

ACADIA LEADS WAY TO REDUCE ALCOHOL HARMS AMONG STUDENTS

By Rachel Cooper ('89)

Wild parties on university campuses are legendary, but what's the reality? And what work is being done to mitigate alcohol-related harms among students?

Two people who can answer both questions are Acadia's James Sanford ('87), Executive Director of Student Services, and Professor Darren Kruisselbrink, School of Kinesiology. They know because Acadia has championed research into alcohol harms and the implementation of measures to reduce them, not only here but across Canada.

"Our data provides evidence that counters the myth that everybody on campus drinks, and drinks to excess," Kruisselbrink says. "In a normal month, probably 15-20 per cent of students don't drink at all. Another 50 per cent don't drink to the point of getting past .08 per cent blood-alcohol, so they're using alcohol in moderation. But it's the few who drink to excess that you hear about."

NCHIP AND PEP-AH

In 2011, Acadia was invited to join a new American collaborative to tackle alcohol-related harms among students. The program was NCHIP, the National College Health Improvement Project, and Acadia was its only Canadian member. "Darren and I were part of that original group, and that was the start in terms of tangible work, tangible efforts, and tangible results," Sanford says.

For most of the three years the collaborative existed, the Acadia team examined what would work here. "A key element of Acadia's team is that students were part of it: Callie Lathem ('14) and Kiara Clory ('14), and later Matt Rios ('14)," Sanford says. "They contributed a lot to making

this successful. We knew if we wanted to effect change on campuses, then faculty, staff and students had to work together."

For Lathem, being on the team was a formative experience. "The work shaped a lot of my passion for mitigating harms associated with high-risk behaviour," says Lathem, now Community Engagement Coordinator at Mount Royal University in Calgary. "The engagement of students and the value placed on student input and experience were phenomenal."

About that time, then President Ray Ivany was working to increase awareness and commitment among his presidential colleagues nationwide for a Canadian version of NCHIP. "He took the lead to initiate that communication," Sanford says. "Then our group began working with partners from Universities Canada, the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, and other post-secondary institutional leaders. We put together a meeting in Ottawa in November 2014, from which emerged the Post-Secondary Education Partnership on Alcohol Harms (<http://pepah.ca/home/>), which is now a fairly robust national organization. PEP-AH has really advanced the work around alcohol harms reduction in Canada."

The harms reduction efforts for Acadia students are not limited to just the campus community, as the Town of Wolfville has become a strong partner and supporter of these efforts as well. There are risk assessments and planning exercises completed through working together when there is anticipation that the potential for harms by alcohol exists (Welcome Week, Homecoming, St. Patrick's Day and Cheaton Cup, last class days). There are also efforts

underway to collaboratively build a municipal alcohol policy framework. Students, faculty, staff, and community leaders are actively engaged in this effort.

POSITIVE TRENDS

Kruisselbrink joined the Acadia team as a faculty member and data specialist, because NCHIP required each institution to measure change monthly. “We started with a fairly simple, straightforward survey, and it evolved into a pretty decent measure of alcohol use and its consequences,” he says. “We did that monthly for six years and just switched this past year to a term-by-term measure.”

He has also taken a lead nationally, including working with Health Canada to develop the alcohol section of a national campus-level survey on alcohol and drugs that will be launched this fall.

Over the past six years, Sanford – who recently received the Bob Stead Award, given to a University staff member who goes above and beyond to contribute to positive student life at Acadia – and Kruisselbrink have seen positive trends emerge. Although the quantity of alcohol that Acadia students drink has remained stable, students now consume it over a longer period, which suggests that blood-alcohol content is falling. The amount of help students say they need to give other students is also declining. And, although 911 calls initially rose after Acadia reduced the threshold for when students call if they’re worried about a friend, the number of those calls has dropped over time and the number of 911 calls that translate into transports to hospital is also down.

ALUMNI AND PARENTS

“We want parents, including alumni with children preparing for university, to remember that not every student drinks, or drinks to the point of experiencing harm,” Sanford says. “We’ve tried to communicate how parents can make a difference when they bring their son or daughter to university. One is to avoid stockpiling them with alcohol. Another is to have conversations with them about their choices, and that those choices don’t have to involve drinking to excess.”

In addition to their work nationally and on campus, Sanford and Kruisselbrink have been actively engaged in the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation’s Keep It Social (<http://keepitsocial.ca/>) program. They’ve involved student leaders to ensure the campaigns resonate with students, and they encourage alumni and parents to look at Keep It Social materials with their sons and daughters.

“We’re proud of Acadia’s influence on seeing Keep It Social emerge and gain traction across the province,” Sanford says. “It’s growing in popularity across Atlantic Canada, and there’s interest from other parts of the country, too.”



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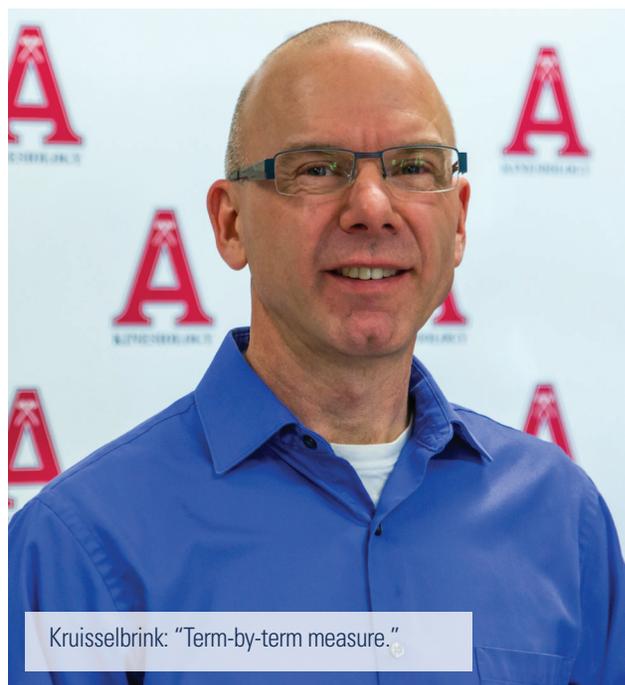


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