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Colleges Ponder Anti-Drinking Efforts

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MIDDLETOWN — Colleges across Connecticut have taken a number of steps to cast off the drinking culture that infuses so much of campus life.

The tactics they've employed include strictly enforcing existing rules, aggressively screening students for signs of risky behavior, establishing peer support programs and enlisting the help of local police, bar owners and those hovering "helicopter" parents.

"Have we solved the problem? Not yet," said Walter Bernstein, vice president of Western Connecticut State University. "But I am convinced that the first step toward solving the problem is admitting that a problem exists."

The scale of that problem was on full display Monday, when leaders from more than 20 colleges in Connecticut came to Wesleyan University to honor the work they have already done and remind themselves of just how much more remains.

The statistics are startling: About half of all college students in the U.S. binge drink or abuse drugs.

One quarter of them meet the medical criteria for drug or alcohol dependency, compared with about 8.5 percent of the general population. And college women, though they lag behind their male peers in terms of alcohol consumption, are catching up fast.

Those are the findings of a 2005 study conducted by the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. Joseph A. Califano Jr., founding chairman of the center and one-time chief domestic aide to President Lyndon Johnson, presented Monday's keynote address.

"Thirty-two kids were killed [at Virginia Tech] by a crazy kid with a gun and the nation went into mourning," Califano said. Yet every week, more than two dozen college students die because of injuries related to alcohol or drugs and scarcely anyone notices, he said.

Drug use is also increasing, according to Califano. Four percent of college students said they used marijuana daily, according to the study. That is even more troubling because today's marijuana is far more potent than that of the 1960s and '70s. "It's not the right of

passage parents might have thought it was," Califano said.

The colleges and universities represented on Monday are part of the Connecticut Statewide Healthy Campus Initiative, a partnership of the state departments of mental health and addiction services and higher education, as well as the Governor's Prevention Partnership. They range in size from tiny Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts (total enrollment: about 180 students) to the University of Connecticut.

But each has a stake in addressing risky behavior among its students. It is "part and parcel of our mission," said Wesleyan President Michael Roth. "You cannot learn the things you need to learn as a college student if you continue on a path" of unhealthy behavior, he said.

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