

# The Report on Social Norms

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## Feature Article: An Interview with William DeJong, Ph.D.

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"I find Henry Wechsler's purported evaluation of social norms marketing to be grossly flawed, and I am dismayed that the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* chose to publish it."

- William DeJong, Ph.D.



The Feature Article for this issue is an interview with Dr. William DeJong. In it he shares his perspective on the social norms approach and the status of the evidence for social norms and other environmental management strategies.

**Alan Berkowitz (AB):** In your role as the Director of the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, you have a unique perspective from which to view the contributions of the social norms approach. In addition, you have a long and distinguished career in the field of health communications and health promotion as a practitioner, scholar, researcher, and teacher. Could you share with us your thoughts regarding the data or theory that exists in support of the social norms approach? Your answer to this question is particularly relevant in light of the recent study by Wechsler and colleagues claiming to disprove the social norms approach.

**William DeJong (WD):** With respect to the research, I would refer readers to the literature review that you wrote for the Higher Education Center that is posted on our website (<http://www.edc.org/hec>). Regarding the theory, my opinion is that Henry Wechsler's frequently stated contention that there is no theory behind the social norms approach is complete nonsense. Social norms theory is grounded in a number of important theoretical frameworks in social psychology and health communications that inform public health practice. One of these theories is the Theory of Reasoned Action, later revised and renamed the Theory of Planned Behavior.

This theory cites subjective norms as a key determinant of behavior, along with personal attitudes toward the behavior and perceived behavioral control. By subjective norms we

mean the perceived expectations of other persons or groups who approve or disapprove of the behavior. These perceived expectations are informed by observations of what other people say or do in particular circumstances. Because the process of collecting, analyzing, storing, and recalling social information is highly prone to error, misperceptions can occur regarding which behaviors are typical. According to this theory, subjective norms that are derived from an inaccurate assessment of what most people do will nevertheless be an important influence on social behavior. This is just one of the important theoretical foundations for the social norms approach, providing a good example of how social norms is in fact theory based.

*(Editor's Note: The July 2003 issue of The Report on Social Norms contains an article describing theories within social psychology that are relevant to social norms.)*

**AB:** How does the information available on social norms compare with any data, research or evaluation for other drug prevention methods currently in practice in higher education?

**WD:** The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) Task Force appointed a panel of over thirty highly respected national experts to do an extensive review of the alcohol prevention literature. I had the pleasure of serving on this panel. The report, which came out in April 2002, looked carefully at the research in this area. The panel concluded that the strongest research evidence exists for a variety of individually oriented educational and intervention programs that target students who are alcohol-dependent or problem drinkers. The Alcohol Skills Training Program (ASTP), for example, incorporates the following elements: 1) cognitive-behavioral skills training (changing the drinker's expectancies about alcohol's effects, monitoring daily alcohol consumption, and

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# Editor's notes

In the process of putting together each issue of this *Report*, unexpected themes often emerge. In this issue the guiding “leitmotif” seems to be the question of what constitutes an effective alcohol abuse prevention program, whether it is social norms or other forms of environmental management. This theme is pushed to the surface from two directions—in response to the recent study by Henry Wechsler and his colleagues questioning the efficacy of social norms, and from social norms practitioners at the Montana Summer Institute who report that one of their major challenges is addressing criticisms and concerns about social norms. These questions also emerge in our Feature Article interview with William DeJong.

What constitutes proof of program effectiveness? First, the premises of the theory must be supported by research. In the case of social norms, misperceptions are documented and are found to be greater among heavier drinkers. Second, outcomes predicted by the theory are supported by the data, in correlational studies, with data analysis techniques like multiple regression, and in studies where a variable at time one predicts behavior at time two. All of these outcomes have been demonstrated for social norms: studies in which degree of misperception is correlated with amounts of drinking, studies in which misperceptions account for large amounts of the variance in drinking behavior, and studies in which misperceptions at time one predict behavior at time two. Third, case study reports can describe interventions in detail that produce desired changes and explain the mechanism of change. There are many such well-documented case study examples of effective social norms programs. Finally, the most rigorous and strongest “proof” can come from randomized trials with experimental and control groups. A number of social norms studies using this design are currently under way.

Currently, only two interventions meet the criteria for the fourth and strongest type of evidence: individual interventions for college student abusers utilizing normative feedback, and environmental management strategies in high school populations. For college students, the strongest evidence that we currently have is for social norms interventions that meet the criteria of the first three categories.

The release of a new Wechsler/Keeling article critical of social norms provides yet another opportunity for us to critically evaluate the data and articulate the standards of evidence for our field. It is the goal of this issue of the *Report* to help with this task.

Sincerely,  
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## Is What We Mean by Social Norms What Others Mean by Social Norms?

Different definitions of social norms may cause misunderstanding

Among social norms practitioners, the meaning of the term “social norms” seems clear. However, in the larger public health field there are other ways in which this term is used. Not being aware of the difference can create confusion and lead us and others to think that we mean the same thing when referring to “social norms” when this is not the case.

Among “social norms practitioners” the term “social norms approach” refers to the correction of misperceptions of social norms when the majority of a population actually behaves in a healthy manner and/or has healthy attitudes. Thus the goal is to reveal and enhance already existing healthy norms that have been underestimated and weakened, rather than to “change” norms.

However, the term “social norms” is also widely used when researchers, practitioners, and advocates believe that unhealthy norms are held by the majority and thus need to be changed. While there may indeed be social and public health issues for which actual norms need to be changed, this is not what we commonly mean by the use of the term “social norms.”

Because both meanings of “social norms” are widely used and have different connotations they must be carefully distinguished because they refer to different phenomenon and presuppose different models of change.

# Recent Research

**Perception and Reality: A National Evaluation of Social Norms Marketing Interventions to Reduce College Student's Heavy Alcohol Use. (2003) Henry Wechsler, Toben Nelson, Jae Eun Lee, Mark Seibring, Catherine Lewis and Richard Keeling. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 64:484-494.** This

study evaluates the effectiveness of social norms marketing campaigns by comparing schools in the College Alcohol Survey (CAS) that met the authors' criteria for a social norms marketing campaign with schools that were determined to not have a campaign. When data was analyzed from the 1997, 1999 and 2001 CAS surveys, these two groups of schools did not differ from each other on seven measures of alcohol use. As a result, the authors concluded that the study "does not provide evidence to support the effectiveness of social norms marketing programs, as currently utilized..." and they urged "college administrators and health educators to base their prevention programs on scientific evidence instead of the perception of promise." This is an important study that merits attention and careful scrutiny. Its announcement was planned with the assistance of a public relations firm and was preceded by great secrecy in the form of an embargoed press release that when released was reported in almost all of the major national media outlets.

The results of the study hinge on the authors' definition of a social norms marketing program. These were identified in two ways: administrators were asked if their school had "ever conducted a social-norms campaign to decrease alcohol use and related-problems," and an index of student exposure to these campaigns was created based on students' reporting that their school provided information on student drinking rates, and/or that they saw posters or signs, read announcements or articles in the student newspaper, or received mailings and handouts.

A number of experts, including Michael Haines and H. Wesley Perkins

(see "Gathering Place" in this issue) and William DeJong (see the interview in the "Feature Article" in this issue) have questioned the methodology of the study. They point out that the definition used for a social norms campaign is not strict enough to ensure that a valid campaign was conducted. In fact, with 50 percent of CAS study administrators reporting that they had such a campaign, it is entirely likely that the measure is too broad and overestimates the number of accurate, well-designed campaigns. In addition, the measures that were used to identify student exposure to social norms marketing do not guarantee that what the students saw met the minimum requirements of a bona-fide social norms effort.

The authors make a number of criticisms of the social norms literature that would also apply to their own study. For example, they mention the low response rate in some social norms studies, yet the CAS response rates for the 120 schools ranged from 22-86 percent. With only 215 surveys distributed on each campus, this computes to an "N" of 47-185 per campus, independent of campus size. This is hardly an adequate sample size, especially in schools with large enrollments that were found to be most typical of schools reporting social norms campaigns. The authors also present an incomplete review of the literature, draw incorrect conclusions from the studies cited, and make unsupported criticisms of social norms theory.

To provide an example of how a school with a weak campaign could have been included in the study, consider a hypothetical case of a campus with a first-year orientation presentation that includes a discussion of campus drinking norms. The campus also has posters or signs, announcements in the student newspaper, and mailings or handouts on alcohol prevention with unspecified content. Although this campus does not have anything else relating to social norms other than the orientation workshop, it would qualify as having a social norms campaign in Wechsler's study even though the program is too limited in scope to have an impact on overall drinking rates. In another example provided by William DeJong in this issue, a

campaign that violated the basic premises of social norms media construction would also have been included in the study.

Imagine that instead of asking about social norms campaigns the study had asked administrators if they "have policies and disciplinary approaches to decreasing alcohol use and related problems on campus" and then asked students if their school had policies, if they were enforced, and if they had received brochures or information about them. These schools would constitute the "policy group" in this imaginary study and would have been compared with the schools that did not report having policies. Determining if schools have policies and if their students know about them is in no way a valid measure of the effectiveness of policy enforcement and other strategies recommended by Wechsler and his colleagues. Yet this was the methodology chosen to evaluate the social norms approach.

A more valid measure of the effectiveness of social norms marketing campaigns could have been conducted with the CAS data set. The study's authors could have asked a panel of social norms experts to rate the quality of the campaigns on those campuses that reported having social norms programs. Then, those campuses rated as having excellent programs could have been compared with other campuses in the study. This would have created a more valid evaluation of the effectiveness of social norms marketing campaigns, properly executed.

In summary, it is necessary for social norms practitioners to be familiar with this study and understand its limitations. This is especially important given the large amount of uncritical attention that it has received. Our job is not only to design, implement and evaluate social norms interventions that are theoretically sound and faithful to the principles of social norms, but also to educate key stakeholders and audiences on our campuses to understand criticisms and answer questions. In this regard, Henry Wechsler, Richard Keeling, and their colleagues have once again provided us with an excellent opportunity to do our homework.

# from *the* field

*Editor's Note: Each issue of The Report on Social Norms will feature model programs or interventions that have been successfully implemented in a community setting.*

The 2003 Montana Summer Institute for Social Norms Practitioners was held June 19-21 in Bozeman, Montana. The Institute was hosted by the Montana Social Norms Project at Montana State University to meet the needs of advanced practitioners in the field of social norms marketing.

The number of participants was capped at 30 and the agenda was built around their specific needs. People in attendance came from across the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom and represented a variety of projects and special interest populations.

Key institute faculty included Drs. Jeff Linkenbach and Jamie Cornish of the “MOST of Us” campaign at Montana State University, Dr. H. Wesley Perkins, Professor of Sociology and Project Director of the Alcohol Education Project at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and the team of researchers from the “MOST of Us” staff.

Specific topical areas focused on were: defining a target population, data collection and analysis, message development, politics and the cultural environment, administrative issues, getting the message out, and pilot testing. Throughout the Institute, participants had opportunities to explore new frontiers of the social norms model, express challenges they were experiencing and to receive specific feedback about the

## The Montana Summer Institute for Advanced Social Norms Practitioners

“stuck spots” they encounter with campaign implementation.

Many participants expressed that one of their biggest challenges was addressing the politics that surround implementation of a social norms campaign. The social norms approach is controversial for some and there are often skeptical stakeholders whose criticisms must be addressed. This uncertainty surrounding social norms is often due to natural skepticism when hearing about the healthy norm, turf-issues on campus, and resistance from people who are involved in programs that are incompatible with social norms that they do not want to change. Institute participants shared strategies for how to build support for social norms campaigns using methods such as creating advisory boards, conducting media advocacy, and prominently featuring the data source and number of people surveyed in all campaign materials and messages.

The participants also discussed challenges common to many social norms campaigns that are in their second or third years of implementation. The difficulty of data collection and analysis was a widespread problem. Social norms practitioners have a difficult time identifying statisticians and researchers who are familiar with the nuances of social norms theory. Additionally, many practitioners are forced to rely on data that is flawed or does not include information on perceptions and attitudes. Continuing to develop valid and relevant survey questions that include perceptual information is critical to making data collection and analysis easier. These survey questions then need to be shared among practitioners—potentially in a question bank.

One of the most exciting and rewarding aspects of this experience was the opportunity for professionals

involved in implementing social norms to share their ideas and experiences with peers in an intimate setting. There was a general feeling that it would be valuable to continue this level of sharing ideas and resources.

As a response to this request “MOST of Us” is establishing a free “virtual community” which will allow social norms practitioners to discuss various issues; view and comment on posters, radio and television commercials; and participate in discussions which will be chaired by leaders in our field

**“Many participants expressed that one of their biggest challenges was addressing the politics that surround implementation of a social norms campaign.”**

The full web platform for this Social Norms Network will be ready this fall. Until then, a Social Norms Network Listserv is operating as a temporary communication tool. The Social Norms Network Listserv offers its members opportunities to post questions or suggestions to a large number of people at the same time. When a question is submitted or if people want to share something with the listserv, their submission is distributed to all on the list. The Social Norms Network “virtual community” will create the opportunity to form a unified community that benefits the field of social norms. You can find information on how to join the Social Norms Network Listserv or the upcoming Social Norms Network community at: [http://www.mostofus.org/faq\\_c3.asp#33](http://www.mostofus.org/faq_c3.asp#33).

*Submitted by the Staff of the “Most of Us” Campaign*

## An Interview with William DeJong, Ph.D.

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stress management); 2) norms or values clarification, (providing data to challenge the misperception that abusive drinking is common among students and widely tolerated); and 3) motivational enhancement (providing feedback on the drinker's alcohol use in comparison with other students and discussing possible negative consequences). Controlled studies show that the ASTP significantly reduces both drinking and alcohol-related problems.

Subsequent research has shown that even relatively brief motivational interventions can produce positive results. A shorter version based on the ASTP, the Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention for College Students (BASICS) program, uses two brief sessions to give students feedback about their drinking level and an opportunity to craft a plan for reducing their alcohol consumption. High-risk drinkers who participated in the BASICS program

significantly reduced their drinking compared to control group participants, a change that persisted even four years later.

**AB:** Yes, I am familiar with BASICS. In fact, recent studies suggest that providing individualized normative feedback by itself, without the other components you have mentioned, can be effective in changing behavior.

What did the NIAAA say about other non-individual approaches to alcohol abuse prevention?

**WD:** The panel noted that there are several environmental change strategies for reducing alcohol-related problems. Although these have not yet been tested with college students, they have been successfully used with general populations and therefore merit serious consideration. Based on this evidence, the NIAAA Task Force recommended the following approaches: 1) increased enforcement of minimum legal drinking age laws, 2) implementation and enforcement of other laws to reduce alcohol-impaired driving, 3) restrictions on alcohol retail outlet density, 4) increased prices and excise taxes on alcoholic beverages, and 5) responsible beverage service policies.

**AB:** What about the social norms approach?

**WD:** The NIAAA Task Force report identified additional program and policy ideas that make sense intuitively or seem theoretically sound but so far lack strong empirical support. With the dearth of rigorous research in mind, the Task Force recommended that these strategies be implemented and rigorously evaluated to test their viability. Based on the research that was available at the time, the Task Force identified social norms marketing as one of these strategies.



*“The Gathering Place” brings together news, announcements, and important developments in the field of social norms.*

**“Social Norms is Effective: Wechsler Study Flawed”** provides a critical analysis of the recently released study by Henry Wechsler and colleagues purporting to dis-

prove the effectiveness of social norms. The essay reviews a number of methodological problems with the study and concludes with examples of successful social norms interventions. It can be found on the website of The National Social Norms Resource Center ([www.socialnorm.org](http://www.socialnorm.org)) along with a second critique by social norms co-founder H. Wesley Perkins.

**“An Overview of the Social Norms Approach”** by Alan Berkowitz will be published by Hampton Press as Chapter 13 in L Lederman, L Stewart, F Goodhart and L Laitman's *Changing the Culture of College Drinking: A Socially Situated Prevention Campaign*. It can also be downloaded from the author's website ([www.alanberkowitz.com](http://www.alanberkowitz.com)). The article provides an overview of the theory of social norms, its history (from its founding by Alan Berkowitz and H. Wesley Perkins to current applications), a review of research in support of the approach and examples of successful interventions. The concluding section reviews emerging challenges and issues for social norms.

**College Students and “Celebration Drinking”** is the title of a monograph that explores the phenomenon of event-specific drinking. Two patterns of celebration drinking were found: students who do not drink much except at special occasions, and student who drink almost anytime, but drink more and for longer periods of time on celebratory occasions. A number of protective behaviors were found to mitigate the negative effects of this type of drinking. The report concludes with information on a social norms campaign at Michigan State University (the location of the study) to foster safe drinking practices. Copies of the report can be downloaded from: [www.ippsr.msu.edu/OSR/CelebrationDrinkingStudy.htm](http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/OSR/CelebrationDrinkingStudy.htm).

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**AB:** What else does the evaluation literature on the social norms approach indicate in comparison with the evaluation literature on other environmental management approaches in higher education?

**WD:** First, I need to explain that, when it comes to evaluations of environmentally focused prevention on campus, the state of the research literature is similar to what we find for social norms marketing. We remain very dependent on case studies. Again, better research is needed to establish that environmental management strategies can lead to significant decreases in student alcohol problems.

**AB:** I have a slightly different sense of things. I agree that the strongest evidence we have is for individual approaches in college-aged populations and for environmental management approaches among pre-college populations. However, I believe that the evidence for the social norms approach is stronger for college populations than for any other approach. I do agree that except for the individually oriented programs you mentioned (that are easier to evaluate) the most rigorous form of evidence is not yet available for what we do with college students.

What then would you look for in a well-done evaluation study?

**WD:** In my opinion, there are four key features that a sound study of social norms marketing should have: First, participating colleges should be randomly assigned to do social norms marketing—that’s the experimental group, or to not have a campaign—that’s the comparison group. Absent random assignment, a strong evaluation would have a large number of well-matched experimental and control sites. Second, on each campus a random sample of students should be drawn to complete a survey on alcohol consumption and drinking conse-

quences. A strong effort should be made to achieve a high response rate. Our sense of what constitutes a high response rate is shifting as it becomes harder and harder to get students to respond to surveys. Today, any response rate above 50 percent for a long survey instrument would have to be considered adequate. Third, the campaigns must be implemented to meet minimum quality standards consistent with social norms theory (for example, the message must convey a true norm that is commonly misperceived). The campaign must also adhere to health communications principles, for example the visual image should reinforce the social norms message, not contradict it. Also, the campaign needs to use a variety of media channels to achieve a high level of student exposure to the message. With these standards in place, the quality and reach of the campaigns will vary from campus to campus, and the evaluation has to take those differences into account. Fourth, information must be collected on additional programs, policies, or key events that might affect student alcohol consumption—for example, parental notification, or that influence perceptions of the norm—for example, an alcohol-fueled “right to party” riot on campus. Gathering and analyzing all of this information is a time-consuming and expensive undertaking.

**AB:** As you know, the NIAAA has funded three large-scale studies of social norms to conduct exactly the kind of evaluations you are talking about. This includes a three-campus study in Washington State under the direction of Mary Larimer at the University of Washington, a multi-campus study of social norms and other environmental management approaches in the California State University system directed by Bob Saltz of the Prevention Research Center, and an NIAAA-funded

study that you are conducting. Is there anything you would like to say about your NIAAA-funded study that might shed light on the above questions?

**WD:** Our study meets all of these criteria. We have a randomized trial involving 32 campuses, with 16 randomly assigned to do a social norms marketing campaign and 16 assigned to a no-campaign control group. For logistical reasons, we had to divide the study into two cohorts. We just completed our last round of survey data collection for the first cohort of 18 schools and will be able to report their results in the late spring. We will be able to report results for the second cohort of 14 schools a year after that.

We have undertaken a major effort to track the quality and extent of the social norms marketing campaigns being conducted by our experimental sites. We have also done a thorough content analysis of student newspapers and conducted key informant interviews in order to understand what else has been happening on these campuses. We are still working on compiling this information and then translating it into indices that can be incorporated into the data analysis.

I should add that, working with Richard Scribner of Louisiana State University, we will also be able to take into account the number of retail alcohol outlets in the communities surrounding these 32 campuses. This was not part of our original plan due to the expense. Thanks to Dr. Scribner’s new NIAAA-funded project, we now have the necessary funding to do that.

**AB:** To what extent does the recent Wechsler et al study meet the criteria you have just identified for a good evaluation study, and does it change your evaluation of the literature on social norms?

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## An Interview with William DeJong, Ph.D.

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**WD:** You may not know this, but my own specialty area is health communications, including public health media campaigns. From that perspective, I find Henry Wechsler's purported evaluation of social norms marketing to be grossly flawed, and I am dismayed that the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* chose to publish it.

The central problem with the study is that the research team made absolutely no effort to examine the quality of the campaigns. An administrator states that the college has done a social norms marketing campaign and that is accepted at face value. We know nothing about the content or strategy of these supposed campaigns, and Dr. Wechsler admits as much in the discussion section of the article. In response, Dr. Wechsler might point out that he did ask students whether they had seen or heard a social norms message, but if you look at his methodology, you'll see that's not the case. In fact, students could answer affirmatively even if what they had been exposed to was a message that chastised students for high rates of drinking. This renders his study essentially useless.

Many social norms campaigns are not done well. For example, San Diego State University (SDSU) conducted a campaign that failed, but analysis of that effort makes it clear why that happened. First, the campaign materials were poorly done. The campaign relied on a poster, which is dominated by a black-and-white photograph of a young, white male student who is bent over a toilet, presumably vomiting. The student's jeans are riding down, exposing the top part of his buttocks. A pizza box and several empty beer cans are strewn on the floor. The phrase "Bottoms Up!" appears at the top in large letters. Near the bottom of the advertisement is the campaign slogan, "Done 4," plus the following normative message in small

print: "Over 3/4 of SDSU students drink 4 or fewer drinks when they party." Second, the campaign ran for only four months, which is hardly sufficient time to produce measurable changes in alcohol consumption. Time is needed for students to have their questions answered, to discuss the issue with their peers, and to make their own confirmatory observations.

**AB:** This is a perfect example of how the Wechsler study is flawed. The San Diego campaign you described would have been classified as a "high exposure" social norms campaign in the Wechsler study and would have been included in the data analysis that led to the conclusion that social norms doesn't work. The San Diego study is often cited as an example of a social norms campaign not working. Yet no one that I know who is familiar with social norms would have chosen this study as an acceptable example of a social norms campaign.

Can you elaborate further on the NIAAA's description of the social norms approach as a promising practice, including their statement that social norms results are so consistent across studies that they are impressive and not likely to be random? What considerations led to this designation? Does the Wechsler study change this designation, in your opinion?

**WD:** The NIAAA Task Force designated social norms marketing as a "promising" strategy on the basis of several written case studies, including reports from Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Northern Illinois University, the University of Arizona, and Western Washington University. Each case study was a simple before-after study, and each could be easily criticized for using a weak research design. What is remarkable is that these were all campuses that had tried other approaches for several years and seen no change, but then saw

dramatic reductions after a social norms marketing campaign was introduced. That doesn't prove that these campaigns were the cause, because there still might be other factors at work on these campuses, but the sheer number of case studies makes that seem somewhat less likely. Ultimately, we need better research that involves control group comparisons. It was the absence of such research that caused the NIAAA Task Force to state that this

**"Proponents of social norms marketing believe it is a powerful technique for directly reducing high-risk drinking. The case studies are persuasive."**

approach was "promising" rather than "proven." Dr. Wechsler's recent study—with all its flaws—does not change this assessment.

**AB:** Is there anything else that you would like to say about the issue of social norms in general or about its efficacy in particular?

**WD:** Yes. Proponents of social norms marketing believe it is a powerful technique for directly reducing high-risk drinking. The case studies are persuasive. As you noted, more rigorous research is now underway to put that proposition to a stronger test. Yet even if this new research should fail to show that social norms marketing does what is intended, I think there would still be two compelling reasons to communicate accurate social norms information.

First, many alcoholics and problem drinkers are able to stay in denial about their drinking because they believe their consumption level is normative when, in fact, it is not. Even extreme drinkers think they are "moderate" drinkers. Letting students know what the true

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norms are, and allowing them to see how their drinking compares to others' consumption, might stimulate them to rethink their drinking habits. This is the logic behind BASICS.

Second, I know from our own research that the majority of college students support reasonable policy changes and stricter enforcement in order to reduce alcohol problems on campus. What types of policies are favored varies from college to college, but everywhere there is a majority that supports environmentally focused prevention strategies. My contention is that these students will be inhibited from speaking out in support of these policies if they believe that most students drink heavily and stand in opposition. Having accurate information about student drinking norms can help embolden the responsible majority of students to speak out. In that way, social norms marketing can help set the stage for environmental management strategies.

*(Editor's Note: Dr. DeJong has a chapter on this subject titled "A Social Norms Approach to Building Campus Support for Policy Change" in the book The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse.)*

**AB:** What would you say to the readers of this *Report* about how to view the Wechsler study?

**WD:** I think campus-based practitioners have to take Henry Wechsler's research on social norms marketing with a grain of salt. His bias against this approach is well known, and I don't think he is willing to give it a fair test.

Three years ago he published a study in the *Journal of American College Health* in which he claimed that students don't misperceive drinking norms. The trick here was that he asked survey respondents to estimate how many students on their campus were "binge drinkers" without defining the term. Instead, he should have asked the respondents to estimate how many men had five or more drinks in a row at least once during the past two weeks and how many women had four or more drinks. In that case, the students would have tended to generate larger—and therefore inaccurate—estimates.

On the basis of this study, Dr. Wechsler declared that social norms marketing is built on a myth, and he once again used his public relations firm to put out the story to major newspapers across the country. What got lost in the press coverage is the fact that there are dozens of studies that show large misperception effects. Students misperceive the norm. Dr. Wechsler seems to be the only person who thinks this basic fact of campus life is in dispute.

**AB:** In addition, most of us don't have a million dollar budget to promote the

results of our research. I've always found Wechsler's skepticism about social norms surprising in light of a study that he and Wes Perkins published analyzing the 1993 Harvard data set in which perceptions were found to be the strongest predictor of student drinking.

**WD:** I think many of us find that puzzling. I can't really explain it.

**AB:** Well, I've enjoyed and learned from this conversation. On behalf of myself and the readers of the *Report*, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to share your thoughts with us.

**WD:** You're most welcome, Alan.

*William DeJong, Ph.D., is the Director of the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center (HEC) for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention. He can be reached at: wdejong@bu.edu. Dr. DeJong is the co-author of several case studies that feature environmental management strategies to reduce alcohol problems on campus, including work at Lehigh University, the State University of New York at Albany, and the University of Arizona. Case studies under preparation can be obtained by contacting Josephine Crisostomo at the HEC (jcrisostomo@edc.org).*

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