



Matt Bellace gives an animated keynote at the 11th annual Peer Institute at the College of New Jersey.

Peer Institute steers youth to natural highs

"Laughing releases dopamine and young people are discovering new highs all of the time because of this," according to Matt Bellace, who was the keynote at the College of New Jersey's 11th annual Peer Institute. Bellace's overriding message to the youth at the event was to choose natural highs over artificial ones.

If that is the case, a great deal of dopamine was released during Bellace's keynote, delivered to a room of mostly high school and college students. Bellace has a Ph.D. in clinical neuropsychology and is the author of the book "A Better High." His "How to Get High Naturally" program encourages over 100,000 students a year to pursue natural highs and make healthy choices.

Bellace's talk combined humor and charisma to keep the mostly young audience enthralled and engaged at the College of New Jersey's 11th annual Peer Institute. The Institute was held from May 26 through May 28th at TCNJ's Ewing Campus and was attended by over 160 college students and 130 high school students. Bellace challenged the students to make healthy decisions and to associate with healthy peers. He pointed to a study which showed that if you surround yourself with healthy individuals you were less likely to take big risks and more likely to engage in healthier lifestyles.

The Peer Institute, funded by the New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety, was designed to address health and safety issues by empowering college students.

Joe Hadge, coordinator of TCNJ's Alcohol and Drug Education Program, said the event is important because it "empowers these students and helps them to develop core skills ... skills to recognize and refer a friend or community member with an addiction problem. Also, the program

teaches students "phraseology that says it's okay not to use." Hadge created the program at the college over 10 years ago and has watched it thrive in recent years.

Jeffrey A., a recent graduate of Rutgers University, was attending the Peer Institute for his second year. He described the program as, "a transformative experience – it was great to come together with others who think the same way." He also said it was a great networking experience and an excellent way to learn to communicate to different populations.

The program is nationally certified by BACCHUS. The BACCHUS Network is a university- and community-based network focusing on comprehensive health and safety initiatives. It is the mission of this non-profit organization to actively promote student and young adult based, campus and community-wide leadership on healthy and safe lifestyle decisions concerning alcohol abuse, tobacco use, illegal drug use, unhealthy sexual practices and other high-risk behaviors.

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Affiliates of the BACCHUS Network, such as The College of New Jersey, are concerned with the health of their students, their institution and their community. Students of all ages are faced with making personal decisions about health and safety. Developing positive decision-making skills impacts student life and prepares students to enter the real world and the greater community to promote healthy and safe lifestyles. BACCHUS promotes respect for state laws and support for campus policies that address high-risk be-

haviors that compromise health and safety such as drinking and drug use.

The BACCHUS philosophy is that students can play a uniquely effective role - unmatched by professional educators - in encouraging their peers to consider, talk honestly about and develop responsible habits and attitudes toward high-risk health and safety issues.

This is the philosophy that Hadge hopes to ingrain in his students, which was demonstrated quite effectively at the Peer Institute.