

Effort seeks to alter view of college drinking

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BENNINGTON -- While scenes from movies like "Animal House" depicting college life as a four-year binge drinking party play in the minds of many students after graduating high school, Southern Vermont College is out to prove perception is not always reality.

In partnership with the Southshire Substance Abuse Coalition, the college is undergoing a new "Social Norming" campaign meant to dismiss the exaggerated stereotypes about excessive drinking on college campuses by advertising the real data derived straight from the students.

"Instead of pounding people with the 'just say no' message, which doesn't work, we're going to look at the data," said Glen Gross, community coordinator for the Coalition.

Because of inflated perceptions about what the norm is, Gross said students feel pressure to fit in to that misconception -- causing students to drink in excess and hurt their bodies and education.

Gross and SVC Director of Counseling Services Michael Goodwin said that once they are gathered the facts will show that students do not drink as much as their peers believe they do, and changes will likely occur.

The work for the campaign began before winter break as students filled out a survey from the Core Institute at Southern Illinois University at

Carbondale that asked questions like "How many drinks do you believe the average college student has on Friday nights?" followed by questions like "How many drinks do you have on Friday nights?"

"The perception is (college) is the place to experiment with alcohol," Gross said. "Everyone doesn't drink and drive, everyone doesn't do 21 shots on their 21st birthday ... and that's what we want to show."

After the survey results are tabulated, the college will display data showing the perception students have about what the norm is on campus and the reality.

With a \$26,000 Vermont Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant to help fund data analysis and hiring a marketing firm to find the best ways to promote the facts, the college will relay the data in a similar manner alcohol companies publicize their messages.

Goodwin said students will then form focus groups to critique and provide input about the messages before putting them out to the student body.

To get students to understand and accept the data, Gross said students must get involved and be excited about how the information is presented.

"(Students) have to be involved in creating, crafting and promoting the message," he said.

One of the methods of promotion Gross talked about is holding a student video contest where submitted videos will be posted on YouTube and the student who creates the winning video will receive a prize.

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The campaign has been welcomed at the college, although it is not a reaction to anything that has happened specifically at SVC, as misconceptions about alcohol use are present on every campus, Goodwin said.

Goodwin said similar campaigns at colleges and universities across the country have successfully lowered binge drinking rates and reduced disruptive behaviors and property damage on their campuses.

During the 18-month campaign at SVC, the college will track data relating to how student perceptions change as well as alcohol-related incidents on campus to find the effectiveness of the campaign.

If the project proves successful at the end of its term, Gross said the Coalition will pursue similar partnerships with other colleges and high schools in the area.

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