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Cultural Commentary: Living at Bridgewater State College: The Drug Scene

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Living at Bridgewater State College

The Drug Scene

A report of research study conducted 1984-86

By Genevieve Fitzpatrick

A 1986 employer survey reflects a new awareness of an old problem in the workplace. Forty-two percent of employers surveyed reported an increase in female employees' abuse of drugs including alcohol. Fifty-eight percent of managers reported an increase in cocaine abuse since 1981. In addition, this study shows a blurring of gender differences in drug use. It should come as no surprise that over one half the employers surveyed reported a reliance on drug testing procedures as well as the more benign approaches of education/counselling to contain the problem.

All of us spend a significant part of our lives in the workplace; clearly productivity and work satisfaction are important components of living the "good life." For these reasons studies such as the one initially cited are particularly worrisome. But the problems of drug use are not limited to the workplace. They occur in college as well, influencing grades and participation in the college's social network, and possibly leading to drug use after college.

Some research suggests that the most powerful predictor of drug use patterns in college and beyond college is the earlier onset of this behavior in elementary, middle and high school. Yet it is in college, in the supportive environment of campus life, that such habits are likely to be reinforced, fixed, and to carry over to later life.

All of these considerations served as a backdrop to a campus health and quality of life survey conducted at Bridgewater State College from 1984-86. More important, specific behaviors, such as drug use and abuse probably account, at least in part, for level of achievement, participation in the college social network and, inevitably quality of life. Quality of life is often elusive in practice as it is in concept. Among our initial tasks, then, was development of a working definition of quality of life. Since our study would require a representative sample of undergraduate and graduate students, to report their behaviors to us, we chose a definition that is both personal and practical. . . . The concept of quality of life assumes that each of us has some specific criteria that describe the best possible conditions of living. Wellness is closely related to quality of life in that it is concerned with optimal functioning and the ability to adapt to a variety of settings. Thus, various health state indicators such as degree of stress and coping were selected as reflections of quality of life on the Bridgewater State College campus. Some variables seem so connected to quality of life defined in this manner that these were also selected for analysis. The major one for this study is the focus of this report: an analysis of the relationship of reported recreational and alcohol drug use to other factors related to quality of life.

![Figure 1](image-url)
The survey began with an extensive literature review comparing Bridgewater State College students to their counterparts in the United States. Illegal drug use, alcohol abuse and smoking habits dominate the literature as health issues confronting college students. Recent studies indicate that drinking and abuse of alcohol is a universal problem among all college populations. Studies of New England colleges and universities report that 95% of students use alcohol and 64% report using other drugs. Moderate to heavy use of alcohol is relatively common. The white male student is identified as the most frequent abuser of alcohol in some studies. It has been estimated that approximately 21 million college students smoke marijuana as a drug of choice. Studies about the effects of marijuana on academic achievement are contradictory while studies of alcohol and cocaine abuse seem to generally agree that both are harmful in their effects on performance.

A variety of forms of drug abuse by college students are accounted for by factors including immaturity, stress, difficulty coping and a variety of social learning issues. The findings of the Bridgewater State College study are strikingly similar to the general overview provided by national studies. Our respondents reported rates of problem-drinking similar to national figures. However, in this study a much lower aggregate figure of so-called "recreational" drug use is reported than in the studies of both regional and national samples. A cautious interpretation of the Bridgewater State College findings is that we are in an excellent position to develop early interventions of a preventive nature for all drug related behaviors. Our data show the extent of illegal drug use on this campus to be less than the national average and similar to figures reported for the legal drug alcohol. Specific findings of our study support this assertion.

**DRUG USE FINDINGS**

The Bridgewater State College Campus Study

Forty-three percent of the total number of questionnaires circulated were returned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POINT ONE</th>
<th>Those who agree with the statement that they use recreational drugs in moderation have significantly lower Grade Point Averages than those who disagree.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POINT TWO</td>
<td>There is a trend in the data that full time students report higher drug use than part time students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POINT THREE</td>
<td>Reported drug use is significantly lower in those who report they cope effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POINT FOUR</td>
<td>The older the undergraduate student, the less likely they report recreational drug use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POINT FIVE</td>
<td>The healthiest undergraduates report they do not use recreational drugs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- GPA
- USE

![FIGURE 2](image)

**Relationship of Recreational Drug Use to GPA, Full or Part Time Status, Coping Skills, Age and Health**

A representative random sample was selected from the population of students at the college in the 1984-85 period. Figure 1 represents the demographic profile of the respondents. This profile is also a representative one in respect to age, grade point averages, class in school and other characteristics of the general student population at the college. In other words, the responses are likely to be generalizable to the entire undergraduate student population. (See Fig. 1)

The survey questionnaire listed various illicit drug and alcohol use and asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they engaged in each. One of these items was deliberately worded to elicit valid responses in respect to use of illicit drugs. These drugs were referred to as "recreational" and the item used the word "moderate" implying to the respondent that he/she is in control of the drug rather than the reverse. In addition, "recreational" drug examples were given as LSD, marijuana and cocaine so that if a respondent was using only one of these, it would be difficult to sort out which one. Those who agreed with this statement were selected out and studied more closely. The results of this analysis were as follows:

Those who admitted to using recreational drugs reported that they coped with problems significantly less capably than nonusers of recreational drugs. While there are several possible interpretations of these findings, a cautious one might be that those who are having difficulty coping see recreational drug use as a workplace alternative for reducing their stress. Moreover, those reporting they did not cope well may, in fact, have been dependent on recreational drugs as an important coping strategy.

The younger the respondent, the greater the reported use of recreational drugs. This, with other findings, suggests that some younger students are gradually assimilated into the culture on the college campus with recreational drug use serving as one vehicle (among many) for such assimilation.

Respondents who scored highest on the health scale agreed that they used recreational drugs significantly less than those who scored lower. This finding is a common one in studies of drug usage among college students. That is, the healthiest students do not report consistent drug use patterns. Married members of the undergraduate respondent group reported recreational drug use to a significantly lower degree than non-married members.

Undergraduates reported a 28% rate of recreational drug use. It is possible that this would be a lower figure if one could control the effect of marijuana use, the most pervasively used drug in all undergraduate populations. A recent University of Michigan study noted a 17% use rate of cocaine in high school seniors. If high school figures are adequate predictions of college use, the 28% rate does have face validity. Moreover, in July, 1986, the University of Michigan reported a cocaine use rate of 30% in a national random sample of college students. Of interest is the close approximation of the 28% aggregate use figure reported by Bridgewater State College students. Cocaine and other drugs such as marijuana
drinking behaviors that are unhealthy prevalent, that many students display alcohol, the most socially accepted drug, it is clear that drinking below age 21 is will be a campus problem to be reckoned patterns of the society. In general, it is do not risk drug abuse. common with since there is ample evidence that students at Bridgewater State College hold while the items on alcohol use were not were selected out for further analysis possibly because the brightest students in the state college student population tend to be those who are very task oriented and do not risk drug abuse. The findings on recreational drug use were selected out for further analysis while the items on alcohol use were not since there is ample evidence that students at Bridgewater State College hold in common with other college students and the larger society the prevalent drinking patterns of the society. In general, it is clear that drinking below age 21 is prevalent, that many students display drinking behaviors that are unhealthy (that is drinking to excess) and that alcohol, the most socially accepted drug, will be a campus problem to be reckoned with for the foreseeable future. Figures 2 and 3 summarize findings about recreational drug and alcohol use as reported by respondents.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In research, as in life, asking the right questions is of key importance. In respect to the campus quality of life study, the question of least relevance is the extent to which drug use and abuse has invaded the Bridgewater State College campus. The more important question is how the Bridgewater State College student compares to his/her national counterparts. Clearly, the Bridgewater State College undergraduate population is very comparable to other college populations in respect to both illicit drug use as well as the use of the legal drug alcohol. In regard to the latter, it is a subtle irony of our nation's obsession

The entire 100 page study with quantitative analysis, bibliography and appendices is available to interested readers from:

GENEVIEVE FITZPATRICK, Professor of Health

FIGURE 3 Alcohol Related Questions

ITEM UNDERGRADUATE RESPONSE GRADUATE RESPONSE
1. Use alcohol moderately 58% Agree 71% Agree
2. Never drink and drive 58% Agree 56% Agree
3. Can enjoy a party without alcohol 58% Agree 85% Agree
4. Never drink without eating 44% Agree 53% Agree

lifestyles - a TV viewer, a newspaper or magazine reader. The problems of our youth clearly center around human sexuality, drug and alcohol abuse, crisis and stress, achievement at school and at work. It should be no surprise then that an investigation centered on a youthful population at a state college has suggested that they labor under the same pressures as their counterparts. What is extraordinary is that an alumni association cares enough about their students that a study such as this was funded.

The 14 recommendations of the study in respect to the drug use patterns identified focus on several early intervention approaches. For example, it is recommended that some entities on campus already serve a support function in primary prevention. Among these are the Women's Center and various programs of the student services component of the College. At this writing the College has already acted on some of these recommendations. A needed policy in respect to alcohol abuse had been developed and implemented. An important feature of this policy is a focus on habilitative rather than punitive responses to alcohol problems. Alcoholism is rightly perceived as a disease rather than a crime and outreach efforts focus on helping interventions such as restorative counselling.

At the outset of the study it was noted that a topic as complex as quality of life cannot be investigated in a simplistic way. This modest investigation offered neither absolute answers nor definitive solutions to the pervasive problem of drug abuse. Nevertheless, it is clear that our students are not so different from other state college populations and hold in common with them similar problems. As we look for support for our students, it is clear that Bridgewater State College is already providing many resources linked to quality of life. Thus, recommendations focus not so much on what we do not have in some form, but on the potential benefit of expanding and strengthening what is in place. Finally, in comparing our populations to those of other state colleges, this investigation's results reasonably argue that we are a bit ahead of most and at least equal to others in respect to quality of student life.