

Despite successes with schoolchildren, recent studies have shown that **normative education** often fails to reduce drinking at colleges, where heavy drinking is both more common and more valued. The approach contrasts real drinking rates with a student's perception of how much their peers drink and with their own drinking. Correcting 'everyone's doing it' misconceptions is expected to reduce drinking closer to the real norm.

One of the largest and most carefully controlled studies of its kind randomised over 1000 US college students to usual peer-led alcohol education in small groups, or to this plus feedback comparing the real extent of drinking at the college to their own drinking and their estimates of how much their fellow students drank. ❶ Before and after surveys available from 874 students showed that, as intended, normative education had reduced estimates of how much students drank. However, these were only very weakly related to changes in the individual's drinking. The net result was that normative education slightly reduced the frequency of drinking but did nothing to reduce the amount drunk on each occasion, the more relevant measure if 'binge' drinking is the major concern.

The first national US study of normative education in colleges used a different research design and studied media campaigns as opposed to face-to-face interventions, but the results were similarly negative. ❷ Colleges which had implemented normative campaigns between 1997 and 2001 had more consistent evidence of *increased* drinking over this period than colleges which had not. Another analysis from the same study showed that colleges which have adopted a social norms approach did less to limit access to alcohol through means such as an alcohol-free campus. The suspicion has been voiced that the drinks industry supports social norms campaigns precisely because these are less effective and divert colleges from imposing restrictions which could cut consumption.

- ❶ Stamper G.A. *et al.* "Replicated findings of an evaluation of a brief intervention designed to prevent high-risk drinking among first-year college students: implications for social norming theory." *J. Alcohol and Drug Education*: 2004, 48(2), p. 53–72 **AC**
- ❷ Wechsler H. *et al.* "Perception and reality: a national evaluation of social norms marketing interventions to reduce college students' heavy alcohol use." *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*: 2003, 64, p. 484–494 **AC**