

# Summary of the Scientific Symposium of the Postsecondary Education Partnership – Alcohol Harms

## The Symposium

The Postsecondary Education Partnership – Alcohol Harms (PEP-AH) scientific symposium was held on October 3, 2019, in Sherbrooke, Quebec. The purpose of this event was to facilitate knowledge mobilization about the latest evidence on reducing alcohol-related harms on campus. It was also to promote networking among experts and PEP-AH members and to foster collaboration in tackling the issues of alcohol and excessive drinking on Canadian campuses. The symposium, hosted by the Canadian Centre on Substance use and Addiction (CCSA) and PEP-AH, targeted student affairs and student life administrators, professionals and counsellors, postsecondary students, student council representatives and residence advisors, as well as public health professionals and practitioners.

The program was organized around the [PEP-AH Framework](#) and speakers were invited to talk about promising strategies and programs that address individual students, the campus culture and surrounding communities. Speakers included seven alcohol experts from Canadian and American universities and four students who shared their experience from the 2019 Summer Leadership Academy for Alcohol Harm Prevention (LEAHP). The students also presented how they are implementing in their local campus communities what they learned at Summer LEAHP.



This summary gives an overview of the topics addressed and discussed during the day. It is intended to supplement the memory of participants and provide an informative summary for those who could not attend.



### Takeaway Messages

The symposium explored promising strategies and programs that address individual students, the campus culture and surrounding communities to reduce alcohol-related harms among students. PEP-AH members received the following takeaway messages. (Speakers who contributed the observations are in parentheses.):

- All postsecondary students should feel supported in living decent lives characterized by dignity, integrity and mutual responsibility. (Dr. Tim Dyck, Summer LEAHP students)
- Postsecondary students should be consulted and play a central role in developing and implementing alcohol policies and projects on campuses. (Dr. Jocelyne Faucher, Dr. Jennifer Merrill, Dr. Tim Dyck)
- In postsecondary settings, prevention initiatives should aim to correct common misperceptions around the norms of alcohol consumption. (Dr. Jennifer Merrill)
- An environmental approach implemented with commitment and intensity can reduce problems associated with high-risk drinking on college campuses. (Dr. Robert Saltz, Dr. Mark Wolfson)
- Both university and community stakeholders need to mobilize to reduce alcohol-related harms among students. (Dr. Jocelyne Faucher, Dr. Robert Saltz, Dr. Mark Wolfson)
- Measuring and monitoring alcohol use and related issues on campus is essential to implementing effective programs, initiatives and activities. (Dr. Darren Kruisselbrink, Dr. Stine Linden-Andersen, Summer LEAHP students)

To request a copy of the experts' presentations (en anglais seulement), send a request to [pepah-pepma@ccsa.ca](mailto:pepah-pepma@ccsa.ca).

## The Experts

The opening speaker was **Dr. Jocelyne Faucher**, General Secretary and vice-dean of student life for the Université de Sherbrooke, who discussed the importance of building capacity at the community level to develop effective campus interventions. Dr. Faucher started by saying that campuses are a learning space, an environment of socialization and personal growth. Universities must educate students on alcohol issues and develop alcohol policies that are coherent with the university's vision to shape responsible citizens.

Dr. Faucher shared her experience that solutions can only arise from inter-sectoral partnerships – as with [Sherbrooke Ville en Santé](#) – where all stakeholders are present and where students play a front-and-centre role. Not only does the partnership embody concepts of collaboration and teamwork with students, it allows for the implementation of relevant and enduring initiatives that can be evaluated. She advised participants to provide concrete support to students, ensure follow-up and show interest for the alcohol file, despite student turnover. Among other issues, the presentation stimulated questions about whether universities should allow pubs on campus premises.

The morning continued with a presentation by **Dr. Jennifer E. Merrill**, assistant professor at the Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies in the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Brown University. The theoretical basis of Dr. Merrill's presentation was that drinking on campuses is influenced by what others do (descriptive norms) and approve of (injunctive norms). She presented the results of two experiments testing whether campuses can leverage mobile phone use among



students to correct those norms. In her experiments, she sent students text messages about what their peers do and find acceptable about alcohol use, protective behaviour strategies, behaviours while intoxicated, alcohol consequences and the campus alcohol culture. Her results showed that students saw the text messages and found them to be interesting and relevant. Three months after the intervention, students who had received daily texts reported a healthier and more responsible attitude towards drinking, but the impact did not persist after six months. Based on these results, a new prototype plan is under development to deliver more personalized texts that would be based on students' goals and real life experiences.

Dr. Merrill encouraged participants interested in implementing a similar project to make it local. They should team up with researchers at their own university and use a campus-wide survey to obtain norms to integrate in text messages. Students' involvement and feedback is crucial, but she warned that there needs to be a balance between what kind of text messages students want to receive and what actually works. Her presentation generated considerable discussion about the content of text messages to be used in such projects, including suggestions to feature quotations from students who have had negative alcohol experiences.

Next, we heard from **Dr. Tim Dyck** from the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research at the University of Victoria and a collaborator with Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses. He shared his experience of supporting students with alcohol problems and attempting to change the culture of substance use on campuses. He began by outlining the considerations – socio-historical, cultural, theoretical, philosophical and educational – that determine the need for campuses to attempt this change. He went on to guide participants to be more reflective about common assumptions and beliefs around alcohol consumption, and be more appreciative of students' diverse experiences and perspectives. In this regard, he was unequivocal: there should be no dismissal of experiences. In the same line, he warned that students' alcohol problems can easily be overlooked on campuses that are on the one hand inundated with encouragement for alcohol consumption, and on the other hand chastised by authority figures about excessive drinking. Hence, to make more room for those who need support, we need to reformulate the extreme narratives around alcohol.

Dr. Dick asked the provocative question as to whether alcohol policies help students with alcohol problems to integrate or instead make them more isolated. One of his main messages was that the prevention of alcohol problems might come down to the provision of a nurturing environment. Students, staff, faculty and all members of campus communities must come together to develop a culture of caring, based on dialogue, openness, respect and equality. He left the audience with a message of hope: students supporting peers who do not fit the stereotype of the party-hungry, binge-drinking student might be the next stage of the health and caring movement that sees students increasingly open in supporting friends with mental health struggles.

After lunch, two American scholars gave a joint presentation entitled, "Why are efforts to prevent high-risk drinking-by college students dominated by educational approaches?" To show the potential to change the environment, **Dr. Mark Wolfson**, from the Wake Forest School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, shared his Study to Prevent Alcohol-Related Consequences (SPARC), a randomized community trial involving ten universities in North Carolina (five intervention sites and five comparison sites). **Dr. Robert Saltz**, from the Prevention Research Center in Berkeley, California, introduced the audience to the Safer California Universities project that involved 14 large public universities (seven intervention sites and seven comparison sites). Their talk was based on a well-known preventive medicine theorem that most alcohol-related problems can be attributed to the vast majority of people who drink alcohol – those at low or moderate risk of subsequent problems – simply because they are so many. Thus, to reduce alcohol-related problems, campuses should favour environmental interventions that target the whole campus population.



**Dr. Robert Saltz and Dr. Mark Wolfson**

The SPARC interventions in North Carolina focused on policies on pricing, drinking and driving, restricting alcohol retail outlet density and responsible beverage service. In California, the interventions targeted off-campus parties, with nuisance party enforcement operations, minor decoy operations, driving-under-the-influence checkpoints, social host ordinances and the use of campus and local media to inform students that off-campus alcohol policies would be enforced. In both states, colleges where the interventions were applied saw significant reductions in intoxication and harm related to intoxication. In North Carolina, there were decreases in severe consequences due to students' own drinking and in alcohol-related injuries. Two years after the intervention, a 2% reduction in alcohol-related consequences at the population level was still observable. In California, the results were equally significant as the likelihood of a student getting drunk decreased in every setting (off-campus party, bar and restaurant) where the interventions were implemented and enforced.

The audience was impressed with the practical implications of the projects: in both states, changing the drinking environment had translated into hundreds of fewer students getting drunk and experiencing harmful consequences due to drinking. Nevertheless, both researchers acknowledged that regardless of these remarkable results, the uptake of environmental strategies remains modest. This observation led to a discussion about the unique hurdles facing campuses and, as Dr. Faucher had in the morning, Dr. Wolfson and Dr. Saltz emphasized the need to mobilize both university and community stakeholders.

The day ended with an armchair conversation between two PEP-AH members about bystander programs and bystander behaviours on campus. **Dr. Darren Kruisselbrink**, a PEP-AH founder and professor at Acadia University, was joined on stage by **Dr. Stine Linden-Andersen**, dean of student affairs at Bishop's University. They described the contexts in which their campuses made it a priority to educate students about how to identify and respond to emergency situations and assist peers in distress.

At Acadia, the bystander program was developed at the initiative of a student, while at Bishop's, it was a response to reduce sexual violence. Dr. Linden-Andersen shared the specifics of Bishop's bystander program which has been mandatory for five years. Then Dr. Kruisselbrink, who has for seven years been monitoring the types of assistance provided by bystanders, shared such results as that females are more likely to provide assistance and more likely to use protective behaviour strategies. At Bishop's, it has been observed that when a student knows someone who is being or has been assaulted, they are more likely to intervene. In recent years, students have come to recognize that safety must come first and there is less stigma associated with making a 911 call. Both presenters shared challenges, tips and advice for those considering implementing a bystander program. Exchanges with the audience pointed to the need to publicize the stories of students who have reacted positively in distress situations.





## The Students

Throughout the day, participants got to hear from the four PEP-AH students who attended the 2019 Summer Leadership Academy for Alcohol Harm Prevention (LEAHP) in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The students shared the status of the alcohol-related campus projects they committed to implementing when they were selected to attend Summer LEAHP.

**Madi Sutton** from Dalhousie University presented two initiatives she implemented during orientation week, including a “drunk” obstacle course where students had to perform tasks while wearing glasses that mimicked the signs and symptoms of intoxication. Students who participated in the “drunk” obstacle course increased their confidence in being able to recognize intoxication, and their knowledge of how to react if a friend is intoxicated or in an alcohol emergency. Surveyed after participating, everyone who took part in the obstacle course either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they had learned new information that would help in future contexts where alcohol would be present.

Inspired by STAD (STockholm prevents Alcohol and Drug problems), **Marilyn Hardy** from Bishop’s University shared her plan to change the high-risk drinking culture on campus. Her project targets the campus pub and will attempt to reduce the availability and affordability of alcoholic beverages. She will work with student executives to implement server training, and ban low-price alcohol promotions, offer low-percentage beer at all events and free non-alcoholic beverages, organize mocktail contests and reduce the advertising of alcoholic beverages.

The projects **Alex Vincent** from the University of Guelph and **Cassandra Chisholm** from the University of Calgary presented both related to the development of non-medical, safe and supportive spaces for students to recover from alcohol intoxication. Alex’s project will evaluate whether Guelph’s Campus Alcohol Recovery Room (CARR) meets students’ needs and identify the barriers to students accessing CARR. Her project, done in partnership with Student Housing Services and Student Wellness Services, will inform improvements to CARR.

In Calgary, Cassandra was already involved in the university’s Post-Alcohol Support Space (PASS) before her departure for the Summer LEAHP. Since returning, she has been developing a video that follows a student throughout an evening, displaying the signs and symptoms of acute intoxication and showing how intervene. The video will be completed in winter 2020 and available to all postsecondary institutions.

While in Sherbrooke for the symposium, the students’ experiences, thoughts and lessons learned from Summer LEAHP were captured in a video [available here](#). Their insights will help the PEP-AH community to set up and present the next Pan-Canadian Summer Academy.

Stay tuned!



(clockwise from top left) **Cassandra Chisholm, Alex Vincent, Madi Sutton, Marilyn Hardy**



## Conclusion and Next Steps

The day was a successful knowledge mobilization event, marked by great openness to collaboration. Nearly all participants who filled out the post-symposium survey reported their intentions to share the information they had learned with colleagues, and two-thirds mentioned they had identified at least one person with whom they would like to collaborate. The event was in line with the values of PEP-AH, which aim, where alcohol harms are concerned, to break down silos and change the competitive relationship among campuses to a cooperative one. In the coming months, CCSA and PEP-AH will facilitate networking and information exchange opportunities among experts, symposium participants and all PEP-AH members to sustain this positive and fundamental shift in thinking about alcohol harms on campuses.

## Acknowledgements

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## Additional Resources

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