

3-1-1999

Lifestyles, 1998: Patterns of Alcohol and Drug Consumption and Consequences among Western Washington University Students - an Extended Executive Summary

Patricia M. Fabiano

Western Washington University

Yu-Ree Hyun

Western Washington University

Gary (Gary Russell) McKinney

Western Washington University

Heather K. Mertz

Western Washington University

Kristoffer W. (Kristoffer Williams) Rhoads

Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/surveyresearch_docs



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fabiano, Patricia M.; Hyun, Yu-Ree; McKinney, Gary (Gary Russell); Mertz, Heather K.; and Rhoads, Kristoffer W. (Kristoffer Williams), "Lifestyles, 1998: Patterns of Alcohol and Drug Consumption and Consequences among Western Washington University Students - an Extended Executive Summary" (1999). *Office of Survey Research*. 466.

https://cedar.wwu.edu/surveyresearch_docs/466



The Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing • Western Washington University

Volume 4, Issue 3

March, 1999

LIFESTYLES, 1998: PATTERNS OF ALCOHOL AND DRUG CONSUMPTION AND CONSEQUENCES AMONG WWU STUDENTS —AN EXTENDED EXECUTIVE SUMMARY—

Prepared by Patricia M. Fabiano, Gary R. McKinney,
Yu-Ree Hyun, Heather K. Mertz, and Kristoffer Rhoads

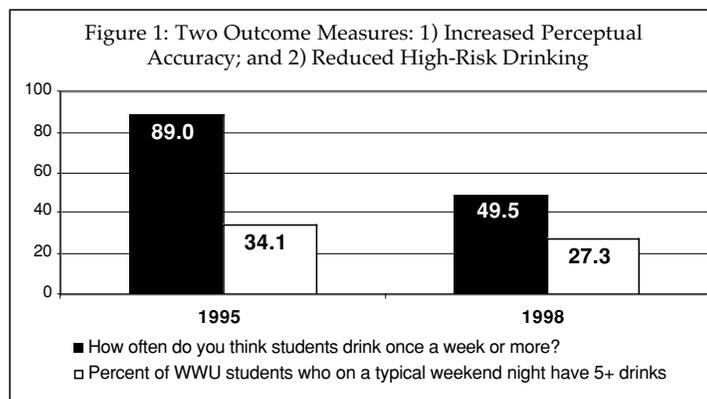
In response to both internal and national findings and concerns, the first Western Washington University Lifestyles Project Survey of alcohol and drug usage among Western students was conducted in 1992 as part of the University's on-going effort (a) to investigate students' college experience both *in and out* of the classroom; (b) to enhance those experiences which lead to personal and academic success; and (c) to reduce risk factors jeopardizing student success. The 1995 and 1998 Lifestyles Project Surveys have had the same goals as their predecessor, with the additional benefit of providing longitudinal findings. All three surveys were administered to random samples of students across all years in school (freshmen through senior). Demographically, the 1998 survey cohort of 638 respondents mirrored the overall population of 1998 Western students by ethnicity and age, though was overrepresented

by males. (For the survey males made up 51.2% and females 48.9%, while the fall, 1997, student body was 44.0% males and 56.0% females). This discrepancy did not bother researchers, as past surveys have indicated that males drink more than females and any

positive trends indicated by the findings would be that much more impressive with a nearly equal gender balance.

As presented in Figure 1, the two most important findings from the 1998 Lifestyles Survey were that (a) the percentage decrease in students

who thought other students drank once a week or more was 44%, indicating that students' awareness *increased* (since the 1998 figure is closer to the actual percent of students who reported drinking once a week or more); and (b) the percentage decrease in students reporting binge drinking (5 drinks or more) on typical occasions was 20%, indicating simply that students drank less.



REASONS FOR DRINKING

From a list of ten items, respondents were asked to indicate which were a major, minor, or not a reason why they chose to drink. The top three items listed as “major reasons” for drinking were: to get drunk or high (29.4%), to relax (25.8%), and to feel at ease socially (19.5%). Yet a considerable number of students also indicated that getting drunk or high was *not* a reason they drank (42.1%), while many students listed to relax (47.5%) or to feel at ease (45.4%) as a “minor reason” they drank. In other words, while drinking to get drunk might have been a specific reason for some students to drink, most students drank to relax or feel at ease socially.

ALCOHOL USE: FREQUENCY OF CONSUMPTION

Overall, students reported drinking somewhat more *often* than they did in previous survey years (though as will be shown, drank in less *quantity*). Slightly fewer drank once a month; slightly more drank 3-4 times a week. Other frequency indicators remained, for practical purposes, unchanged.

Males reported drinking with more frequency than females, whose drinking patterns remained amazingly consistent with previous survey administration findings. First- and second-year students reported drinking with more frequency than third- and fourth-year students. Under-aged students reported drinking with more frequency than in previous survey years. Respondents who played club sports reported drinking with more frequency than respondents who volunteered or participated in intercollegiate athletics.

Additionally, some might find it interesting that not all substance-free hall residents were teetotalers. Nearly a quarter of those living in substance-free halls reported they drank 2-3 times a month, though less than eight percent reported drinking with any more frequency than that. Though it might surprise some that substance-free hall residents drink occasionally, it should be noted that students also choose to live in substance-free halls to cut down on noise and distraction.

ALCOHOL USE: QUANTITIES OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION DEFINED

Besides frequency, the Lifestyles Survey utilizes four measures of alcohol consumption: typical drinking, peak drinking, binge drinking, and drinking to the point of alcohol poisoning. A **typical** quantity of alcohol is defined as the amount a student would drink on any given Friday or Saturday night. This measure has been used in a number of research studies and is considered a valid indication of the amount of alcohol students generally drink. A **peak** quantity of alcohol, on the other hand, is defined as the “most” a student has consumed in the past month. This measure yields an indication of the high-range amounts of alcohol students consume.

Another measure of consumption frequently cited in the literature is **binge drinking**, operationally defined as the consumption of five or more drinks in one sitting. Binge drinking is of particular concern to colleges and universities because it is frequently associated with residence hall damage, sexual assault, poor academic performance, and missed classes. Although drinking to the point of life-threatening alcohol poisoning differs among individuals based on height, weight, speed of consumption, drinking history, gender, etc., for the purpose of this study the threshold for **alcohol poisoning** will be considered drinking 7-8 drinks at one sitting. Taking into account all the individual variables, drinking 7-8 drinks at one sitting generally will produce an average blood alcohol level of 0.15%-0.20%. Blood alcohol levels in that range begin to put the individual at risk for alcohol poisoning.

FOR THE REMAINING ANALYSES OF TYPICAL AND PEAK QUANTITY DRINKING, ONLY DRINKERS WERE INCLUDED. IN OTHER WORDS, THOSE RESPONDENTS REPORTING THEY DID NOT DRINK WERE REMOVED FROM THE ANALYSIS. THIS WAS DONE SO THAT THE TRENDS OF DRINKERS COULD BE ASSESSED, SINCE DRINKERS ARE THE POPULATION THAT PUT THEMSELVES AT POTENTIAL RISK OF ALCOHOL-RELATED PROBLEMS.

ALCOHOL USE: TYPICAL AND PEAK QUANTITIES

For those respondents who drank, patterns for typical alcohol consumption changed markedly between 1998 and previous survey years. The percentage of students reporting they typically had 1-2 drinks increased from 33.8% in 1995 to 49.2% in 1998. Conversely, the percentage reporting they typically had 3-4 drinks decreased from 32.1% to 23.5%, and 5 drinks or more from 34.1% to 27.3%. Unfortunately, this good news is tempered by the fact that the percentage of students reporting they drank to the point of alcohol poisoning decreased only marginally, from 14.6% in 1995 to 14.2% in 1998, though it has remained down from the 1992 figure of 16.3%. (See Table 1.)

For those respondents who drank, patterns for peak alcohol consumption changed only slightly overall. For instance, the percentage of students reporting they had 3-4 drinks on peak occasions increased from 19.6% in 1992 to 20.5% in 1995 to 23.0% in 1998, while the percentage of students reporting they had 5 or more drinks on peak occasions decreased from 57.2% in 1992 to 55.8% in 1995 to 52.2% in 1998. Both categories have seen slow but steady positive change. As with drinking on typical occasions, students appear to be having fewer drinks on peak occasions. Unfortunately, the percentage of students reporting they had seven or more drinks on peak occasions remained virtually unchanged: 35.1% in 1995 compared to 35.3% in 1998. (See Table 2.)

Table 1: Typical Alcohol Consumption (drinkers only)

Item	Overall		
	'92	'95	'98
1-2 drinks	38.2	33.8	49.2
3-4 drinks	28.0	32.1	23.5
5+ drinks	33.8	34.1	27.3
7+ drinks*	16.3	14.6	14.2

*Potential alcohol poisoning

Table 2: Peak Alcohol Consumption (drinkers only)

Item	Overall		
	'92	'95	'98
1-2 drinks	21.9	23.7	24.7
3-4 drinks	19.6	20.5	23.0
5+ drinks	57.2	55.8	52.2
7+ drinks*	40.6	35.1	35.3

*Potential alcohol poisoning

TYPICAL AND PEAK BY GENDER AND AGE CATEGORY

When Lifestyle Survey findings are categorized by both gender and age category, the issue of which subgroup drinks the most amount of alcohol is made painfully clear: under-aged males. On typical occasions, 40.6% of under-aged males reported having 7 drinks or more, compared to 12.9% of legal-aged males, 11.8% of under-aged females, and only 3.5% of legal-aged females. On peak occasions, a staggering 64.4% of under-aged males reported having 7 drinks or more, compared to 40.3% of legal-aged males, 33.3% of under-aged females, and only 14.5% of legal-aged females. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: Typical and Peak Alcohol Consumption by Gender and Age Categories

Typical	Underaged Males	Legal-aged Males	Underaged Females	Legal-aged Females	Peak	Underaged Males	Legal-aged Males	Underaged Females	Legal-aged Females
	1-2 drinks	34.4	48.5	34.3		71.9	1-2 drinks	18.6	19.5
3-4 drinks	12.5	22.1	39.2	17.5	3-4 drinks	11.9	23.3	23.2	28.2
5-6 drinks	12.5	16.6	14.7	7.0	5-6 drinks	5.1	17.0	23.2	17.3
7+ drinks*	40.6	12.9	11.8	3.5	7+ drinks*	64.4	40.3	33.3	14.5

*Potential alcohol poisoning

NEGATIVE EFFECTS DUE TO ALCOHOL USE

In order to quantify the occurrence of negative effects due to alcohol use, the Lifestyles Project Survey utilized the Rutgers Alcohol Problem Inventory (RAPI). The RAPI contains a number of items measuring the negative effects of alcohol use, ranging from hangovers, missed work or school, arguments with family or friends, driving under the influence, etc. Survey respondents were asked to indicate how often, if at all, they had experienced each incident in the last six months .

NEGATIVE EFFECTS: OCCURRENCE

From the seventeen prompts utilized from the RAPI on the Lifestyles Survey, the most common negative occurrence among 1998 respondents was “caused shame or embarrassment to self or someone else,” followed by “neglected responsibilities,” and “not able to do homework or study for a test.” It is important to note that two of the top three most likely negative occurrences due to alcohol use appear to contribute directly to a student’s academics.

Additionally, a few RAPI items can be tracked longitudinally (across all three Lifestyle Survey years). For those items, an interesting trend emerges. In all cases the percentages increased. More students in 1998 than in previous survey years indicated alcohol has influenced them to: neglect their responsibilities, not complete homework or study for a test, miss a day of school or work, and drive shortly after having four or more drinks. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: RAPI Measure of Negative Effects, Longitudinal Findings

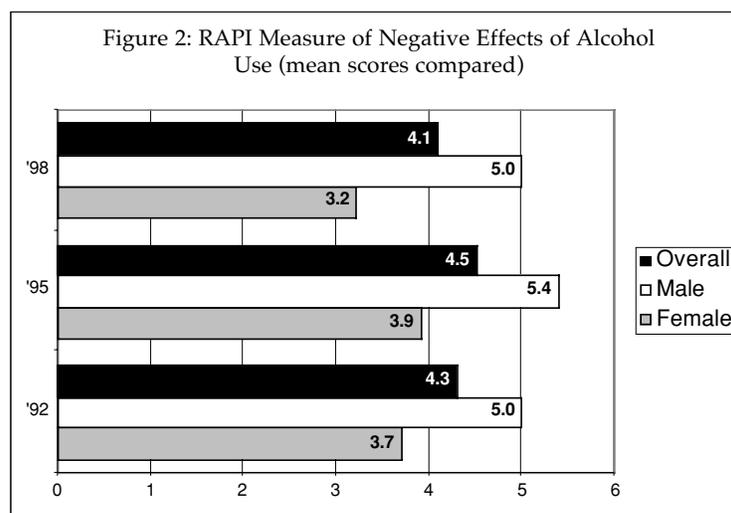
Item	1-2 Occurrences		
	1992	1995	1998
Neglected your responsibilities	20.1	20.0	25.6
Not able to do your homework or study for a test	13.2	13.6	17.4
Missed a day (or part of a day) of school or work	14.5	13.4	15.3
Drove shortly after having 4 or more drinks	12.6	8.9	12.1
Tried to cut down or quit drinking	14.1	9.9	12.1

Yet do the findings mean that Western students are having more alcohol-related problems than in previous years? Though that may be one possible interpretation, but it may also be that students are more aware of the influence of alcohol on their lives than they were in previous years. The two trends highlighted in Figure 1 (presented on the front page) support this interpretation: A. students reported consuming less alcohol; and B. students reported increased awareness of alcohol-related issues.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS: SEVERITY

Each RAPI item asked survey respondents to indicate how often each negative effect occurred in the past six months: never, 1-2 times, 3-5 times, 6-10 times, and over 10 times. This scale was then assigned a single digit numerical value: never = 0; 1-2 times =1; 3-5times = 2; 6-10 times = 3; and over 10 times = 4. Scores for each respondent were then tallied and an average was calculated, a synthesized figure used for comparison purposes. If, for instance, the RAPI Mean were to rise or drop dramatically over a given period of time, one could assume that survey respondents were experiencing an increasing or decreasing amount of negative effects due to alcohol use.

The overall RAPI Mean for 1998 Lifestyles survey respondents was 4.1, down slightly from the 1995 finding of 4.5, and from the 1992 finding of 4.3. For females in 1998 the RAPI Mean was 3.2, down from 3.9 in 1995 and 3.7 in 1992. For males the RAPI Mean was 5.0, down from the 1995 finding of 5.4, and equal to the 1992 finding, also 5.0. That the RAPI Mean decreased from 1995 is encouraging, especially considering that a RAPI Mean of 5.0 or higher is often indicative of more troublesome alcohol problems, as it meets criteria for alcohol abuse as outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IIR, American Psychiatric Association, 1987. The 5.0 RAPI Mean for males adds a note of concern, but does at least demonstrate survey consistency, as other survey findings indicated that males were heavier drinkers than females. (See Figure 2.)



NEGATIVE EFFECTS: PERCEIVED RISKS VERSES ACTUAL OCCURRENCES

In an attempt to understand students' perceptions of alcohol-related problems with actual occurrences of alcohol-related problems, two sets of findings were utilized. One set was based on the Assessment of Perceived Risks of Alcohol (APRA), which measures the personal perception of the likelihood of risks related to alcohol use while in college. The other set was based on the Rutgers Alcohol Problem Inventory (RAPI), which measures the number and severity of alcohol-related problem behaviors. Questions from these independently-developed instruments were included on the Lifestyles Survey. Because they are separately developed and administered instruments, only a few prompts matched up well enough to report in a comparative fashion, but those that did provided important insight, as well as raised some interesting questions.

In 1992, very few students felt they would have a problem with alcohol, while in fact many more actually had problems. In 1998, more students anticipated they would have drinking problems or would miss class due to drinking (or hangovers) than actually reported the problems, which would suggest a heightened awareness of the negative effects of alcohol, at least in these two areas. On the other hand, students continue to exhibit a blind spot regarding the effects of alcohol on their academics. In 1998, the percentage indicating they felt they would have a problem "completing assignments due to drinking" was 9.2%, while the percentage of students actually reporting they were "not able to do homework or study for tests due to drinking" was 20.2%. (See Table 5.)

Table 5: Perceived Risks vs. Actual Occurrences of Negative Alcohol Effects
RAPI and APRA Measures Compared (1992/1995/1998)

APRA: % indicating any likelihood of experiencing this effect in the next four years	RAPI: % indicating even one occurrence of effect during the past six months	APRA			RAPI		
		1992	1995	1998	1992	1995	1998
Develop a drinking problem	Felt you had a drinking problem	3.1	3.7	11.0	10.6	8.4	9.2
Miss class due to hangover	Missed school or work because of drinking	12.0	17.7	24.2	19.6	18.1	20.4
Unable to complete assignments due to drinking	Not able to do homework or study for test due to drinking	4.3	3.1	9.2	16.7	18.1	20.2

DRUG USE

According to 1998 survey findings, use of cocaine (or crack), and heroin among Western students was practically nonexistent, with less than 2% indicating they had ever used cocaine (or crack), and less than 1% indicating they had ever used heroin. Use of LSD was also minimal, with less than 7% indicating they had ever used LSD. The percent of Western students indicating they had ever used marijuana decreased from 31.3% in 1995 to 28.7% in 1998, though it was still higher than the 25.4% in 1992.

PERCEPTIONS

Of particular importance to the alcohol and drug abuse prevention programs at Western are students' perceptions of the alcohol and drug use of other students. Strategies utilized by such programs as WE CAN 2000 are based on the concept of the "imaginary peer," that mythical group often referred to as "everybody," as in "everybody smokes pot," or "everybody drinks." The problem with the imaginary peer is that he/she often drinks more alcohol and smokes more marijuana than students actually report drinking and smoking. By pointing out that the facts don't support the perceptions, education programs sponsored through the Prevention and Wellness Center attempt to debunk the drinking standards set by these imaginary peers. Students, for instance, usually only have 1 or 2 drinks on a typical weekend, not 3 or 4. Such facts can help students make better decisions regarding their own drinking patterns, basing them on facts, not myths.

Findings from the Lifestyles Survey indicated that positive strides have been made at Western in reducing the amount of alcohol students consume, and that to some extent, students' awareness has been increased. However, evidence also exists that the power of the imaginary peer is still strong. Students still have a tendency to overestimate, sometimes grossly, how often and how much other students drink or use marijuana.

STUDENTS ESTIMATE THE DRINKING FREQUENCY OF OTHER STUDENTS

Lifestyle Survey respondents were asked: "How often do you think students typically consume alcohol?" Most respondents thought other students drank 1-2 times a week, followed by 2-3 times a month, and once a month. No respondents thought that other students never drank. When compared to how often respondents actually reported drinking, students' estimations of how often other students drink weren't close, but rather grossly overestimated. (See Table 5.)

STUDENTS ESTIMATE THE FREQUENCY OF MARIJUANA USE OF OTHER STUDENTS

Lifestyle Survey respondents were asked: "How often do you think students typically use marijuana?" Most respondents thought other students used marijuana once a month or less, followed by 2-3 times a month, and more often than 2-3 times a month. Few respondents thought that other students never used marijuana. Similar to drinking estimations, compared to how often respondents actually reported using marijuana, students' estimations of how often other students use marijuana weren't close, but rather grossly overestimated. Especially underestimated was the percent of students who do not use marijuana. (See Table 6.)

Table 6: How Often Students Actually Reported Drinking or Using Marijuana Contrasted to How Often Respondents Thought Other Students Drank or Used Marijuana

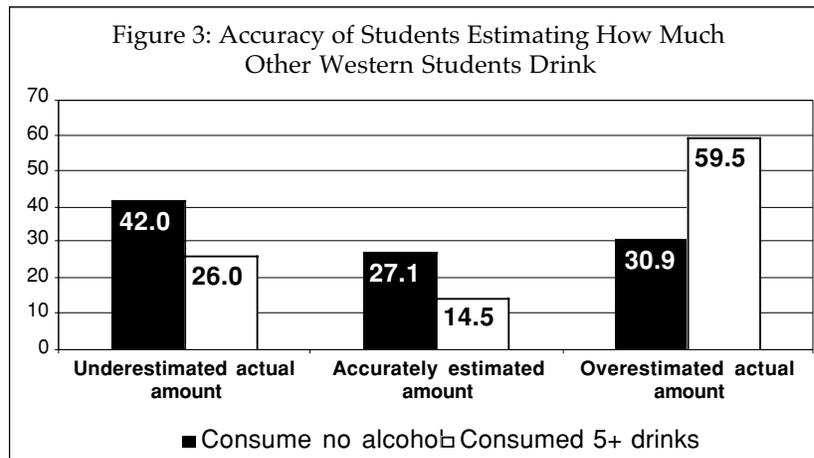
Drinking				Using Marijuana			
Actually reported		Estimated by peers		Actually reported		Estimated by peers	
not at all	22.3	never	0.0	not at all	71.3	not used	2.6
once a month	12.5	once a month	7.9	once a mo. or <	18.0	once a mo. or <	55.0
2-3 times a mo.	29.4	2-3 times a mo.	41.9	2-3 times a mo.	3.8	2-3 times a mo.	26.9
1-2 times a wk.	24.7	1-2 times a wk.	47.3	more often	6.9	1-2 times a week	14.0
more often	11.0	everyday	2.3	-	-	everyday	1.5

STUDENTS ESTIMATE THE AMOUNT OF ALCOHOL USED BY OTHER STUDENTS: NO USE

The actual percentage of Western students reporting they did not drink at all was 22.3%. Using this figure as the standard, three groupings were established: 1) those survey respondents who estimated below 20%, thus underestimating the actual figure; 2) those respondents who estimated between 20-25%, thus accurately estimating the actual figure; and 3) those respondents who estimated above 25%, thus overestimating the actual figure. Overall, most survey respondents underestimated the percentage of other students who consumed no alcohol. Only just over a quarter of respondents accurately estimated the percentage. (See Figure 3.)

STUDENTS ESTIMATE THE AMOUNT OF ALCOHOL USED BY OTHER STUDENTS: 5 DRINKS OR MORE

The actual percentage of Western students reporting they consumed 5 or more drinks on a weekend night (typical drinking pattern) was 27.3%. Using this figure as the standard, three groupings were established: 1) those survey respondents who estimated below 25%, thus underestimating the actual figure; 2) those respondents who estimated between 25-30%, thus accurately estimating the actual figure; and 3) those respondents who estimated above 30%, thus overestimating the actual figure. Overall, again, most survey respondents overestimated the percentage of other students who consumed 5 or more drinks on typical occasions. Very few respondents estimated accurately the percentage (14.5%). (See Figure 3.)



STUDENTS' PERSONAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS ALCOHOL AND MARIJUANA COMPARED TO THE ATTITUDES THEY PERCEIVE OTHER STUDENTS HAVE TOWARDS ALCOHOL AND MARIJUANA

Lifestyle Survey respondents were presented a 5-point scale representing various attitudes one might have towards alcohol and asked which of the statements best represented their personal attitude. A majority of respondents (55.3%) indicated that “occasionally getting drunk is okay as long as it doesn’t interfere with academics or other responsibilities.” Many respondents (30.7%) indicated that “drinking is all right, but not getting drunk.”

In contrast, nearly three-quarters of respondents (72.3%) thought other students thought that “occasionally getting drunk is okay as long as it doesn’t interfere with academics or other responsibilities.” Few respondents (4.8%) thought that other students thought “drinking is all right, but not getting drunk.” In other words, students were likely to report relatively moderate personal attitudes regarding alcohol use, while assuming indulgent attitudes on the part of other students. This pattern or perception was equally true for attitudes toward marijuana use. Students were likely to report moderate personal attitudes while assuming indulgent attitudes on the part of other students. (See Table 7.)

LIFESTYLES SURVEY, 1998

Table 7: Personal Attitudes ("Which statement best represents YOUR attitude?") vs. Perceived Attitudes ("Which statement best represents the most common attitude among WESTERN STUDENTS IN GENERAL?")

Alcohol	Personal attitude	Others' attitude
1. Drinking is never a good thing to do	8.1	0.2
2. Drinking is all right but a person should not get drunk	30.7	4.8
3. Occasionally getting drunk is okay as long as it doesn't interfere with academics, etc.	55.3	72.3
4. Occasionally getting drunk is okay even if does interfere with academics or responsibilities	2.2	12.3
5. Frequently getting drunk is okay if that's what the individual wants to do	3.6	10.4
Marijuana		
1. It is never a good thing to use marijuana	47.0	2.6
2. Trying it out one or two times is okay as long as it doesn't interfere with academics, etc.	18.8	26.8
3. Occasional use is okay as long as it doesn't interfere with academics or other responsibilities	26.3	56.3
4. Occasional use is okay even if it does interfere with academics or responsibilities	0.3	6.6
5. Frequent use is okay if that's what the individual wants to do	7.6	7.8

ABOUT WESTERN'S ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE PROGRAMS

One of the most important aspects of the Lifestyles Survey is also one easy to overlook: that the survey is being done at all. Most higher education alcohol prevention programs are reactive and event-based, responding to vandalism, drunken resident hall fracas, etc., as they happen, often mistaking the messages that such events send. In contrast, Western's alcohol prevention program is proactive and widely focused. It is data-based and data-driven. From surveys and studies, administrators and prevention specialists form profiles of drinkers and drinking patterns based on the slow, incremental assessment of large populations over time. These profiles are used to "market" accurate campus drinking patterns, patterns that demonstrate the typical student at Western does *not* abuse alcohol. Though an unusual approach, it is also the heart of Western's alcohol and drug abuse program, one that has already begun to produce results as well as receive national recognition. In 1995, the Primary Prevention and Wellness Center was chosen by the Harvard School of Public Health (based on a nomination by the U.S. Department of Education) as one of the five best higher education alcohol abuse programs in the nation.

There are reasons why the program has received positive attention. For instance: whereas the reactive approach to student alcohol abuse often misconstrues the situation as better or worse than it is—because counselors see only what they see—the proactive approach is based on real facts gathered through proven survey research methodologies. In the reactive system, students in trouble through alcohol may claim that "everybody is drinking." Prevention specialists at Western, however, can counter this allusion to the *imaginary peer*. Because Western's program is based on hard data, a prevention specialist at Western can indicate with great confidence that most students at Western, if they drink at all, drink only in moderation.



Published by:

OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT AND TESTING

Dr. Joseph E. Trimble, Director

For copies of OIAT technical reports, Focus Research Summaries, InfoFacts, or Dialogue discussion papers, please contact Gary McKinney: Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA 98225
 Phone: (360) 650-3409; FAX: (360) 650-6893; e-mail: garyr@cc.wwu.edu
 Web page: <http://www.wwu.edu/~assess>