

## Campus programs tackle issues of alcohol abuse, binge drinking

Marylynn G. Hewitt Catholic News Service | Feb. 29, 2012



Two students make their way into The Loft, a campus bar at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Catholic colleges and universities across the country are working to address the issue of risky drinking practices, promote responsible alcohol behavior and help counsel students identified with drinking trouble. (CNS photo/Tim Rue)

**DETROIT** -- Nicole vividly remembers the moment she got the results from the research survey showing she drank more than 90 percent of the women on the Loyola Marymount University campus.

"I was shocked," said the senior about that freshman-year experience at the school in Los Angeles.

Her first drink was a shot of vodka at the college apartment she shared with some older students. That first year, she told Catholic News Service, there were many occasions where she drank three times a week, often having seven drinks.

Seeing the survey results "put a ton of things into perspective," added Nicole, who asked that her real name not be used.

Catholic colleges and universities across the country are working to address the issue of risky drinking practices, promote responsible alcohol behavior and help counsel students identified with drinking trouble.

"The fact of the matter is young people drink, and people under 21 drink, and with the college lifestyle, I don't think that will change anytime soon," said Justin Hummer, assistant director of Heads UP Research Lab at Loyola Marymount University.

"It's part of the recognition that abstinence programs fail regularly, so we're trying to meet students where they are, not being judgmental and confrontational," he said. "We try to engage them in a way you can deliver information that might be helpful in terms of how they make decisions. That's key in a lot of ways."

"Binge drinking is a serious public health challenge, leading to injury and in some cases, death, for hundreds of thousands of college students each year," said U.S Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

She made her comment last spring when Dartmouth College announced the Learning Collaborative on High-Risk Drinking, with 14 colleges and universities joining to address high-risk drinking on campuses. In December, the private Ivy League school announced it was turning to the problem-solving skills of engineering students to help in the research.

A Centers for Disease Control study released in January said the prevalence of binge drinking and its intensity (9.3 drinks) were highest among people ages 18-24. A study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration said that in 2009, almost half of all substance abuse treatment admissions that involved college students -- in the same 18-24 age group -- were for "alcohol disorders."

The Heads UP Research Lab, the umbrella for a number of ongoing prevention and intervention research projects, already has a 10-year history. It was founded by Jesuit Fr. Joe LaBrie in 2002 after 26 students were hospitalized for alcohol use following the Charter Ball, a university-wide dance party. All 26 students were eventually released from the hospital and the Charter Ball is no longer offered.

The priest, special assistant to the president and associate professor of psychology, wanted to use empirically validated research to address alcohol use and other health risk behaviors to promote responsible drinking in the face of what was pretty widespread risky drinking behavior that was common on the campus, Hummer said. "We've been fortunate not to have had an alcohol-related death on campus as far as I know. I'd like to say Heads UP had some impact on that."

Since its inception, LaBrie has been the principal investigator on more than 10 privately and federally funded research grant projects on the campus, totaling more than \$3.1 million. Loyola Marymount has collaborated with Loyola College in Baltimore, and a number of public universities for some of the studies.

Hummer pointed out "that many other universities are building on the things we were doing here."

He estimated that 15,000 Loyola Marymount students have directly participated in the research projects run by the lab, which includes five full-time staff and one part-time staff member. He added that in each year, the majority of the 6,000-student body has been exposed to Heads UP initiatives such as the posters promoting responsible drinking designed by the graphics art students.

Through small- and large-group interventions involving incoming freshmen, those in sororities and fraternities, and those with mental health challenges, Hummer said, the campus culture has changed in how students view alcohol use.

"There are movies like 'Animal House' that portray this widespread heavy use of alcohol," so it was "very interesting for students to realize heavy drinking was not the norm and was not as widespread as they thought. Students, if they did drink, were more responsible with drinking than people thought."

Many campuses, such as Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, offer counseling for students with drinking problems or underage students who have been reported for drinking.

Cynthia Vaudrain, licensed professional clinical counselor at Franciscan, said having the full counseling center on campus keeps sessions affordable and available for all kinds of issues.

In recent years, she said there have only been a few students with reported risky drinking behaviors at the 2,500-student university. AA is also offered on campus.

Secondhand problems are also discussed, Vaudrain said, including the fact that someone needs to take care of

intoxicated students, students may miss class, and seeing someone who has had too much to drink "might traumatize some of the other students" who have not been exposed to that in the past, she said.

Nicole, now 22, said because of being a part of the Loyola-Marymount's ongoing research project, "along with the fact I'm more mature," she drinks much less. And when she does, "I am a more responsible drinker. I now make sure to have a designated driver, drink water between drinks and usually drink with food."

Hummer said the Heads UP research coincides "with the Catholic identity and religious heritage of LMU. We're focused on the Greek term 'cura personalis,' the cure of the whole person. We recognize that alcohol use is an inherent part of developmental transition into adulthood," he said.

"So we try and provide really stringent empirical research and effective harm-reduction approaches to understanding and preventing alcohol use and other behaviors that might negatively impact the students' ability to become more fully alive," Hummer said, "and hamper their development of their self, and their academic and professional development physically, socially, psychologically, morally, culturally."

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