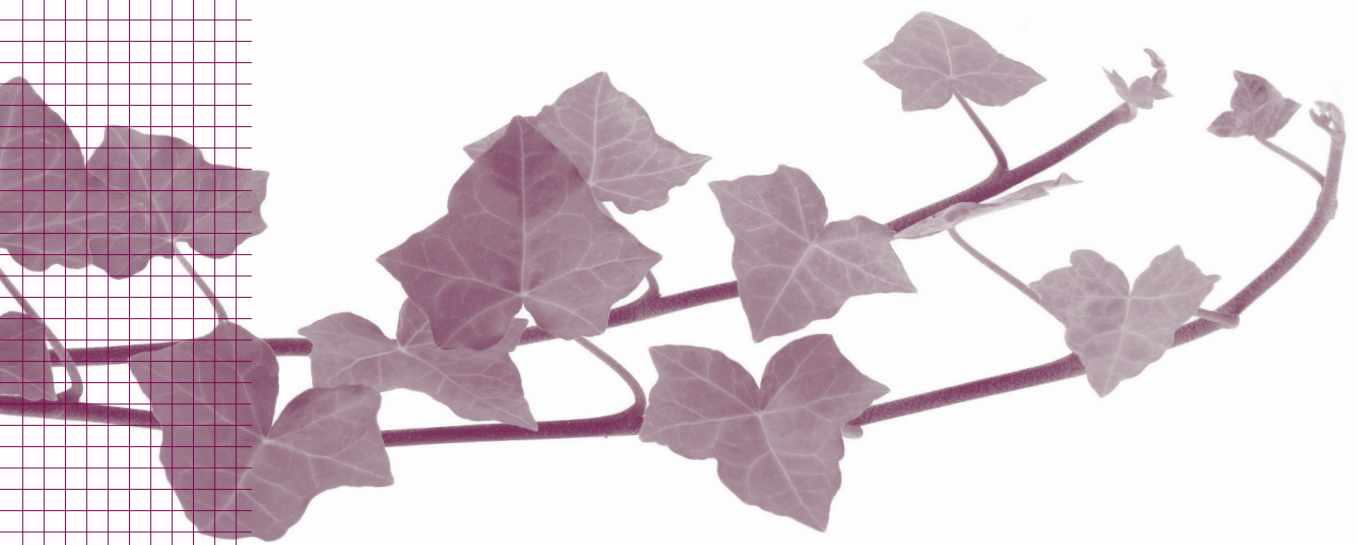


THE ALCOHOL PREVENTION COALITION

# Enlisting Today's Parents in Alcohol Prevention:

**Challenges and Opportunities  
for Leveraging Parental Influence**



Research Summary  
January 2011

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## Note to Readers

In 2009, Outside The Classroom launched The Alcohol Prevention Coalition, an initiative to address high-risk drinking among college students through targeted research, insight reports, and tools to support campuses in their alcohol prevention efforts.

Each year, The Coalition shares its major research findings at the Annual Research Summit, a learning forum for Coalition institutions. The 2010 Summit included a presentation of research findings on how campuses can engage college parents to help reduce student alcohol use and its negative consequences. This endeavor, titled “Enlisting Today’s Parents in Alcohol Prevention: Challenges and Opportunities for Leveraging Parental Influence,” arose from the requests of Coalition partners who were challenged in reaching parents with effective prevention messages.

As campus administrators are well aware, today’s college parents are different in kind from parents of previous generations. Not only have parenting styles become more dynamic, but also the degree of parental involvement in college students’ lives has dramatically increased, as has the extent of their communication with students. These shifts present both challenges and opportunities for campuses to involve parents in their efforts to help students make safer and more responsible choices regarding alcohol.

As campus administrators and prevention professionals work to combat student alcohol use, they must reach out to many partners, including parents, who can support students’ healthy choices. The following report summarizes the findings from our research, citing case examples of how campuses have adopted innovative practices to gain the support of parents as partners in campus alcohol prevention.

We hope this briefing proves useful to you and your campus in strengthening your relationship with parents. A more complete presentation of our research on this topic is available to Coalition partners and can be accessed by contacting your Partner Services representative.

**The Alcohol Prevention Coalition**

January 2011

## Introduction

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College officials are increasingly reaching out to parents as important resources and partners for fostering a healthy student transition to college life. Parent orientation programs, newsletters, and other forms of campus outreach are now commonplace as administrators recognize that the parent-student connection provides a powerful mechanism for reinforcing important messages, supporting wise decision-making, and promoting student success.

For campuses, parents are an important “vested interest” in getting students to consider healthy alternatives to high-risk alcohol use and other harmful behaviors. Yet, attempts to reach and engage college parents in alcohol prevention can be challenging, with some parents dismissing the need to encourage more responsible student behavior and others seeking to protect students from the consequences of poor decisions.

To address this concern, Alcohol Prevention Coalition researchers examined the published research on parental influence in college alcohol use and sought out best practices for engaging parents as partners in prevention. This research gave rise to a framework for how to best engage parents as prevention partners, along with key considerations for employing these strategies.

## A Review of the Literature

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The National College Health Assessment has consistently demonstrated that students consider their parents to be a believable source of health information, yet parents often claim they have little influence on their student’s decisions regarding alcohol use in college. The research literature belies this perception, pointing to several ways in which college parents can both positively and negatively influence students’ drinking behaviors. The research indicates a variety of mechanisms of parental influence on college alcohol use, including modeled behavior and explicit messages in the high school years, the first year of college, and beyond.

Despite the growing research on how parents can influence students’ decision-making, there are only a handful of research studies on how campuses can foster parental involvement and support campus alcohol prevention. The few studies on this topic examine the distribution of a parent handbook during the transition to college. The 35-page handbook (see Figure 1), developed by a researcher at Pennsylvania State University, contains information on student alcohol use as well as tips and strategies for parents to effectively speak with their students on this topic. Three studies examined the impact of these handbooks, assessing parental usage of the booklets, as well as the drinking behaviors of their students upon arrival in college. Although findings indicated some short-term impact on student drinking behaviors, it is unclear from the analyses whether this approach can sustain behavior change over time. Several limitations of the studies (e.g., small sample sizes) also make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

**Figure 1: A Parent Handbook for Talking with College Students About Alcohol**



### 35-page booklet containing:

- ✓ Incidence and consequences of drinking
- ✓ Communication, encouragement, tips, and techniques
- ✓ Skills to teach teens to resist alcohol
- ✓ Warning signs and how to respond

### Parents must:

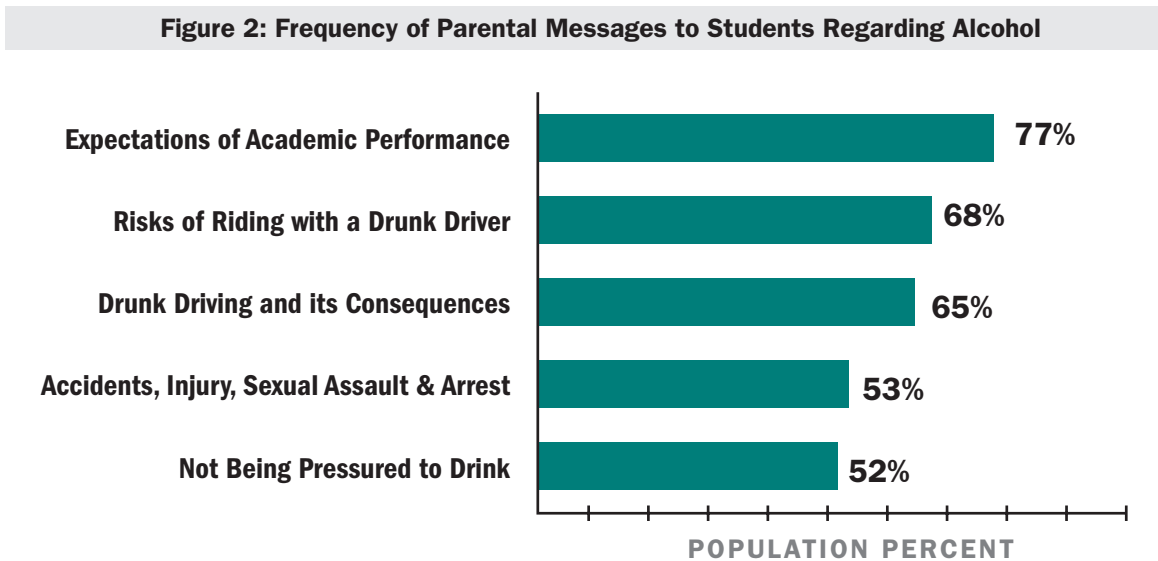
- ✓ Read and summarize each chapter
- ✓ Rate each section according to:
  - readability
  - usefulness
  - effectiveness
- ✓ Write comments in booklet and return

Source: Turrisi, R., Jaccard, J., Taki, R., Dunnam, H., & Grimes, J. (2001). Examination of the short-term efficacy of a parent intervention to reduce college student drinking tendencies. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 15*(4), 366-372.

Our review of the literature on efforts to engage college parents in alcohol prevention demonstrates a pressing need for more research in this area. Our efforts to uncover best practices in parental engagement required us to rely more heavily on case studies of promising approaches employed by innovative practitioners, many of whom call upon anecdotal evidence to support their approach. We strongly encourage Coalition campuses to document and disseminate the results of their parental engagement efforts, as this will serve to strengthen the collective efforts to build effective partnerships with parents.

### Examining the Role of College Parents

In order to gain more insight on the potential role of parents, we analyzed Outside The Classroom’s data from AlcoholEdu for College surveys on the nature and extent of parental messages to students regarding alcohol. As shown in Figure 2 below, this analysis revealed that parents provide a variety of messages to students about alcohol use and their expectations of student behavior. Many of the most common parental messages relate specifically to the risks of alcohol use.



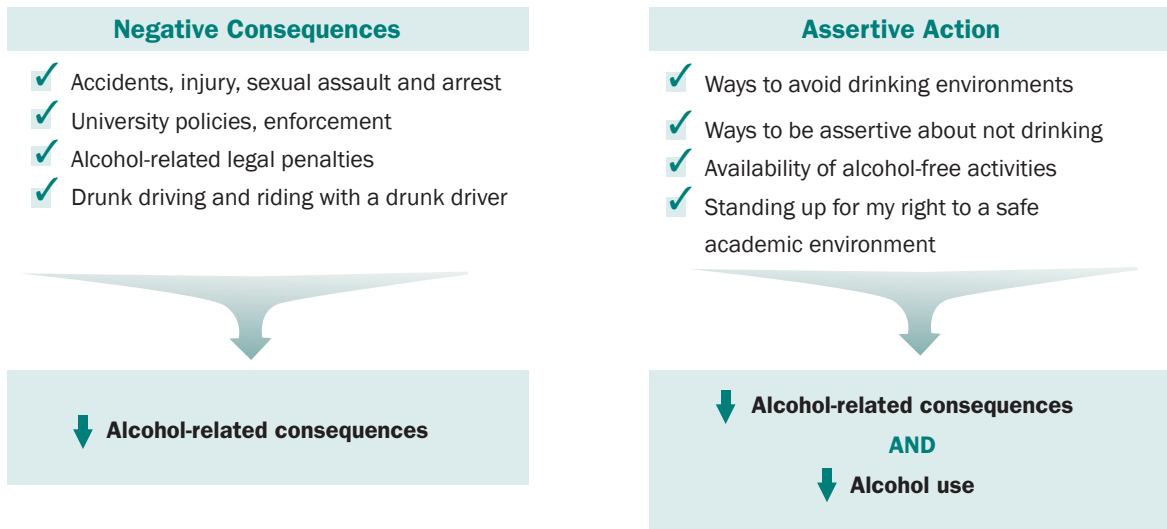
Source: Parental Communication About Drinking supplemental question set (SQS); N=5,000. AlcoholEdu for College National Survey Data-base, 2009-2010, Outside The Classroom.

In-depth analyses also revealed that students who received messages regarding the negative consequences of alcohol use—accidents and injury, legal and policy repercussions, and drunk driving—did not drink less, but did experience fewer alcohol-related negative consequences. In short, these students were “partying smarter” than their peers, to the extent that they suffered fewer negative repercussions.

Importantly, students whose parents provided messages that supported alcohol avoidance and the adoption of healthy alternatives had both lower rates of alcohol use and fewer alcohol-related consequences (see Figure 3). These messages included advice on how to act more assertively or avoid situations that involve drinking. Such findings highlight the value of parents moving beyond fundamental messages about risk to provide students with strategies to handle difficult situations or avoid them entirely. For that reason, campuses may benefit from encouraging such messages from parents to their college-bound students.

**Figure 3: Different Messages Associated with Different Outcomes**

## My parents and I have talked about...



Source: Parental Communication About Drinking supplemental question set (SQS); N=5,000. AlcoholEdu for College National Survey Data-base, 2009-2010, Outside The Classroom.

To gain further insight into this issue, Coalition researchers conducted a focus group with college parents. While this small sample is not nationally representative, the session provided important insights on how campus officials can appeal to parents on this issue.

Among the insights gained were that parents were very concerned about the harms associated with collegiate alcohol use and, generally speaking, did not fully appreciate the influence they still had on their students' decisions.

While some campus officials may shy away from sharing their data on student alcohol use, these parents were very interested in knowing what was happening on campus and asked for campuses to provide them an honest assessment of the situation.

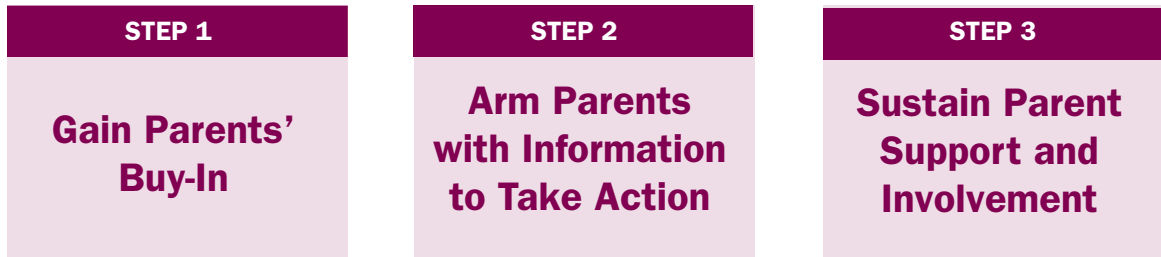
Many parents also underestimated the extent to which their student's campus addressed the problem of student alcohol use, making it clear that campuses are not getting the message out to parents about their proactive efforts on this issue. This revealed a need for greater communication from institutions about their existing prevention efforts.

Although the findings from this focus group should be interpreted with caution, an important takeaway is that most parents want more information, tools, and other resources to better address this issue in partnership with campus officials.

## Best Practices for Engaging Parents: A Three-Step Approach

Coalition researchers also reached out to a variety of campuses to uncover best practices for engaging parents in prevention. Several themes emerged as a result of these conversations, leading to a step-based framework for how campuses may engage parents as partners in prevention.

**Figure 4: A Three Step Approach to Engaging Parents**



### STEP 1 Gain Parents' Buy-In

A key practice uncovered in our research sought to capture parents' attention and to foster a belief that they have a role to play in addressing high-risk drinking. This was most often achieved in the context of a new college parent orientation session.

#### Key Points of Emphasis:

- ✓ Provide an honest assessment of student behavior on campus by revealing the data and painting an accurate picture of the problem.
- ✓ Build parents' confidence by reminding parents that they have been an expert at keeping their child healthy throughout the childhood years and should feel confident continuing in this role now that their child has entered college.
- ✓ Communicate tips and strategies for parents to address the problem head-on (e.g., specific guidelines for talking to their student about alcohol).

The goal of these strategies is to remind parents that it is their parental duty to talk to their son or daughter about alcohol and provide them information and guidance that could save their lives.

#### CASE STUDY: American University

American University employs some of these strategies by using what they call a “shock approach” during parents' orientation. During the session, parents view a clip from the movie “Haze” about Gordie Bailey's alcohol-related death at the University of Colorado at Boulder, during which Gordie's mother discusses her regret of not talking to her son about the dangers of alcohol use. This sobering account can be viewed at <http://hazethemovie.com>. Following the clip, parents are provided data on levels of alcohol and other drug use both at American University and nationally. The Director of Student Conduct then provides an overview of the policies and enforcement procedures at American, and parents are given a brochure that provides tips for how to talk to college-aged students about alcohol. Administrators at American believe this approach is effective in getting parents on board with their alcohol prevention efforts and attribute their high completion rate of AlcoholEdu for Parents to this strategy.

## STEP 2 Arm Parents with Information to Take Action

Ensuring that parents have the resources and tools they need to take on the alcohol issue is another essential component of engaging parents. Many parents state that they would be more inclined to act if they knew how to take action.

### Key Points of Emphasis:

- ✓ **Provide parents with tools and skill sets to identify the signs of a student in distress**, often in the form of handbooks, guidelines, or an online course.
- ✓ **Provide information about campus services and resources** on an ongoing basis, either via the web or through frequent mailings.

### CASE STUDY: St. John's University

One campus that provides information to parents in a particularly engaging way is St. John's University. During parent orientation, parents are given information from public safety, residential life, and the AOD prevention staff. Peer educators and orientation leaders also perform skits that portray several issues related to the college transition, with the goal of preparing parents to deal with these situations. For example, one skit addresses how to identify the signs of a student with an alcohol problem and then intervene appropriately. Following each scenario, parents are brought into a discussion and coached by peer educators on how to best approach the situation. St. John's skits are rated highly by parents and viewed as a valuable way to build parents' skills for dealing with these common challenges.

## STEP 3: Sustain Parental Support and Involvement

A third and equally important component of engaging parents is sustaining their support and involvement over the course of their students' college experience.

### Key Points of Emphasis:

- ✓ **Reach out to parents at times of heightened risk** (e. g., Homecoming Weekend) through newsletter items, emails, or other avenues to make them aware of the increased risks inherent in these events.
- ✓ **Provide parents with concrete action steps for keeping their student safe**, such as speaking with their students about safe decision-making and discussing relevant campus resources and policies.

### CASE STUDY: Ohio University

Ohio University (OU) makes repeated efforts to communicate with parents throughout the academic year. Staff send an online newsletter to parents highlighting the need for their involvement and support around specific events, such as Halloween and their annual Mom's Weekend, an event that is associated with heightened rates of drinking among both parents and students.

OU's messages to parents stress the need to speak to their student about alcohol use and being safe. Prior to Mom's Weekend, parents are also reminded that, despite the Ohio state law that permits parents to serve their minor children, they must abide by the university's policies that prohibit furnishing alcohol to minors.

## BEST PRACTICE CAMPUS: ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY

Roger Williams University (RWU) employs a comprehensive effort to engage parents, not just at the onset of their students' college experience, but across their college years. RWU's approach demonstrates each of the elements discussed in the three-step framework.

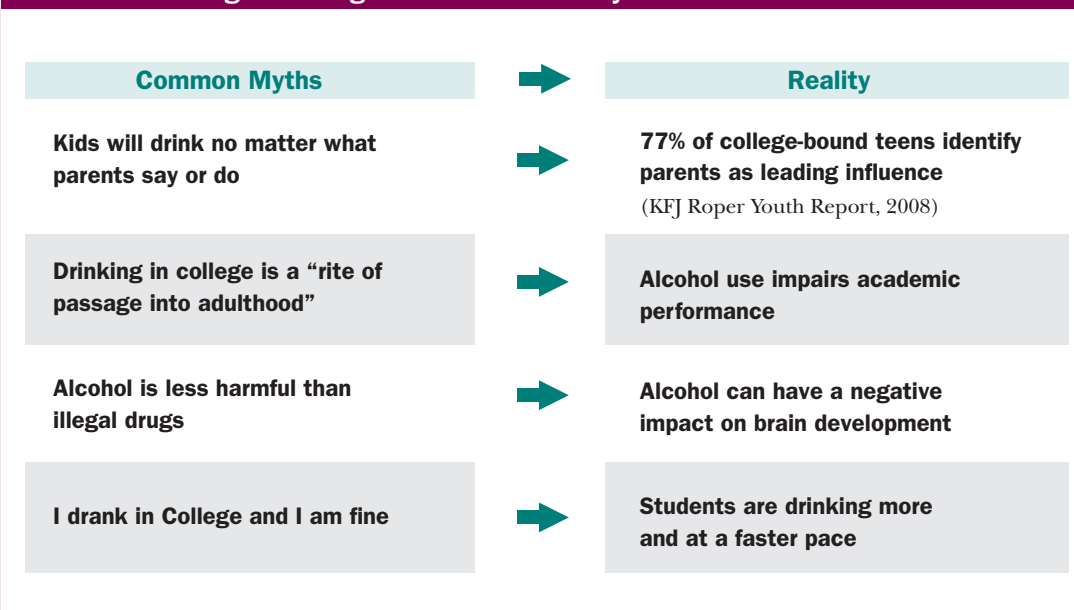
### President's Letter Garner's Parental Support

RWU reaches out to parents on the issue of alcohol before their students begin their college experience. President Roy Nirschel sends a letter to parents the week before the first-year student convocation, encouraging parents to attend and engage their student in a conversation about alcohol use. The letter reminds parents that they are an important role model in their student's life and provides a list of talking points (e.g., underage drinking policies).

### Parent Orientation Gives Parents the Real Facts

Once students and parents arrive on campus, they attend an orientation session led by Director of Health Education Donna Darmody that relies on the use of clicker technology to teach parents about common alcohol-related myths. For example, parents often think "I drank in college and I'm fine." In response, Darmody explains that in reality students are drinking a higher volume and at a faster pace compared to when their parents were in school. Parents are given the straight facts about student drinking rates and advised to maintain open communication and to promote healthy decision-making by their student.

Figure 5: Roger Williams University Parent Orientation



During other parts of RWU's orientation, parents are presented with information regarding the perils of being a "helicopter" college parent. Even so, RWU welcomes parents' active involvement regarding issues of alcohol. Prior to the AOD presentation, Dean of Students Kathleen McMahon tells parents that, while they should hold back on their parenting impulses in other areas, this is one issue where, "there is no such thing as helicoptering." RWU invites parents' active participation.

### **Parental Notification Promotes Parental Involvement**

RWU also keeps parents informed and involved through its parental notification policy. If a student receives an alcohol violation, parents are notified by phone. During the phone conversation, Darmody gathers background information on the student and gauges the parents' level of concern before meeting with the student in a counseling session. Having conversations with parents at this juncture not only helps Darmody better understand the student's situation, but also provides a key opportunity for parents to be involved in addressing their student's drinking-related problem without venturing into conversations prohibited by FERPA.

### **Parent Newsletters Keep Parents Informed**

RWU also routinely keeps parents informed on topics involving alcohol through its fall and spring newsletters. The newsletters present timely issues related to constructive parental involvement. For example, the fall newsletter advises parents on how to prepare for their student's return home during the long winter break, with tips on how to manage the difficult transition back to "house rules" from the relative freedom of college life.

This variety of mechanisms and opportunities to engage parents in alcohol prevention at RWU demonstrates how campuses can gain the true support of parents on this important topic and keep them engaged throughout their students' college experience.

## **Conclusion**

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Parents have a significant influence on students' alcohol-related decisions beyond the teenage years. Campuses should feel encouraged to harness this influence and engage parents as partners in their prevention efforts. At the same time, parents should feel confident in their role as parents and not hesitate to talk to their students about the dangers of alcohol.

Given the right tools to support their college-aged children appropriately, parents can be a powerful asset in the fight against college alcohol abuse. We encourage campuses to use the strategies presented in this report to develop and nurture partnerships with parents and use parents as allies in addressing high-risk drinking.

*Alcohol Prevention Coalition partners may access the full research presentation, "Enlisting Today's Parents in Alcohol Prevention: Challenges and Opportunities for Leveraging Parental Influence," by contacting their Partner Services representative. Coalition Partners are encouraged to introduce a dialogue on enlisting parental support for prevention on their own campus by scheduling an on-campus briefing led by an expert Coalition consultant.*

The Alcohol Prevention Coalition is comprised of colleges and universities who are working together to pave the way toward state-of-the-art prevention approaches that will inform and change the field, through effective policies and pioneering practices.

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