Published in final edited form as:

J Coll Character. 2013 May ; 14(2): . doi:10.1515/jcc-2013-0022.

Intervention for Positive Use of Leisure Time Among College Students

Careen Yarnal [Associate Professor of Recreation],

Park and Tourism Management at Penn State. She specializes in college student use of free time and health. cmy122@psu.edu

Xinyi Qian [Post-doctoral Fellow],

University of Minnesota. She specializes in free time use and development across the lifespan. qianx@umn.edu

John Hustad [Assistant Professor of Medicine and Public Health Sciences at Penn State College of Medicine], and

He specializes in evaluating mechanisms of change and treatment outcome research for hazardous alcohol consumption by college students. jth20@psu.edu

Damon Sims [Vice-President for Student Affairs at Penn State]

One of his focus areas is a university-community wide initiative to address student excess alcohol consumption. drs37@sa.psu.edu

Abstract

College student excessive alcohol use is a pressing public health concern, and many of the negative events associated with heavy drinking occur during leisure or free time. Positive use of leisure can lead to coping skills, stress reduction, and healthy development. Negative use of leisure, including heavy alcohol use, is associated with physical inactivity, stress, and short and long-term health concerns. We contend that using the classroom context to help college students understand why it is beneficial to engage in positive leisure pursuits and how that engagement will promote personal growth is of critical importance to healthy development.

Throughout their undergraduate experience, college students make frequent decisions about time use. Every day, students weigh their schedules deciding what time to devote to academics and jobs, how many hours to allocate to sleeping and personal maintenance, and what to do with leisure or free time. Leisure can be thought of as free time or certain types of activities like reading or exercising. Most important, however, is that leisure is commonly held to be a context with relative freedom of choice and some level of enjoyment (Kleiber, 1999). Research demonstrates that college students have *considerable amounts* of leisure time—an average of 42 hours a week—almost twice the average 24 hours a week devoted to attending and studying for class (ATUS, 2010). So how do college students use free time? On the one hand, some engage in leisure activities that boost mood, increase coping skills, reduce stress, encourage physical activity, and promote academic and community engagement. Other college student free time choices, however, lead to physical inactivity, social isolation, stress, academic and community disengagement, and illicit substance abuse (Payne, Ainsworth, & Godbey, 2010).

One persistent negative use of college student free time is excessive alcohol consumption, described as “the single greatest public health hazard to American college and university campuses” (Misch, 2010). In fact, one national survey found that between 1999 and 2005, the percentage of students engaging in heavy episodic alcohol consumption (i.e., five or more drinks on one occasion for males, four or more for females) *at least monthly* increased

from 41.7 to 45.2% (Hingson, 2010). Heavy episodic alcohol consumption is associated with negative outcomes, including memory blackouts, risky sexual activity, interpersonal distress, academic difficulties, and short and long-term health concerns (e.g., Jackson, Sher, & Park, 2005; Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002). It is important to stress that alcohol use and abuse, including heavy episodic consumption, occurs mainly during college students' *leisure time*.

A recent survey of college administrators revealed that the primary mode used by colleges and universities to address student alcohol use is educational programs (98%), with the fifty percent (50%) of campuses providing programming for students *at high risk for alcohol problems* (Nelson, Toomey, Lenk, Erickson, & Winters, 2010). Campus administrators are also increasingly turning to empirically supported interventions, such as norms clarification, cognitive behavioral skills training, and brief motivational interventions as strategies to reduce college student excess alcohol consumption (e.g., Carey, Scott-Sheldon, Carey, & DeMartini, 2007; DeJong, Larimer, Wood, & Hartman, 2009; Whiteside, Crouce, Pedersen, & Larimer, 2010). However, educational programs by themselves demonstrate mixed results. Limited audiences, high cost per student, and flawed research designs translate into inconsistent evidence for longstanding reductions in alcohol use (Walters & Bennett, 2000). Indeed, the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA, 2002) issued a widespread call for colleges and universities to "develop programs to assist students with recreation and social interaction," and more recently, Misch (2010) concluded that educational programs taking "novel approaches are desperately needed" (p. 59).

In support of the NIAAA (2002) recommendation, most divisions of student affairs *provide* college students with alcohol-free on-campus recreation and social events, but few of these events are assessed for their effects on alcohol use by researchers or divisions of student affairs. One exception is Patrick, Maggs, and Osgood's (2010) study of LateNight Penn State (LNPS). Using daily reports of freshmen alcohol use over fourteen days, this study of university sanctioned, on-campus, alcohol-free programming on weekend nights (Thurs-Sat 10pm-2am) documented reduced alcohol consumption on days students attended LNPS, particularly among women.

There are, however, at least four concerns with making direct linkages between the provision of on-campus recreation and social events and reduction in student alcohol consumption. First, the type, duration, and frequency of events offered at late night on-campus events may not appeal to all student demographics and may incur self-selection: heavy drinkers may not choose to participate in these late night events, while those interested in these events may not be problematic drinkers. Second, student behavior at a late night, on-campus, alcohol-free event may not reflect behavior at campus and non-campus locations where alcohol may be available (e.g., fraternity and sorority houses, sporting events, bars and parties). Third, lowered alcohol consumption on the day of the provided activity may not reflect patterns of alcohol use in the days or weeks before or after the activity. Finally, *providing* students with alcohol-free activities assumes students' knowledge of and skills to use free time productively. Yet, studies continue to document college student maladaptive use of free time, including short and long-term health concerns related to alcohol use and abuse (e.g., Hingson, Zha & Weitzman, 2009; Mundt, Zakletskaia & Fleming, 2009). So how can these shortcomings be overcome?

One possible solution is to provide students with a set of skills and knowledge about *why* it is beneficial to engage in positive free time pursuits and *how* that engagement will promote personal growth, development, and health; in short, to educate students about leisure time use. In support of education about leisure time use, and using behavioral theories of choice (Rachlin, 2000), Murphy and colleagues (2006) helped college students complete an alcohol

intervention to identify enjoyable alcohol-free activities to engage in on nights when they might otherwise be drinking. Although limited to a small sample of mandated high-risk students ($N=108$), the study found that alcohol-free activities like movies, time with friends, and going to restaurants were as pleasurable as drinking, that social activities were more pleasurable than solitary, and that women engaged in more alcohol-free activities with greater levels of enjoyment. Murphy et al. also concluded that “further research is required to identify procedures for increasing participation in alcohol-free activities and to determine whether increased alcohol-free activity participation results in decreased alcohol consumption” (p. 339).

In similar support of education about leisure time use, and using social cognitive, selective optimization with compensation, and self-determination theories (Baltes, 1997; Bandura, 1986; Ryan & Deci, 2000), Caldwell and colleagues had success in decreasing adolescent risky (sexual and substance) behavior using “TimeWise: Taking Charge of Leisure Time.” TimeWise, a component of HealthWise South Africa, which is part of a Life Orientation curriculum in South African schools, helps adolescents understand that *choosing to use leisure time positively* can simultaneously prevent initiation of risky behaviors and reduce existing high-risk behaviors (Caldwell, 2004; Tibbits, Smith, Caldwell, & Flisher, 2011). It is interesting to note that although focused on adolescents and in a different cultural context, Caldwell and colleagues attribute success of the educational program to “lessons aimed at developing social-emotional skills such as decision-making and stress and anger management, promoting prosocial attitudes, increasing knowledge and skills in regard to substance use and sex and encouraging engagement in personally meaningful healthy free time experiences” (Tibbits, Smith, Caldwell & Flisher, 2011, p. 2).

Although there may be several paths to encouraging productive use of leisure time, the senior author has developed a class on leisure and human behavior that shows potential as an indicated intervention. This general education course ($N \sim 200$ per semester comprised of freshmen through seniors from various majors) presents a balanced perspective on leisure, including positive and negative effects of free-time use and their various contributions to development and health over the life span. The course includes four primary components: (1) developing knowledge about leisure and its application to every-day life, paying particular attention to leisure as a sphere for personal control and as time for exploration and experimentation; (2) self-monitoring of leisure time use through on-line and in-class assignments; (3) discussing free time use in small groups after self-monitoring activities; and (4) reflecting personally on free time use.

The main venue for personal reflection is a time diary, comprised of two parts. The first part involves student data collection on individual time use. Conducted over seven consecutive 24-hour periods at the beginning of the semester, students enter data about activities and emotion and stress levels in increments of 30 minutes. It is important to note that because of the subjective nature of leisure (i.e., what is leisure to one may be work or personal maintenance to another, Pentland & Harvey, 1999), and because of validity concerns with retrospective data (e.g., Bernard, Killworth, & Kronenfeld & Sailer, 1984), students self-code whether the activity was work, personal maintenance, or free time *at the time of the activity*. They also provide daily documentation on units of alcohol consumed and units smoked. Daily steps are recorded from the pedometer students wear for the week of data collection. A statistical program calculates each student’s daily and weekly (a) percentage of time spent on work, personal maintenance, and leisure, and (b) emotion, stress, alcohol, smoking and step averages. In the second part of the diary, a 9-10 page semester-end capstone reflection, students draw from knowledge of class concepts and their time use data to critique personal time use.

Anecdotal information from seven years of teaching the course suggests that the process of learning about leisure is linked to cognitive and behavior change in some students. We provide two of examples from the many capstone time diary reflections. First, one student noted

I was actually pretty upset at the amount I drank over the week (44 units). I guess I had never really thought about it until now. But when it hits you in the face, it's like "bam." I have always wondered "who am I if I am not drinking and not this fun party girl," but now I realize I need to be more. There is more to life than getting wasted.

At the end of class, the same student shared, *"I want you to know, I drink far less now."*

A second student said

I went camping with my family the weekend of data collection. I did not drink for obvious reasons. When I came back I immediately started drinking again. The really weird thing is that I noticed that my positive emotions were higher with my family than when I went drinking with my buddies. I decided it was time for a change and moved to another apartment. Drinking is now a lot less of a focus for me.

The strengths of the course as an indicated intervention are fourfold. First, leisure interventions are relevant to all students, increasing the likelihood that students will be receptive to the information. Intervention programs that target alcohol use may not be relevant to nondrinkers. Second, leisure interventions are cost-effective and have a broad reach because they can be administered to the student body in a classroom setting. Third, these interventions may empower students with knowledge about the importance of leisure, which by itself may contribute to positive long-term development and health trajectories, including reducing heavy episodic alcohol consumption. Finally, given its potential broad reach, leisure intervention at the college level may have a strong public health impact on students, the college community, and the nation as a whole.

In summary, we believe this intervention, currently in a pilot phase, including a control for potential confounders, holds great promise to help college students increase positive and decrease damaging use of leisure time, including excess alcohol consumption. With potential broad reach, this approach can be easily delivered at colleges and universities as prevention initiatives or as indicated interventions for high-risk students. We believe that broadening the scope of intervention strategies to include learning about the *why* and *how* of positive leisure time use has the potential to advance intervention practices and to change the culture of excessive alcohol consumption on campuses across the nation.

Individuals interested in expanding the focus of campus alcohol intervention initiatives to incorporate leisure education might consider the following activities: (1) constructing leisure time use modules for key transitions in college students' lives like freshman enrollment, transferring from one university to another, and switching from dorm to apartment life; and (2) designing leisure time use modules for campus health care professionals, student affairs staff, health education specialists, and even community members. A broad array of constituents could draw on the leisure education modules perhaps proactively contributing to increases in students' health, to decreases in health-care costs, and to declines in the social and financial burden that some communities experience from college student heavy episodic drinking.

References

- ATUS: American Time Use Survey. Time use on average weekday for full time college and university students. Bureau of Labor Statistics; Washington, DC: 2010.
- Baltes P. On the incomplete architecture of human ontogeny: selection, optimization, and compensation as foundations of developmental theory. *American Psychology*. 1997; 52:366–80.
- Bandura, A. *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Prentice Hall; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1986.
- Bernard R, Killworth P, Kronenfeld D, Sailer L. The Problem of Informant Accuracy: The Validity of Retrospective Data. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 1984; 13:495–517.
- Caldwell, L. *TimeWise: Taking Charge of Leisure Time curriculum for middle school students*. ETR Associates; Scotts Valley, CA: 2004. 2004
- Carey K, Scott-Sheldon L, Carey M, DeMartini K. Individual-level interventions to reduce college student drinking: A meta-analytic review. *Addictive Behaviors*. 2007; 32:2469–2494. [PubMed: 17590277]
- DeJong W, Larimer M, Wood M, Hartman R. NIAAA's rapid response to college drinking problems initiative: Reinforcing the use of evidence-based approaches in college alcohol prevention. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*. 2009; 16:5–11. [PubMed: 19538907]
- Hingson R. Commentary on Nelson, Toomey, Lenk et al (2010): Implementation of NIAAA College Drinking Task Force Recommendations: How are colleges doing six years later? *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*. 2010; 34(10):1694–1699.
- Hingson R, Zha W, Weitzman E. Magnitude of and Trends in Alcohol-Related Mortality and Morbidity Among U.S. College Students Ages 18-24, 1998-2005. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*. 2009; 16:12–20. [PubMed: 19538908]
- Jackson, K.; Sher, K.; Park, A. Drinking among College Students. In: Galanter, M., editor. *Recent developments in alcoholism: Volume 17. Alcohol problems in adolescents and young adults*. KluwerAcademic/Plenum Publishers; New York, NY: 2005. p. 85-117.
- Kleiber, D. *Leisure experience and human development: A dialectical interpretation*. Basic Books; New York: 1999.
- Misch D. Changing the culture of alcohol abuse on campus: Lessons learned from second-hand smoke. *Journal of American College Health*. 2010; 59:232–234. [PubMed: 21186456]
- Mundt M, Zakletskaia L, Fleming M. Extreme college drinking and alcohol-related injury. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*. 2009; 33(9):1532–1538.
- Murphy J, Barnett N, Colby S. Alcohol-related and alcohol-free activity participation and enjoyment among college students: A behavioral theories of choice analysis. *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology*. 2006; 14:339–349. [PubMed: 16893277]
- NIAAA: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Task force of the national Advisory council on alcohol abuse and alcoholism. National Institutes of Health; Washington D.C.: 2002.
- Nelson T, Toomey T, Lenk K, Erickson D, Winters K. Implementation of NIAAA College Drinking Task Force recommendations: how are colleges doing 6 years later? *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*. 2010; 34:1687–1693.
- Patrick M, Maggs G, Osgood D. LateNight Penn State alcohol-free programming: Students drink less on days they participate. *Prevention Science*. 2010; 11:155–162. 2007. [PubMed: 20020210]
- Payne, L.; Ainsworth, B.; Godbey, G. *Leisure and Health: Making the Connection*. Venture Publishing; State College, PA: 2010.
- Pentland, W.; Harvey, A. Future directions. In: Pentland, W.; Harvey, a.; Lawton, M.; McColl, M., editors. *Time use research in the social sciences*. Kluwer Academic / Plenum Publishers; New York, NY: 1999.
- Rachlin, H. The lonely addict. In: Bickel, WK.; Vuchinich, RE., editors. *Reframing health behavior change with behavioral economics*. Prentice Hall; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 2000. p. 145-164.
- Ryan R, Deci E. Self-Determination Theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychology*. 2000; 55:68–78.
- Schulenberg J, Maggs J. A developmental perspective on alcohol use and heavy drinking during adolescence and the transition to young adulthood. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. 2002; 14:54–70.

- Tibbits M, Smith E, Caldwell L, Flisher A. Impact of HealthWise South Africa on polydrug use and high-risk sexual behavior. *Health Education Research*. 2011; 26(4):653–663. [PubMed: 21511818]
- Walters S, Bennett M. Addressing drinking among college students: A review of the empirical literature. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*. 2000; 18:61–77.
- Whiteside U, Crouce J, Pedersen E, Larimer M. Brief Motivational Feedback for College Students and Adolescents: A Harm Reduction Approach. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 2010; 66:150–163. [PubMed: 20049906]