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LONGITUDINAL FINDINGS FROM THE 1999 LIFESTYLES SURVEY

Prepared by Patricia M. Fabiano, Gary R. McKinney, Kristoffer Rhoads, and Christopher Stark

INTRODUCTION

The Lifestyle Survey Project began in 1992, and was designed to track patterns of alcohol and drug consumption and consequences among Western students. The survey was replicated in 1995, 1998, and 1999. The 1999 administration, conducted during spring quarter, differed from previous administrations in that only 1998 participants were surveyed, thus furnishing longitudinal findings. While this approach produced a cohort demographically different than its predecessors, beneficially, few longitudinal studies are done in the alcohol and drug prevention field, and so the possibility existed that such a survey would reveal new and interesting findings. Researchers also hoped that the study would shed some light on the efficacy of the second year of the social norms marketing strategy employed at Western to reduce the potential negative influences of alcohol misuse on a student's academic endeavors.

[Note: rather than allowing misinformation and myth to influence the decisions students make regarding their use of alcohol, social norms marketing disseminates facts about drinking behaviors, in the hope of creating a climate where better decisions can be made. For instance, survey findings consistently indicate that when Western students party, over 80% have four or few drinks. In light of the fact that students often believe other students drink more than they do, this kind of statistic informs those who do drink in moderation (the majority) that *theirs* is the norm, not those who drink in excess.]

This report and others in the Focus series that present Lifestyle Survey findings—including *Lifestyles, 1998, an Extended Executive Summary* (Volume 4, Issue 3), and *The Relationship between Alcohol Consumption and Academic Performance* (Volume 4, Issue 7)—pinpoint areas of interest taken from the larger Lifestyles technical reports. (See the back page colophon for information on receiving these and all other Office of Testing and Assessment publications.)



LIFESTYLES SURVEY, 1999 - WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

DEMOGRAPHICS

Unlike previous Lifestyles Surveys—in which a random sample was drawn from the overall population of Western students—the 1999 Lifestyles Survey sample was drawn only from the pool of students who had taken the 1998 Lifestyles Survey. Questionnaires were mailed to 800 respondents; ultimately, 347 questionnaires were returned.

The 1999 cohort was 46.7% male and 53.3% female—slightly different from the 1998 cohort, which was 51.2% male and 48.9% female. The 1999 cohort were 29.1% under-aged (that is under 21), and 70.9% legal-aged (21 or older)—considerably different from the 1998 cohort, which was 40.8% under-aged, and 59.2% legal-aged. The 1999 cohort mostly lived off-campus, 82.7%, which again differed from the 1998 cohort, 61.8% of whom lived off-campus.

Regarding the findings, some points regarding demographics should be noted. First, respondents had one year to mature between surveys, which likely had some influence over their responses. Second, demographic analysis indicated that high risk drinkers from the 1998 survey were less likely to have filled out a 1999 survey than those who drank at more modest levels. These points do not, by any means, lessen the impact of the findings; however, they should be kept in mind when making interpretations.

DEFINITIONS

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Lifestyle Survey findings consider the frequency with which students drink, and also the amount they drink defined two ways: 1) typical, the amount consumed on any given weekend night, and 2) peak, the greatest amount consumed on a single occasion in the month prior to the survey. Further definitions of alcohol consumption include high risk drinking, operationally defined as consuming five or more drinks in one sitting, and alcohol poisoning threshold, operationally defined as consuming seven or more drinks in one sitting. Also, it should be noted that unlike the Lifestyle Project Survey Technical Reports, in which those who reported no drinking were removed from the analysis of typical and peak alcohol consumption, the findings in this report include *all* survey respondents.

APRA: PERCEIVED RISK BEHAVIOR

The APRA (Assessment of Perceived Risks of Alcohol) is a series of questions that measure a student's perception that he or she will experience certain negative consequences due to alcohol use—for example, missing class due to hangovers, being unable to complete homework due to drinking, etc. Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether there was any likelihood of experiencing each of a list of items in the next four years.

RAPI: ACTUAL RISK BEHAVIOR

The RAPI (Rutgers Alcohol Problem Inventory) is a series of questions that quantify the occurrence of negative effects due to alcohol use in college students. It covers a wide range of risk behaviors—for example, missing work or school due to alcohol use, arguing with family or friends, driving under the influence, etc. Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether in the last six months they had experienced each incident.

PERCEPTION: HOW DO WESTERN STUDENTS PERCEIVE THE DRINKING PATTERNS OF OTHER WESTERN STUDENTS?

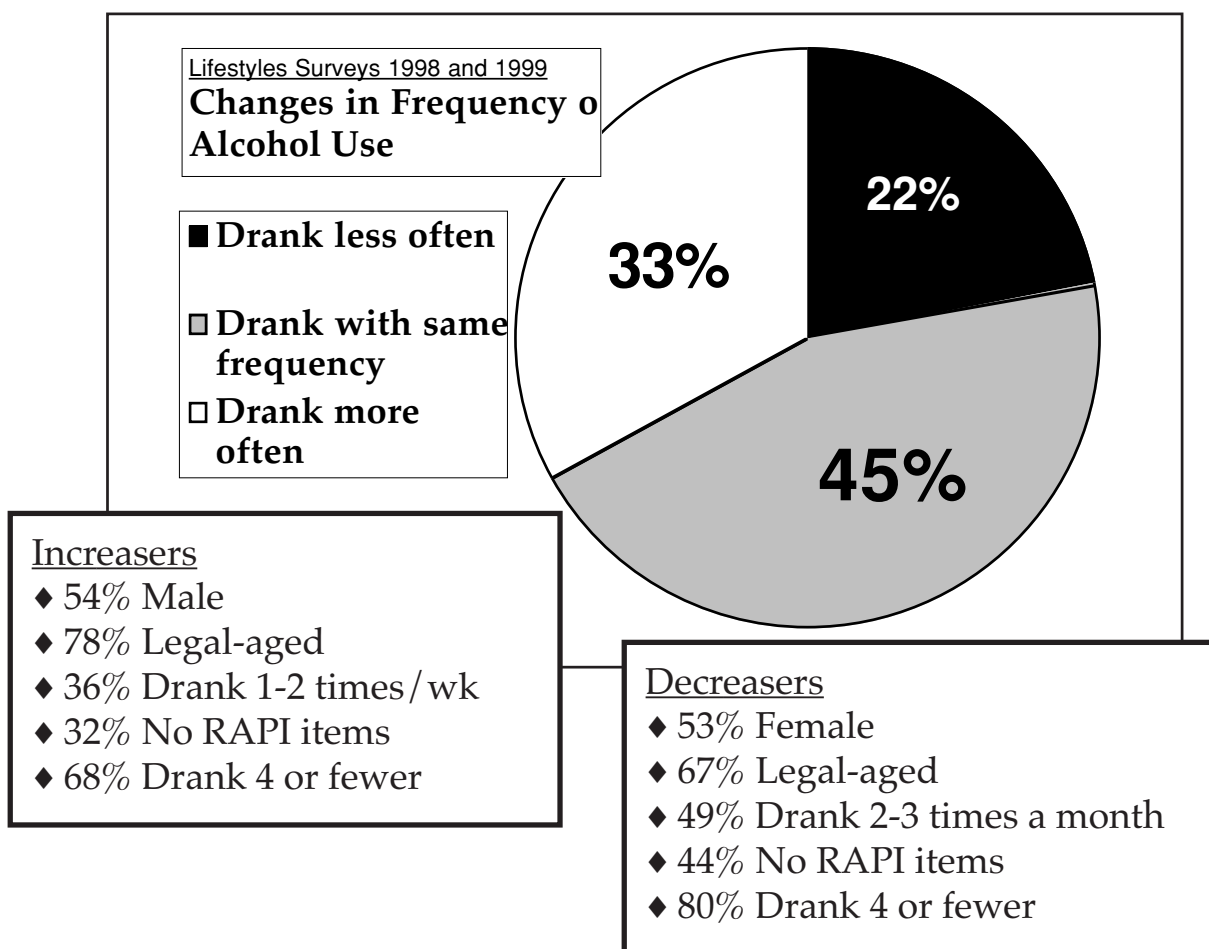
Lifestyle Survey respondents were asked to make their "best estimate (of the) percentage of Western students...you think consume no alcohol beverages at all." They were also asked to make their "best estimate (of the) percentage of Western students...you think consumed 5 or more drinks at a time on at least one occasion in the last two weeks." These questions establish some idea of how students view the drinking habits of other students.

FREQUENCY OF ALCOHOL USE

Most students drank about as often in 1999 as they had in 1998. Of those reporting no change in drinking frequency, most were females (64%) and legal-aged (68%). Most of these students experienced two or fewer RAPI items (56%) and actually decreased the numbers of drinks consumed on typical occasions (71%).

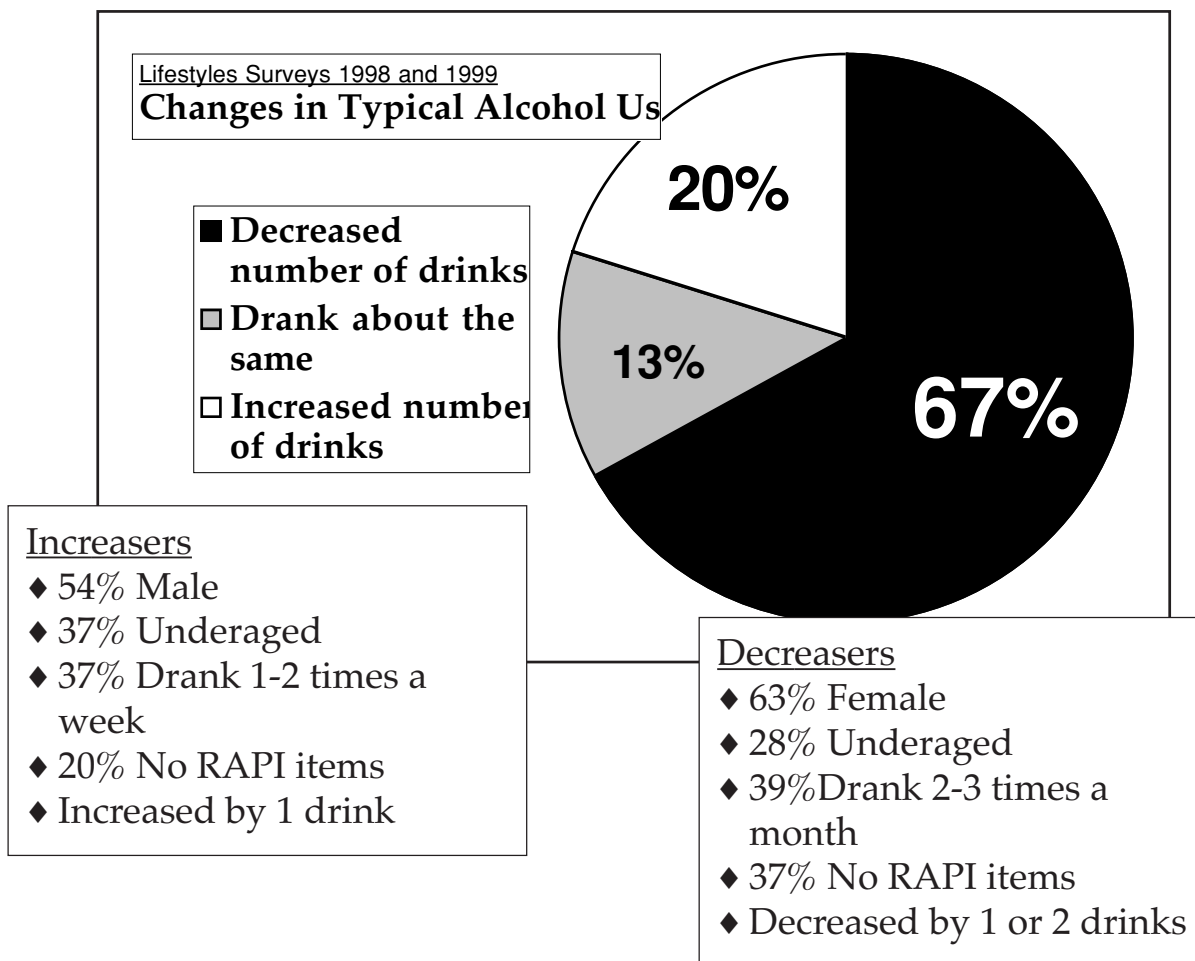
For students who decreased their drinking frequency, gender was reflective of the overall cohort balance (53% female vs. 47% male). Most of these students drank two or three times a month and experienced one or fewer RAPI items (56%). Strikingly, most consumed four or fewer drinks on *peak* occasions (64%), reflecting modest drinking patterns.

For students who increased their drinking frequency, most were male and most reported drinking once or twice a week. Yet despite the fact these students drank more *often*, for most (59%) their number of RAPI items either remained the same or decreased. Moreover, most (52%) reduced the amount they drank on typical occasions by one or more drinks. In other words, even though these students drank more frequently, they consumed less alcohol at a sitting.



TYPICAL ALCOHOL USE

Overall, alcohol use on typical occasions fell between 1998 and 1999, with 67% of survey participants reporting a decrease in consumption. A profile of “decreasers” noted that most were females and of legal age. They had tendency to drink at the lower frequency levels, and were effected less by alcohol-related problems. On average, they consumed one or two less than they had in 1998. On the other hand, “increasers” were mostly males and more likely to be under-aged. They had a tendency to drink at higher frequency levels, and were more likely to be effected by alcohol-related problems. On average, they consumed one drink more than they had in 1998.



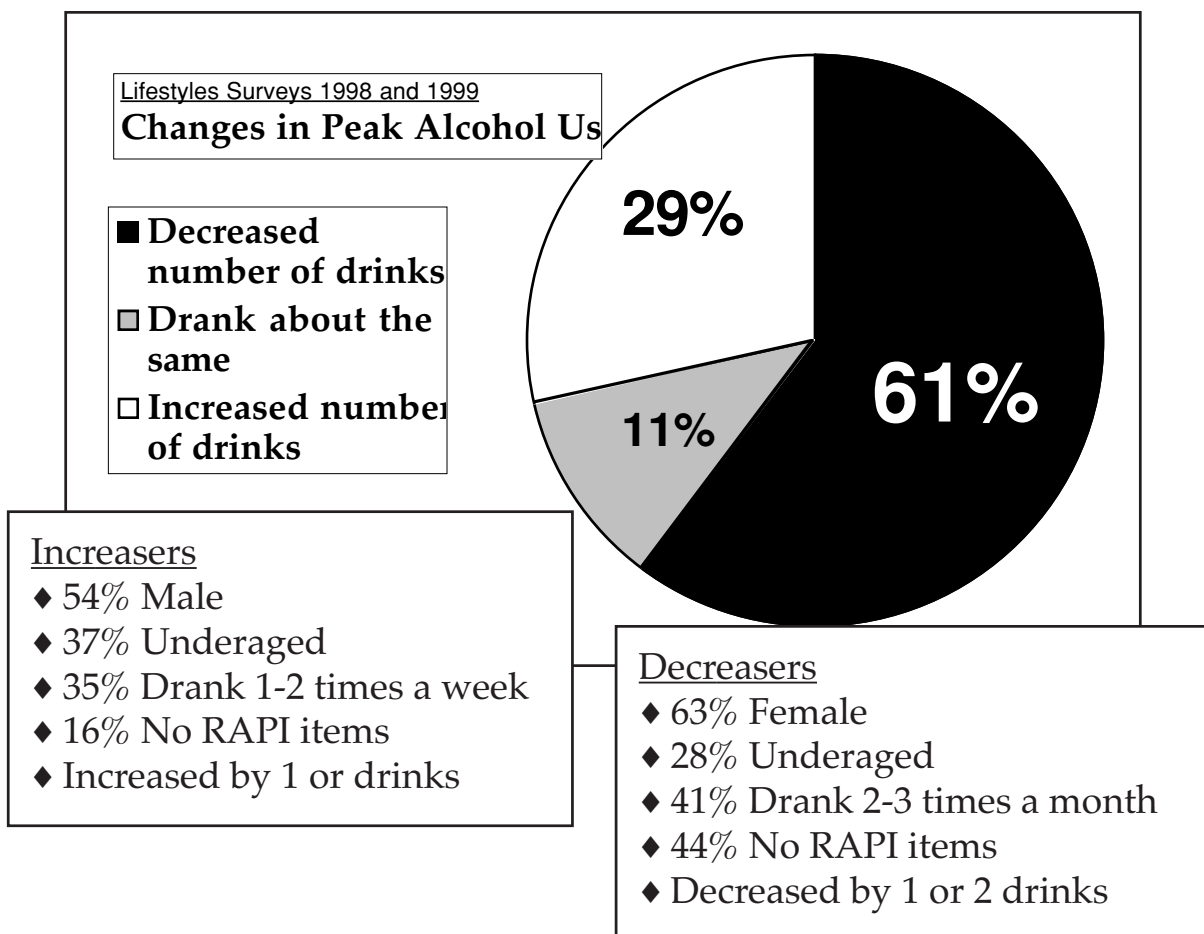
PEAK ALCOHOL USE

As with alcohol use on typical occasions, use on peak occasions also fell between 1998 and 1999, with 61% of survey participants reporting a decrease in consumption. Since the decreaser subcohort were likely to drink less regardless of category (typical or peak), some of the figures remained constant; for instance, for both typical and peak occasion, there were the same percentages of female and legal-aged students.

Again, decreasers were mostly females and legal-aged, had tendency to drink at the lower frequency levels, and were effected less by alcohol-related problems. On average, they consumed one or two less than they had in 1998. Importantly, on peak occasions, most decreasers (67%) consumed four or fewer drinks. Moreover, for most (78%), their number of RAPI items either remained the same or decreased.

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By contrast, increasers were mostly males and more likely to be underaged. They had a tendency to drink at higher frequency levels, and were more likely to be effected by alcohol-related problems. On average, they consumed one drink more than they had in 1998. On peak occasions, most increasers (56%) consumed as many as eight drinks, at which level a drinker is flirting with potential alcohol poisoning.



APRA: PERCEIVED RISK BEHAVIOR

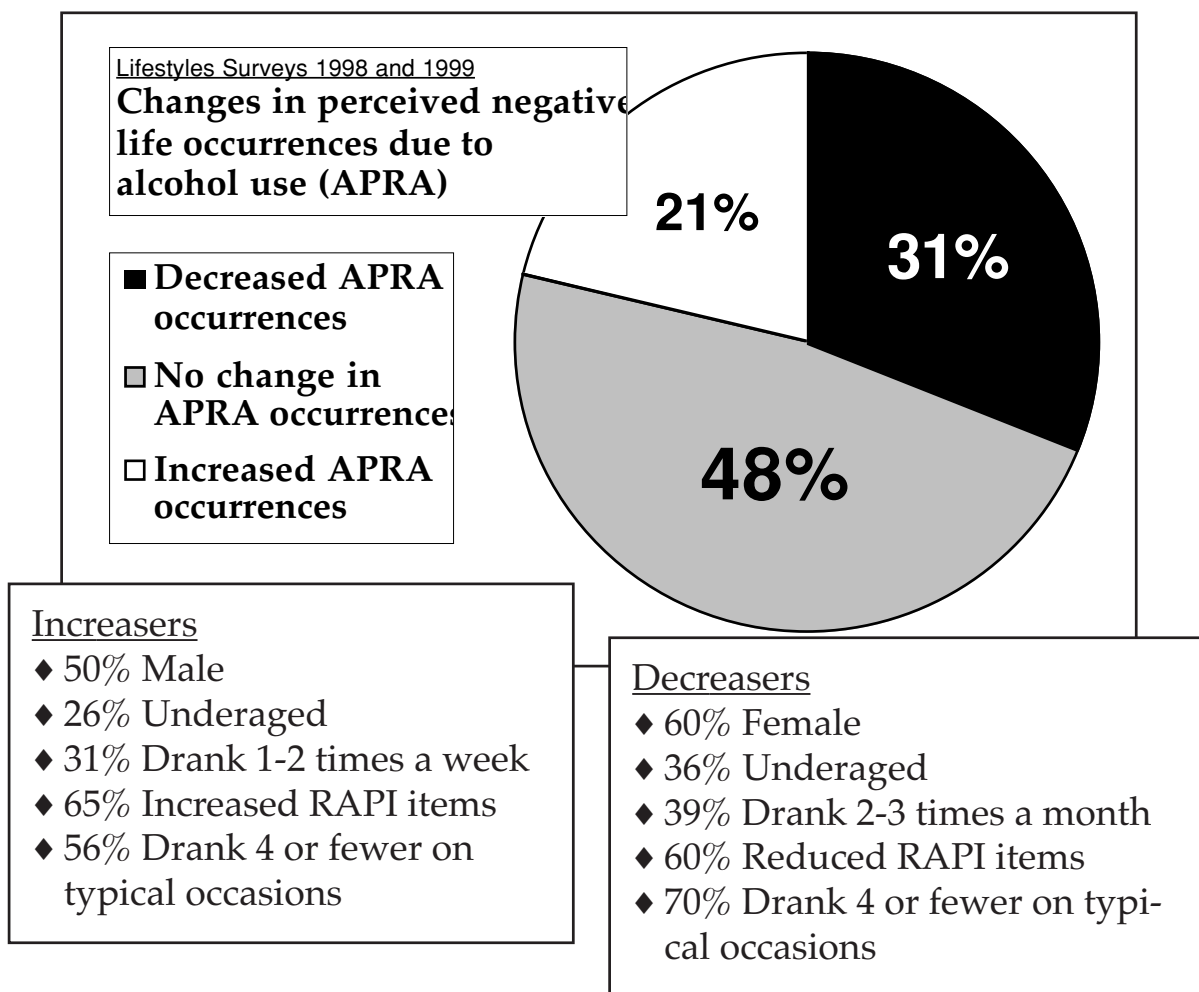
As mentioned above, the APRA is a series of survey questions that measure a student's perception that he or she will experience certain negative consequences due to alcohol use. Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether there was any likelihood of experiencing each of a list of items in the next four years.

For most students polled in the 1999 Lifestyles Survey, there was no change in the number of APRA items reported. These students were mostly female (58%) and legal-aged (75%). Most drank at the modest frequency level of two or three times a month (48%) and experienced no RAPI items (61%). Most reduced their amount of typical drinks by one or more (69%) and consumed four or fewer drinks on peak occasions (76%).

Those students perceiving they would experience fewer negative consequences due to alcohol also reduced the actual number of negative occurrences. These students were mostly female. Most consumed four or fewer drinks on typical occasions and reduced the number of drinks they consumed by one or more. Yet most also binged periodically, with 63% indicating they consumed six or fewer drinks on peak occasions.

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Those students perceiving they would experience more negative consequences due to alcohol also increased the actual number of negative occurrences. Males were somewhat more likely to be included in this group (50% of this subchort were male, compared to 47% of all respondents). Most consumed four or fewer drinks on typical occasions, though at a lower percentage than found among decreaseers. Most increaseers (63%) indicated they consumed as many as ten drinks on peak occasions, putting them at high risk for potential alcohol poisoning.



RAPI: ACTUAL RISK BEHAVIOR

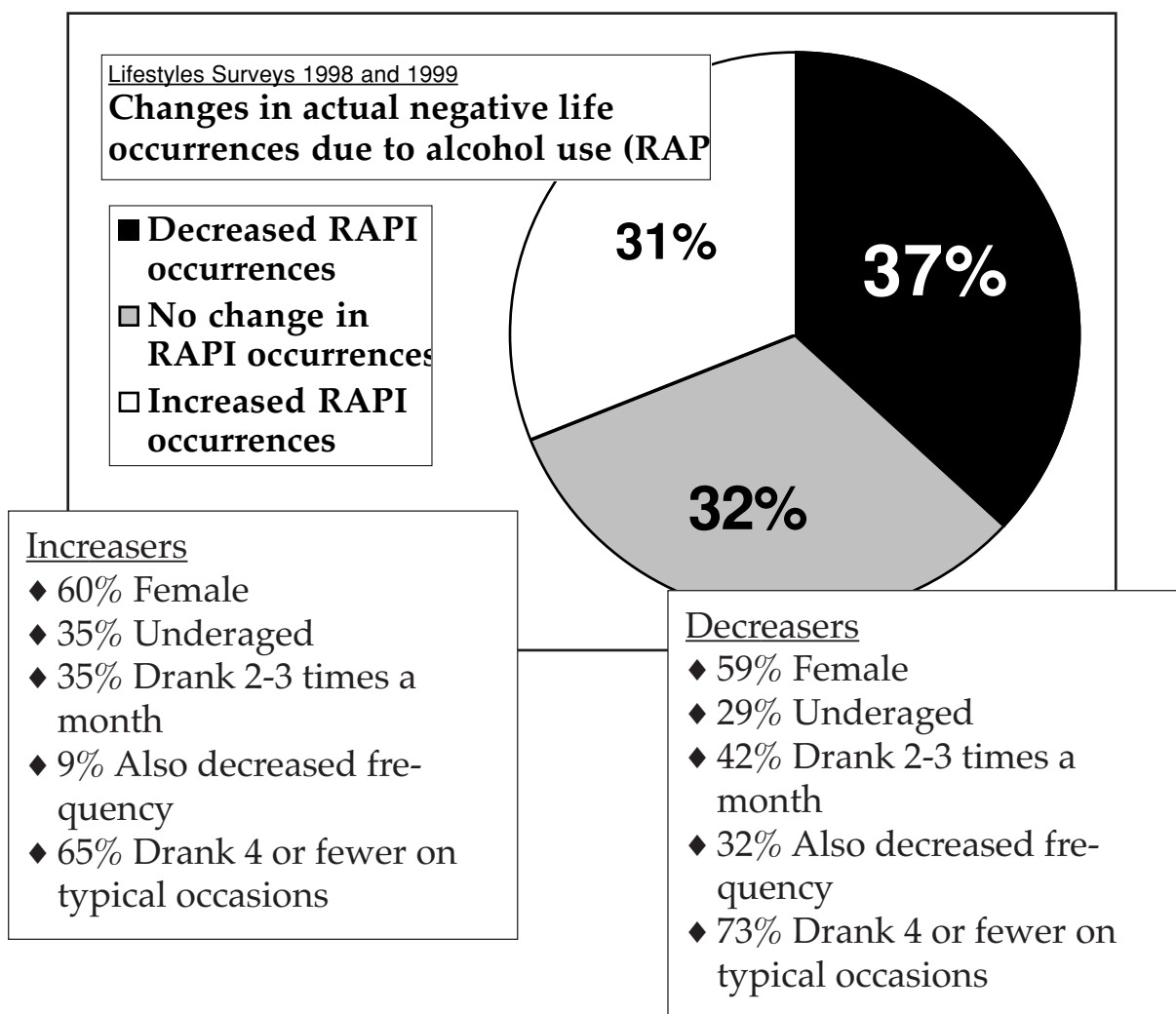
As mentioned above, the RAPI is a series of survey questions that quantify the occurrence of negative effects due to alcohol use in college students. Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether in the last six months they had experienced each incident.

For most students polled in the 1999 Lifestyles Survey (37%), there was a decrease in the number of RAPI items reported. These students were mostly female (59%) and legal-aged (71%). Most drank at the modest frequency level of two or three times a month (42%) and experienced one or fewer RAPI items (55%). Most reduced their amount of typical drinks by one or more (68%) and consumed four or fewer drinks on peak occasions (53%).

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Most students reporting no *change* in the number of RAPI items (77%) also reported experiencing no RAPI items whatsoever, indicating the likelihood that they were in a relatively low-risk group to begin with. These students were mostly female (57%) and legal-aged (77%). Nearly all of these students (92%) consumed four or fewer drinks on typical occasions, and most (63%) consumed three or fewer drinks on peak occasions.

As would be expected, those students reporting they had experienced more RAPI items also reported consuming more alcohol. Only 9% of these students decreased their frequency of drinking, and most (57%) consumed seven or more drinks on peak occasions, thus putting themselves at risk of potential alcohol poisoning. Most experienced as many as five RAPI items.



STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF OTHER STUDENTS DRINKING BEHAVIORS

In both 1998 and 1999, survey respondents were asked to make their best estimate of the percentage of Western students that consume no alcoholic beverages at all, and the percentage that consumed 5 or more drinks at a time on at least one occasion in the last two weeks (high risk consumption). Respondents entered an actual figure, anywhere from 0% to 100%. For each question and cohort, an average was calculated.

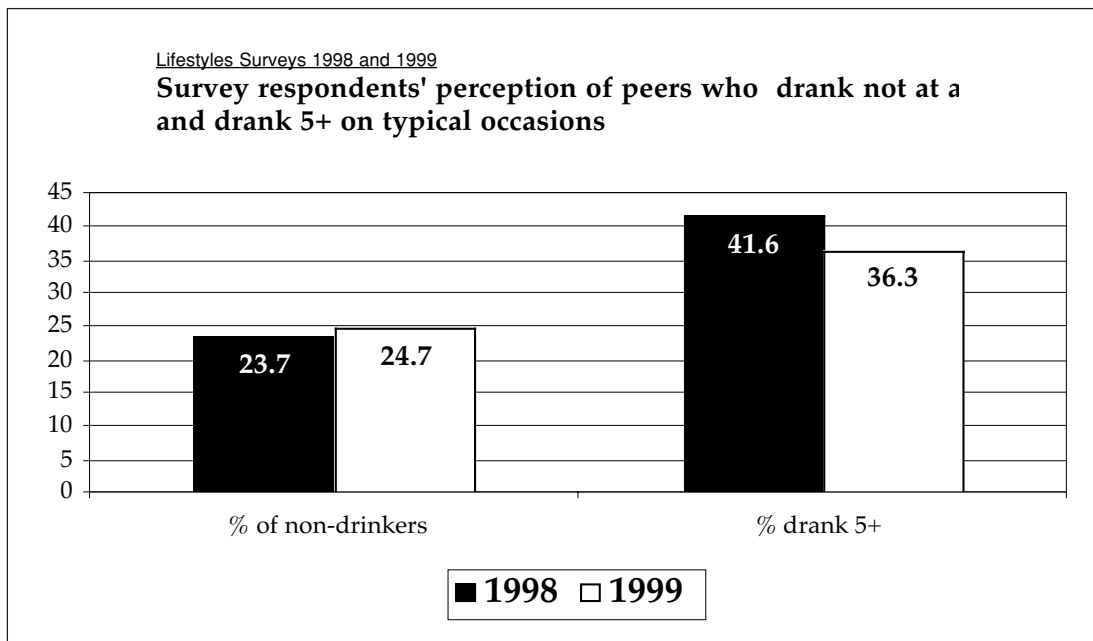
LIFESTYLES LONGITUDINAL STUDY, 1998-99

NON-DRINKERS

In 1998 the averaged response from survey respondents was that 23.6% of other Western students did not drink at all. In 1999, the averaged response was that 24.7% of other Western students did not drink at all. This finding was not statistically significant.

HIGH RISK DRINKERS

In 1998, the averaged response from survey respondents was that 41.6% of other Western students drank 5 or more drinks at a time on at least one occasion. In 1999, the averaged response was 36.3% (which constitutes a percentage decrease of 13%). This finding was statistically significant [sig. (2-tailed) = .003], and indicates a move toward more accurate perception, because in actuality less than 20% of students typically drink 5 or more drinks at a time. While it would be unlikely for perception and actuality to arrive at the same figure, movement towards accuracy is definitely the direction for which social norms marketers strive. And although no direct causal links can be made, *something* increased the accuracy of 1999 respondents, and it is fair to say that social norms marketing has been very much in evidence on Western's campus in recent years. Moreover, this second year of increased accuracy in perception and decreased heavy consumption supports the idea of social norms marketing as a viable and essential tool as an *on-going* process in the effort to help students make healthy decisions regarding their use of alcohol.



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