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College Parties, Minus the Beer Binges

By **SUE SHELLENBARGER**

Reports of binge drinking in college have long made headlines. As more schools offer increasingly creative alternatives to shots and beer pong, they say they see noticeable declines in drinking.

Surveys at Purdue University, for example, show a sharp drop in binge drinking among students, to 37.3% in 2009 from 48% in 2006, says Tamara Loew, health-advocacy coordinator. She attributes this in part to a boom in late-night, alcohol-free events on or around campus, from poetry slams and dances to carnivals and "cabin-fever" parties.



Amid rising concern about college binge drinking, no-alcohol social groups are springing up on many campuses to offer students a drug- and alcohol-free route to having fun. Sue Shellenbarger explains.



Dave Bratton

Fairleigh Dickinson University students at a Rock 'n Bowl Event in the fall.

Purdue senior Keith Brashaber knew there were other students like him who didn't want college to mean one big hangover. So he raised money and organized a free weekly movie program on campus instead, "Thursday Night at the Theater," screening films like "Zombieland" and "Paranormal Activity."

"I wanted to give students a chance to do something fun, get out of the dorm and be social" without drinking, he says. Since last spring, the films have been drawing up to 150 students for each of two weekly showings.

Other no-alcohol groups and programs around the country offer late-night physical activities, lively entertainment, a party atmosphere and free food.

About 100 colleges and universities do a good job of supporting alcohol-free activities that are frequent, regular and entertaining enough to compete with drinking, says Brandon Busteded, chief executive of Outside the Classroom, Needham, Mass., a provider of student alcohol-prevention research and programs. Some programs are initiated by students; others are suggested and financed by administrators who turn them over to students to run.

About 37% of college students engage in binge drinking, defined as consuming five or more drinks in a row during the preceding two weeks, according to 2009 data from a long-term study at the University of Michigan. That is down about 3% from 2008 levels, but still higher than high-school seniors and young adults who don't attend college. Binge drinking in college is linked in research to risky sexual behavior, lower grades and a rise in violent crime, accidental injury and death.

To succeed, no-drinking events have to be held regularly during late-night hours when students typically would be drinking, Mr. Busteded says. The most popular alcohol-free options are movie nights, live music or just having an entertaining place to hang out with games and space to socialize, according to a survey by his organization of 500,000 college freshmen. Other tactics include serving free food into the early-morning hours or raffling off prizes at the end of the evening to encourage students to stay.

Still, no-drinking events carry a stigma among many students, who arrive on campus thinking college life "is this huge wild party," says Sarah Geisler, a junior at the University of Pittsburgh. Many think that "if they're not out at a party and doing something that involves alcohol, their weekend was unsuccessful and they have no stories to tell."

The remedy, says Ms. Geisler and other students who organize alcohol-free events, is to make the activities so entertaining that students forget to be skeptical. Pitt lures hundreds of students to such events, from a semi-formal ball at the Carnegie Music Hall to alcohol-free tailgate parties before football games. The university also set up a late-night tea house in the student union with billiards and other games. "It's like a bar without the alcohol, a great environment where students can go and relax," says Anna Vitriol, a Pitt health educator.

At Brown University in Providence, R.I., an alcohol-free "foam party," a dance with the floor flooded with bubbles, draws about 600 students during Spring Weekend, a series of student-run events to celebrate the near-ending of the school year, when drinking is higher than usual, says Erin Hannen, a junior at Brown. And at North Dakota State University in Fargo, students flock to "Club NDSU" nights offering simulated sumo wrestling, gladiator games, and casino nights, says Laura Oster-Aaland, director of orientation and student success.

"Once you pull students in, they find out they can have a good time without alcohol," says Greg Brightbill, a senior who belongs to a 50-member student group that organizes non-drinking activities at Frostburg State University in Maryland.

Student-run groups can take off fast. Rita Della Valle, a non-drinker, says she had a hard time finding social events on campus last year as a freshman at Drew University in Madison, N.J. "If my friends went out on weekends, sometimes it was awkward for me," and she often left campus for her parents' Cranford, N.J., home, she says. But since she joined a new alcohol-free campus group and helped organize a late-night video-arcade party, a "Humans vs. Zombies" foam-dart contest and bowling, she has stopped going home on weekends. The group, New Social Engine, a program of a Rockaway, N.J., non-profit organization called Prevention Is Key, quickly drew 200 members.

Some organizers downplay such events' no-alcohol rule in campus promotions, stressing the entertainment value instead. The University of Michigan's biweekly "UMix" parties draw as many as 1,000 students for roller skating, film screenings or trivia or karaoke contests, but the university doesn't promote them as alcohol-free. That would suggest that "the main event is at a bar or a frat party and the secondary event is here. We want this to be the main event of the evening," says J. Eric Heilmeyer, a university program adviser.

Others, however, are up-front. At Brown University, an "Art Gallery Mocktail Party" at fall orientation for the past two years has drawn 20% of incoming freshman," says organizer Halie Rando, a senior at Brown. Students viewed comical art exhibits, such as gym socks hanging from the ceiling, while meeting new, non-drinking friends, Ms. Rando says.

Although the programs are very different, their goals are the same. Frostburg has posted a 27% decrease in binge drinking among students in the past 10 years. The University of Pittsburgh reduced problem drinking 12% between 2007 and 2009, Ms. Vitriol says. At North Dakota State University, alcohol-related violations on campus have dropped 3.7% in the past two years, Ms. Oster-Aalund says.

Critics say such events attract light or non-drinkers. "Philosophically it doesn't matter to us," Ms. Oster-Aaland says. "We feel it's really important to support those students who are non-drinkers, because if there's nothing for them to do they will probably become drinkers."

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