

Be Yourself

Student choices regarding alcohol are often influenced by the degree to which they think their peers drink. In fact, 69% of new and 40% of all Cal students don't drink. Among those who do drink, most (77%) consume four or fewer when they party.

Despite these facts, abstainers and moderate drinkers assume they are in the minority (i.e., everyone else is drinking more). This is sometimes called the "reign of error" because such misperceptions allow heavy drinkers to perceive themselves as the majority and justify their behavior and the harm associated with it.

Social norms marketing aims to correct misperceptions about alcohol use, consequences, and attitudes and to support healthy non- and moderate-drinking behaviors. It is not a solo strategy. It needs to be implemented, as in the case of PartySafe@Cal, as one of a multi-faceted approach. The normative messages need to be reinforced by the policies, procedures and other programs in the campus and surrounding community.

Does our tendency to overestimate drinking mean there's really no big problem? Quite the reverse. Our tendency to overestimate "normalizes" the behaviors – and perpetuates the myth that excessive drinking and related problems are "just part of college life". When community members a) know the real norms for drinking and related harms and b) accept our tendency to misperceive, we better see problematic drinking behaviors and situations for what they really are - not normal.

Our Campaigns

PartySafe@Cal launched its first social norms marketing campaign in January 2008 to promote accurate perceptions about student drinking at UC Berkeley.

Not Everyone Drinks got its title from a sophomore who learned that 28% of Cal students don't drink. He said "I wish someone had told me during CalSO that not everyone drinks. They really gave me the opposite message."



True Stories

I am not much of a drinker myself, but I believe that now that I have this information, I will be less conscious of my drinking patterns while at a party and also be proud of them. I have to admit that before, I was one of the many Cal undergraduates that overestimated everyone's drinking and saw myself as a "goody-good" – the one who only took a drink or two maximum per occasion, only twice a year. But now I know the grand majority are actually very similar to me!
—Jovita

When I first came to Berkeley, I had always believed that drinking was something everyone was bound to do. A lot of my first year roommates drank and encouraged me to drink. In my mind, I believed that there has to be some people who don't drink, and I was correct. Although I still do not drink, I am much more informed and confident that drinking is not a social norm here in Berkeley. — Mark

Now that I know what the real statistics are about drinking, I don't have to feel as self-conscious about not fitting in with those who like to drink and pressure others to drink. — Olivia

This information heavily impacted my decision to start drinking because I was going to try alcohol during my last semester here in Berkeley. The most important lesson I learned was not the amount of students who consumed alcohol, but the very low amount of students who drink more than 5+ in one sitting. I feel that if I do start drinking with friends, I will not feel as pressured to drink so much. I am sure that there are other students that feel the same way I do so it is imperative that we inform these students about the true drinking habits of a college student. — Roger

Since then we have been educating all our audiences that Cal students don't drink as much, as often, or with as many negative consequences as most of us think. We use a variety of education and social marketing activities.

Results

Cal students still overestimate how much other students drink — but the misperceptions are shrinking — especially about the percent of abstainers and heavy drinkers.

	All		Males		Females	
	Actual	Perceived	Actual	Perceived	Actual	Perceived
Never Used	27%	5%	30%	7%	25%	3%
Used (last 30 days)	60%	90%	54%	90%	64%	95%

What You Can Do

Are you part of a student community that is directly or indirectly impacted by heavy drinking and/or alcohol-related negative consequences? Want a tool to stimulate change in problematic drinking?

PartySafe@Cal has a Drinking and Party Norms Workshop which we can help you use with your group or community. You need two leaders to dedicate a total of about six hours: create and conduct a group survey, compile the data visually, present and facilitate a discussion about the data with the group. The facts and conversation may surprise you....And can lead to positive changes in personal and group drinking behaviors and practices.

For more information, contact partysafe@berkeley.edu or (510) 643-9073.

True Stories

In the past I tolerated many instances of binge drinking or negative behavior resulting from drinking because I felt it was the norm among college students. I think that many students might have the same notion of an inflated tolerance for negative drinking behavior that I had. — Melissa

When I was told by my roommates that everyone in college drinks, I had no response to his comment. Now with this data, I am able to explain to him that many students are under the perception that drinking is a social norm. — Chris

As a freshman, I completely abstained from drinking, and it was not until the next year that I had my first experience with alcohol intoxication. At the time, I was at a party with close friends who were all drinking. My first shot of Bacardi 151 was exhilarating as I thought "now I am finally a college student who drinks and has fun". When those you see around you are drinking, you think that drinking is the norm. Since I wanted to share an experience with the people I was with, I drank. The simple need to bond with friends by conforming to their behaviors is a basic element of the social norms theory. Knowing now, what I did not realize then, has given me more strength to refuse alcohol. I feel less pressured to drink, and am more confident in asking friends to meet me for a drink of tea instead of beer. — Katherlin

Projects that reach out to student groups can have a big impact. We have a built in bond and want to support one another. The desire to get rid of drinking misperceptions can be driven by our concern for our friends. —Melissa