

Online Alcohol Education Course for College Students Reduces Heavy Drinking

AlcoholEdu for College, an online course for college freshmen designed to reduce heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems, was found to have short term, but not long term effects on these behaviors. The 30-campus study was carried out by the Prevention Research Center of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Berkeley, California, using a randomized controlled design. The study was also designed to explore what changes in student knowledge and attitudes resulted from the course.

Drinking among college students, especially heavy drinking, has created serious problems for many years. Approximately 40 to 45% of college students report that they have engaged in heavy drinking within the previous two weeks, a rate that has remained stable over the past two decades. In response, many colleges now administer prevention programs that capitalize on the advent of interactive online learning technologies, among them AlcoholEdu for College. As of 2011, AlcoholEdu was being administered by over 250 colleges and universities nationwide. Students take the two- to three-hour course in two parts, the first in the summer before they begin at the university and the second in their first fall semester. Previous research has shown that students who take the course reduce their heavy drinking, but no study had examined AlcoholEdu as a campus-level strategy even though it is typically required for all incoming freshmen. The current project was designed to evaluate AlcoholEdu as a campus-level prevention strategy, and to investigate intervening processes by which the course reduces student drinking.

The research was carried out at 30 colleges, half of which were randomly assigned to offer the AlcoholEdu course and half of which did not offer that or any other online alcohol education course. A large sample of 1,102 students at the AlcoholEdu schools and 1,298 at the control schools responded to a questionnaire about their perceptions of alcohol and drinking habits before the course was implemented and during subsequent fall and spring semesters.

The study found that students who took the course reported less drinking in the past 30 days, less binge drinking and fewer negative physiological and social consequences in the fall semester, but these effects did not persist in the following spring semester. The study also showed stronger course effects on these outcomes among schools with the highest course completion rates (schools with 70% completion or higher).

The researchers also wanted to learn *how* the course had those effects. The materials in AlcoholEdu course are designed to address student misperceptions of drinking norms and other psychosocial factors such as personal disapproval of alcohol use, expectations regarding positive and negative effects of alcohol use, and strategies to minimize alcohol-related harm. AlcoholEdu presents accurate descriptive drinking norms by means of graphical displays of information concerning college students' alcohol use. This information helps students compare their drinking to that of their peers and corrects any exaggerated misperceptions they may have concerning their peers' alcohol use. College students tend to overestimate levels of alcohol use and heavy drinking among their peers, which may negatively influence their own drinking behavior.

The researchers found that exposure to the online AlcoholEdu course had an effect on perceived drinking norms – that is, students had a more realistic understanding of how much their peers drink. Exposure to the course, however, was not related to any of the other variables that the materials were designed to affect. Findings of this study suggest that AlcoholEdu for College affects alcohol use and related consequences indirectly through its effect on student perceptions of drinking norms. Further research is needed to better understand why this online course did not appear to affect other targeted psychosocial variables, and how to increase the number of students completing of the course.