

Partnership aims to reduce alcohol harms on Canadian campuses

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While binge drinking isn't a new issue for universities and colleges, a more collaborative effort has emerged.

Thirty-six universities and colleges have teamed up with the [Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction](#) and Universities Canada in an effort to curb high-risk drinking. The [Postsecondary Partnership – Alcohol Harms](#) (PEP-AH), as it's called, is connecting students and administrators with health experts to create campus programs to reduce harms related to binge drinking.

While Canadian universities have individually been grappling with the issue for decades, this partnership represents a more collaborative approach, said Scott Duguay, co-chair of PEP-AH and associate vice-president, enrolment management, at St. Thomas University. "We're offering resources and ideas and best practices but allowing a lot of space for individual members to build their own plans," Mr. Duguay said. "We strongly encourage institutions that are partners to have a campus team that oversees alcohol harm reduction programming."

A 2016 survey of 43,780 students from 41 Canadian campuses affirmed the challenges institutions face with the prevalence of binge drinking. More than a third of students surveyed reported having five or more drinks the last time they partied or socialized, and many reported physically injuring themselves (18 percent), having unprotected sex (24 percent), forgetting where they were or what they did (29 percent) and doing something they later regretted (38 percent) due to alcohol.

"PEP-AH is not concerned with the drinking per se, but the harms associated with it," said Catherine Paradis, co-chair of PEP-AH and senior research and policy analyst with the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, which has received funding from Health Canada for this initiative. Ms. Paradis led the creation of a framework for campus programs to reduce alcohol harms. She recommends that institutions adopt at least one recommendation in each of five strategic areas, depending on the needs and structure of their campus. "Drinking is a social behaviour that happens in a larger context," she said. "Each university or college has its own history and its own culture and policies."

PEP-AH grew out of discussions since 2013, when former Acadia University president Ray Ivany rallied the support of university presidents to look at campus drinking culture. Mr. Ivany became passionate about the issue after having to deliver news of 19-year-old Acadia student Jonathan Andrews' death following a night of binge drinking in residence. It was an event after which "our campus changed forever," Mr. Ivany had said.

This past June, student affairs staff, administrators and students met for a one-day conference during [CACUSS](#), the national conference of student affairs professionals across Canada, to share best practices and challenges. The dialogue will continue into 2018 and includes four student symposia in Western Canada, Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada in advance of the national meeting. It was recognized that "students were at the heart of this if it was going to work, but we needed presidential level approval and support," Mr. Duguay said. "At the end of the day, students are the experts in the experience itself."

Cam Yung, PEP-AH's student representative for Ontario and rector at Queen's University, echoed that sentiment (the rector position at Queen's is held by a student and is elected by students). Queen's has had an alcohol working group for almost 20 years and recently hosted PEP-AH's Ontario student symposium. "Students react better when they have peers there to lead and provide guidance," Mr. Yung said. "When we have students educating students, and not a top-down approach of administration trying to educate students about alcohol harms, that is a way more effective solution."

