

## **FRATERNITY AND SORORITY NEW MEMBERS' SELF-REGULATION OF ALCOHOL USE**

**Andrew Wall, Ph.D., Janet Reis, Ph.D., and Dan Bureau**

*One hundred seventy three first year fraternity and sorority members completed an on-line survey on alcohol expectations, perceived capacity for regulating their alcohol intake (self-pacing), weekly consumption of alcohol, and perceived peer consumption. The 146 students who reported knowing how to self-pace planned to do so, were less susceptible to expectations to drink, drank less in a week and drank fewer days when compared to the 27 students reporting uncertainties in being able to self-pace. Opportunities for enhancing student's capacity for self-regulation are discussed.*

Alcohol education has historically been a primary focal point for undergraduate fraternal organizations. Efforts to address alcohol behavior by fraternity and sorority members have had a wide range of impact. Some efforts have been focused on addressing irresponsible use in the organization's facility, while others have focused on the individual's decisions as the foundation for alcohol intervention strategies. This article focuses on efforts to engage fraternity and sorority new members in a process to examine individual alcohol use and evaluate possible ways to aid in the decision-making process regarding self-pacing and overall alcohol consumption.

### **Review of Literature**

New member orientation is often perceived as an essential component of indoctrination into social fraternity and sorority membership. New members are expected to participate in a number of activities, ceremonies, and rituals that introduce expectations for membership (Pascarella et al., 1996; Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001). In recent years, undergraduate fraternal organizations have dedicated considerable time and effort orienting new members to issues related to alcohol misuse and abuse (Anderson, date unknown; Miami University, 2003; Wall, 2006). Research reflects that students belonging to undergraduate fraternal organizations drink more on average than non-affiliated counterparts drink and experience more negative consequences (Alva, 1998; Cashin, Presley & Meilman, 1998). While longitudinal data offer some indication of favorable changes in chapter culture, the amounts of alcohol consumed, especially by some new members, raises concerns for the health and safety of these students and the future of fraternal organizations (Caron, Moskey & Hovey, 2004).

Preventive interventions such as educational programs, campaigns addressing alcohol misuse and abuse, and other community wide efforts to focus on activities not involving alcohol, have not been as successful as hoped in reducing excessive drinking (Wechsler, Seibring, Lui, & Ahl, 2004). The effectiveness of these interventions may be increased if they focused on decreasing risk factors for excessive consumption. Longitudinal patterns of drinking suggest that self-regulation of alcohol intake is one such risk factor.

Over the course of a college career, most young adults develop a capacity for regulating their drinking, consuming less in each session and in the total amount per week (Bachman, O'Malley, Schulenberg, Johnston, Bryant, & Merline, 2002; Steinman, 2003; Weingardt, Baer, Kivlahan, Roberts, Miller, & Marlatt, 1998). Monitoring the total number of drinks consumed is reported as the most prevalent method of self-regulation (Delva, Smith, Howell, Harrison, Wilke, & Jackson, 2004). From the perspective of orienting new college students, the question becomes whether it is possible to accelerate this process of goal setting, planning, and self-monitoring of alcohol use (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003; Hull & Slone, 2004).

The purpose of this analysis is to examine psychosocial and consumption variables related to a new fraternity or sorority member's confidence in their ability to pace drinks (referred to as self-pacing). Knowing what student characteristics are associated with a low sense of self regulation could help identify students in need of additional assistance, and the type of education, counseling and intervention necessary (Baer, 2002; Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002). The question remains particularly salient for new members, as some will lead the organization in the immediate future, some may live in a chapter facility if available and may be charged with monitoring chapter social activities, and all will have an impact on the organization's alcohol culture. These future leaders are faced with an additional challenge because they are expected to enforce the legal drinking age and risk management/alcohol policies of their inter/national organization.

### **Methods**

First-year members were recruited from a total of four fraternities and four sororities affiliated with a large public university hosting over 50 registered social fraternities and sororities. Recruitment of participants was organized through the University Office of Greek Affairs in conjunction with the local chapter officers and inter/national organization Chapters were selected based on having varied levels of chapter emphasis on alcohol use as perceived by Greek Affairs staff. Efforts were made to include chapters with high level of consumption and chapters with lower levels of consumption in an attempt to get a representative sample of the collective fraternity and sorority community. First-year students who completed the recruitment and new member education process were contacted by their chapter president during spring 2004 regarding an opportunity to participate in an on-line survey regarding alcohol use and preventive alcohol education. 184 first year students participated (75 males and 109 females) representing about 65% of the total new member class for the 8 chapters (n=284). Of this initial group, 11 reported not consuming alcohol and were eliminated from the remainder of the analyses reported here. One-hundred and seventy-three students were eligible for participation.

The online questionnaire was developed using previous surveys as well as incorporating new questions to meet the objectives of assessing fraternity and sorority first-year members' alcohol norms. The online questionnaire contained 32 questions used in previous analyses of undergraduate drinking (Reis, Trockel, & Wall, 2003). Self-efficacy regarding safe and responsible use of alcohol was assessed with six questions (Cronbach's alpha .80). Sample questions included "I can turn down a drink I don't want" and "I plan to be safe with my own consumption." Expectations concerning positive and negative behavioral, physiological, and social effects of alcohol were assessed with nine questions (Cronbach's alpha .88). Sample

questions include “Alcohol is necessary for having a good time” and “Alcohol makes it easier to deal with stress.”

Students were also asked about perceived norms for weekly alcohol consumption for first year college men and women and for members of the student’s own fraternity or sorority, the number of drinks personally consumed daily across a typical week, and the likelihood of personal change towards greater responsibility with alcohol in the next month. This last question followed the stages of change paradigm as presented in the Transtheoretical Model of Behavioral Change (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). Students responded to a six-point scale ranging from “won’t change higher risk behavior” to “already maintain safety and control.” The online survey protocol and survey questions were reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board at the university where the study took place.

Students were categorized according to self-assessment of personal ability to pace themselves so they do not get drunk. In this sample, 27 students described themselves as uncertain or very uncertain of their ability to pace themselves with their drinking. A discriminant analysis with stepwise entry of the independent variables was used to test for differences between the two groups on alcohol expectations and self-efficacy for responsible use of alcohol. Potential differences between the two groups were also analyzed according to self-reported daily consumption, perceived consumption norms, and personal assessment of readiness for change regarding the safe use of alcohol.

### Results

Of the 27 students categorized as not exercising self-pacing, 16 were female and 11 were male. Within the pacing group, 87 of the 146 students were female and 57 were male. There was no association between gender and group membership. Table 1 presents a summary of the patterns of daily self reported drinking for the two groups.

**Table 1**  
 Summary of Daily Self Reported Drinking for Students Exercising Self-Pacing and Students Not Exercising Pacing.

Number of Daily Drinks	Minimum-Maximum		Mean		Standard Deviation		Percent of students drinking >5 drinks	
	Pace	No Pace	Pace	No Pace	Pace	No Pace	Pace	No Pace
Sunday	0-9	0-7	.21	.68*	.97	1.63	1	4*
Monday	0-10	0-14	.96	2.08*	1.93	3.89	3	16*
Tuesday	0-8	0-5	.36	.76	1.15	1.59	1	20
Wednesday	0-10	0-9	.78	2.08**	1.77	2.93	3	20**
Thursday	0-12	0-13	2.58	4.22**	2.57	3.95	10	41**
Friday	0-20	0-20	4.70	6.31*	3.44	5.23	32	50**
Saturday	0-20	0-14	4.32	5.74*	3.33	4.43	32	52**

\* p < .05  
 \*\* p < .001

The daily minimum and maximum drinks were approximately equal between the two groups. However, the differences in daily averages were significant at the .05 level or less for every day

but Tuesday, with the students not exercising pacing consistently drinking more each of the remaining six days. A similar pattern is seen in the percent of students per day reporting drinking five or more drinks. With the exception of Tuesday, the number of students not exercising pacing and drinking five or more drinks was significantly greater than their pacing counterparts. Men in the non-pacing group reported significantly more drinking ( $p < .05$  or less) for Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday than did men in the pacing group.

Three variables were found to discriminate between the two groups of students (Wilks' Lambda = .85; Chi-Square 26.08,  $p < .01$ ). "Planning to be safe with one's own alcohol consumption" (standardized discriminant function coefficient = .44) was positively associated with the self-pacing group. Conversely, "my friends expect me to drink" (standardized discriminant function coefficient = -.45) and "alcohol is an important part of first year social life" (standardized discriminant function coefficient = -.40) were negatively associated with the self-pacing group. Using an adjustment for the original number of students in each group, 85% of the students were correctly classified as self-pacing or not self-pacing.

With regards to perceptions of the amount of alcohol consumed weekly by peers, the two groups of students did not significantly differ in their estimates for first year men (overall mean = 14.07 drinks per week,  $SD = 5.84$ ), for first year women (overall mean = 9.64 drinks per week,  $SD = 5.02$ ), or for members of one's chapter (overall mean = 10.55 drinks per week,  $SD = 5.50$ ). There were also no significant differences on these estimates between the two groups according to gender.

Seventy percent of students exercising self-pacing described themselves as maintaining personal safety as compared to 33% of the students not exercising self-pacing. Thirteen percent of the pacing group indicated that they were contemplating moderation of their drinking in the next month as compared to 22% in the non-pacing group. Seven percent of the pacing group described themselves as unwilling to change risky consumption as compared to 26% of the non-pacing group.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practitioners**

The group of students reporting confidence in their ability to self regulate consumption was the clear majority of this sample. Compared to non-pacers, students who felt they knew how to pace themselves planned to do so, drank less in a week, drank fewer days per week, and were less susceptible to peer's expectations about alcohol use. Men reported drinking more than women, but no proportional difference existed between men and women in the number reporting lack of confidence in ability to pace, underscoring the importance of including women in analyses of problematic drinking (Nolen-Hoeksema & Corte, 2004).

The response rate to the on-line survey was substantially higher than the response rate of recently published surveys of undergraduate samples (e.g. Delva, Smith, Howell, Harrison, Wilke & Jackson, 2004). Therefore, the feedback from this group of new fraternity and sorority members is likely representative of this particular subgroup of students for the point of time they responded to the survey questions. However, generalization of these results is limited by the small sample size, selection of a subset of chapters on campus, lack of comparison with non-

Greek students, selection of chapters through the Greek Affairs office based on perception of alcohol use and misuse, and use of a cross-sectional analysis. How students from other chapters perceive their self-regulatory skills is unknown, as is the perspective of non-Greek students.

Another limitation of this project is the size and scope of the sample. While statistically significant with a response rate of almost two-thirds of possible participants, less than 200 students participated in the project and the selection of organizations could reflect a bias in the information. A more randomized sample across different organizations could influence outcomes. In addition, the research was conducted at a single large public Research I institution. The institutional demographics would also need to be taken into account. Environmental factors on other campuses may affect results.

Finally, the need to assess alcohol use within a more diverse population is also important, as the majority of respondents were Caucasian. Future research could assess how ethnicity and fraternity/sorority membership impacts self-pacing. Evidence regarding culturally based fraternal organizations may provide insight into members' use.

Although the cross-sectional nature of the survey limits projections of future behavior, the results offer some guidance as to the scope and focus of preventive alcohol educational interventions that fraternities and sororities might pursue. These organizations are in a unique position to test different preventive intervention models by virtue of their peer networks and longstanding histories of chapter citizenship (Bandura, 1997; Jung, 2003). Fraternities and sororities can be seen as microcosms of the growing push in higher education to use scarce resources to address the issue of alcohol use and abuse in a meaningful manner. Addressing self-regulation as an identified risk factor within a peer network could serve as an example of targeted prevention for broader higher education efforts in the area of addressing alcohol use and misuse.

Peer expectations for drinking are one possible focus for an intervention, given the non-pacers in this sample were more likely than the pacers to ascribe to the belief that their peers expected them to drink and to view alcohol as important to social life. The existing connections between and among students preparing to live in their chapter's house may be a starting point for recalibration of expectations for when, where, how much and type of alcohol is consumed (Borsari & Carey, 2001; Borsari & Carey, 2003). In addition, social norming approaches should be tailored to fraternities and sororities when possible to aid in helping this population reshape alcohol expectations.

Students in undergraduate fraternal organizations, practitioners and volunteers working with this population, or other fraternity and sorority community constituents trying to moderate consumption, may wish to assess new member's views of peer expectations for drinking. If a number of students in a given chapter report believing that their chapter members expect heavy consumption, a chapter might consider sponsoring small group, chapter based discussions on the range of consumption within a chapter, the negative consequences for individual health and safety that occur with excessive drinking, and/or the impact on the quality of community life when problems such as vandalism and noise increase as a result of excessive drinking (Trochel, Wall, & Reis, 2003).

A second factor related to self-regulation of alcohol consumption identified in the analysis is the time span during the week when students plan to consume and total amount drunk in a sitting. Starting to drink on Wednesday suggests non-pacing students place a high priority on alcohol and related social activities. Chapter sponsored conversations around drinking schedules could include a focus on how excessive drinking can affect issues such as academic performance and personal health. Depending on the tenor of the chapter's camaraderie, members may also consider an explicit commitment to forgo one night of drinking and/or to drink less on a given day."

Lastly, a question of intent and willingness exists in alcohol use. Alcohol consumption is a rational behavior for most young adults (Kuther, 2002). In this sample of first year fraternity and sorority members, 26 % of the 27 non-pacing students fell into the "don't plan to be safe" category as opposed to 33 % from the same group of non-pacers who asserted that they maintained personal safety and control with alcohol. Both groups would appear to benefit from counseling on the discrepancies between their behavior, self-perceptions, risk taking, and consequences. This provides significant implications for practitioners who wish to aid in the safety of students participating in social fraternities and sororities. Policies and practices may be established, preferably in tandem with students and other constituents, to promote increased responsibility for each other when consuming alcohol. This could result in better monitoring among peers and greater accountability by all involved in alcohol-related activities.

### **Conclusion**

Brief interventions reviewing patterns of consumption and personal skills regarding drinking have been found to be effective in tempering the amount of alcohol consumed (Baer, Kivlahan Blume, McKnight & Marlatt, 2001). Group discussions of the negative consequences of consumption have been related to increased support for regulation and monitoring (Reis, Trockel & Wall, 2003). Elements of such interventions could be integrated into fraternity and sorority new member orientation programs capitalizing on the power of group self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Keeling, 1999). Most chapters would have the capacity to inquire as to members' expectations regarding alcohol and preparedness to handle alcohol safely. Chapters may require some assistance in designing and implementing certain activities and brief interventions, but with support from fraternity and sorority practitioners and other invested individuals in the success of fraternal organizations, they could successfully sponsor such events. Declaration of peer expectations for fewer days of drinking and fewer drinks per session could present the non-pacing group – and all members, for that matter - with different expectations for alcohol consumption and might encourage and accelerate development of self regulatory behaviors.

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*Andrew Wall, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in Educational Leadership at the University of Rochester. He can be reached at [kamwall@mac.com](mailto:kamwall@mac.com)*

*Janet Reis, Ph.D., is a professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She can be reached at [jsreis@uiuc.edu](mailto:jsreis@uiuc.edu).*

*Dan Bureau is currently a Ph.D. student at Indiana University in Higher Education and Student Affairs. He received his Masters of Higher Education Policy Research and Administration from The University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1998. He served as Assistant Dean of Students for Greek Affairs at the University of Illinois from 2001-2006.*

*Address Correspondence to Dan Bureau at [dbureau29@yahoo.com](mailto:dbureau29@yahoo.com).*