

**Statement for the Record of
Drew Hunter, Executive Director
The BACCHUS and GAMMA Peer Education Network
Before the
Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs**

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thompson, and the members of the committee, it is a great honor and privilege to be invited here today to testify on the topic of "Under the Influence: The Binge Drinking Epidemic on College Campuses."

Let me begin by extending this thanks as well from Dr. Edward H. Hammond, president of Fort Hays State University and Chairperson of our Board of Trustees. He asked me to share his appreciation to this committee for inviting him to present and he regrets that he was unable to attend. I'm here today in my role as the Executive Director of The BACCHUS and GAMMA Peer Education Network, a 27 year old, student leadership organization focusing on alcohol abuse prevention and related student health and safety issues, with affiliates on more than 1,000 colleges and universities.

Before getting into the heart of my remarks, I'm pleased to see here today representatives from the NIAAA sponsored College Task Force. Their recent report on college drinking is a significant achievement that supports many strategies that our organization has been advocating for some time – including the importance of engaging student leadership on this topic through Peer Education. This report will be very helpful in the upcoming academic year as we press our host campuses for more attention to this important issue.

I have much to share about things that are working in higher education – and since your time is valuable and my time here is brief, let us get right to it. From my experience, there are four key components of a successful campus alcohol abuse prevention program.

The first is the need for a strong commitment from campus presidents and their administrations.

Simply stated, college presidents and their administrations must prioritize their commitment and resources to work on this issue – so that it is truly a vital part of the campus mission. I am pleased to share time on this panel with Dr. John Welty, president of Fresno State University. Having personally participated in the CSU effort led by he and Chancellor Reed, I'm comfortable that his testimony will cover this part of a comprehensive approach in greater detail, so I will move on, but before I do it is important to note that despite all of the publicity this issue has received:

- We know there are many colleges and universities that still do not support a full-time alcohol educator or staff person dedicated to these efforts;
- We know there are many campuses that have higher budgets for one time events like Homecoming than they do for year-round alcohol education programming, and;
- We know there are some colleges and universities that have solid alcohol policies written in their student handbook, but these policies are seldom put into practice on campus;

And I say to you as long as this remains true, then it is also true that "reducing alcohol-related harm" is NOT central to that campus' mission. This disparity in addressing the issue is why we need leadership from the top down.

Number Two: A strong campus policy and the willingness to enforce that policy.

As is usually the case whenever you are faced with a complicated issue here in Washington, the answer is not that MORE policy is needed, nor is a Federalized "one size fits all" national policy going to work for all institutions – it is the commitment to use the policies that are already in place that will solve many of our problems. This is what our campuses need to do on an individual basis to better address this issue.

At the risk of creating a sound bite, campus policies and student service programs must send a simple message to students. **Get smart, get help or get out.**

Get Smart! When a student gets confronted for underage drinking or drinking in a high-risk fashion, we first need to give them a chance to get smart. We must start by forcing these students to get mandatory education on the alcohol issue.

Get Help! If a student breaks policy a second time, we need to respond in a caring and compassionate way by offering that

student a chance to get help. We need to meet with these students and where permissible and appropriate engage their parents in the discussions and offer these students assessment services and counseling.

Or, Get Out! And if the student continues to drink in a high-risk fashion and is unwilling to change their behavior, we have to say “get out.” Being dismissed from school would certainly get their attention and may influence their understanding they have problems. AS IMPORTANTLY, it says to the rest of the student body, this type of behavior is not acceptable here

Number Three: Any successful program must include student peer education.

Everyone working with young people knows that we have to impact students in their peer groups. We need to engage students to be leaders, role models, activists and caring friends when it comes to stopping alcohol abuse.

I could spend the rest of the day telling you about campuses with successful peer education programs but time does not permit. When students do get involved in the issue through peer education there are some things we can count on.

- We know peer educators make healthier choices themselves and they are comfortable confronting others about high risk behaviors
- We know that significant percentage of students say they would rather talk to a peer instead of a professional counselor about troubling issues, and
- We know that students learn a great deal about the culture of the institution from watching their peers for clues of what is acceptable and what is not

Therefore, we must continue to advocate and support these peer educators as a vital part of the alcohol education process. Let’s face it, they are active in the campus social scene long after administrators have gone home for the day. They can and do make a difference when it is needed.

And finally, number four. We need to market healthy norms to our students.

This is a hard one because what I’m about share will provide no TV ratings, or headlines. It is simply a fact of life that you will get much more attention with a headline or lead story that says “Students Are Out of Control and Dying” than you will with one that says “Most Students Are Doing Just Fine.” But you know what? The real truth of the matter is that most college students balance their bottles and books, and that most first year students become second year students who eventually graduate. According to the American College Health Association data, significantly more students leave our institutions due to health and financial problems than drinking problems.

Social Norms in prevention works by using actual student behavior data to market healthy norms, such as broadly sharing messages that:

Most students (68%) have not driven a car after drinking.

Most students (74%) go out drinking one night a week or less.

And, when they do go out, most students (60%) drink five or fewer drinks when they party.

And when we use social norming theory as part of the campus alcohol response, when it is done well and campus-wide, we see great changes like at:

Hobart and William Smith College, which saw a 40% drop in high-risk drinking over the course of 4 years, or, Northern Illinois University which saw a 44% drop over the course of 10 years, or the Prevention Collaborative in Minnesota which saw a 14% drop in drinking and driving in just one year.

And finally – when we spend too much time highlighting the problem “College Students Binge Drink!” we mistakenly feed into the misperception that this is what campus life is really like. Which is why many of us in higher education refrain from using the popular, yet misguided term “binge drinking” in describing student alcohol use. First of all, when you think of going on a binge, of being a binge drinker, what comes to mind is someone who really needs help, who is out of control. Yet, the current definition, of 4 drinks if you are a woman, 5 drinks if you are a man, during one sitting in the previous two week period does not necessarily match the perception. In addition, the definition conveniently labels nearly one half of the students as being at high risk while ignoring the very factors that contribute to actual intoxication and risk. The term binge drinking has become a joke on campuses as far as students are concerned.

It would be more productive if we would refocus our efforts to talk about those students who drink and put themselves or others at risk by engaging in unsafe behaviors. When engaged, college students are likely to support efforts to reduce drinking and driving, they want to reduce incidents of sexual assault, they want to reduce noise in their living areas, then

want to deter vandalism and violence on campus. We have had great luck in making students part of the solution on these issues.

And The BACCHUS and GAMMA Peer Education is doing everything we can to help them do just that. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, this concludes my prepared remarks.

Thank you very much.