

# Alcohol and Other Drug Use at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

by Daniel Ari Kapner

The “culture of drinking” on U.S. college and university campuses has gained widespread national attention. Researchers cite the disturbing consequences of drinking on campus each year—1,700 college student deaths from alcohol-related causes; 600,000 unintentional injuries; 700,000 assaults; and 100,000 cases of sexual assault and acquaintance rape.<sup>1,2</sup>

Recent studies confirm that students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and African American students in general drink far less and, as a result, suffer fewer consequences than do students at predominantly white institutions. This disparity in alcohol consumption appears to be strongly related to factors such as HBCUs’ emphasis on character development in their institutional goals and the enrollment of many students with strong religious values. As a result, the atmosphere at HBCUs militates against the “culture of drinking” found on so many other college and university campuses.

HBCUs play a central role in educating African Americans. Although there are just over 100 HBCUs in the United States, 1.24 percent of all African

American graduates earned their baccalaureate degrees at these institutions, according to the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>3</sup>

HBCUs have been centers for leadership development in the African American community, resulting largely from the religious affiliation of a number of campuses. Nearly two-thirds of private HBCUs are affiliated with religious organizations. Booker T. Washington, the foremost black educator in the early 1900s, emphasized character training, sobriety, and sexual restraint. Likewise, many religious organizations supported the American Temperance Movement during the 19th century because of that movement’s close links to the antislavery movement.<sup>4</sup> These groups were often involved in the founding of black institutions of higher education, and they kept character development and temperance at their core.<sup>4</sup> Prohibiting alcohol consumption or intoxication on campus may still be a policy for some of these religiously affiliated campuses.<sup>5</sup>

HBCUs’ emphasis on character development has had a strong influence in reducing alcohol consumption rates on campus, and other colleges and universities can learn much about alcohol and other drug (AOD) prevention from these institutions.



## Prevalence of Alcohol Use by African American Students

The Core Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale reports that approximately 47.4

### Rates of Alcohol and Other Drug Use

- African American students drink less frequently and in smaller quantities than any other racial or ethnic group on campus.<sup>6</sup>
- African American students at HBCUs drink at approximately the same rate as African American students at predominantly white institutions.<sup>9</sup>
- White students at HBCUs drink less than white students at non-HBCUs do.<sup>9</sup>
- Black student athletes drink less alcohol than white student athletes do, and black athletes are more likely than their white counterparts to abstain from alcohol.<sup>10</sup>
- Students at HBCUs use marijuana less than do students at predominantly white institutions.<sup>7</sup>

percent of college students were heavy drinkers in 2005.<sup>6</sup> African American students drink less frequently and in smaller quantities than white students do. The Core Institute reports that African American students were the least likely to be heavy drinkers on campus, with 23.3 percent of them drinking heavily in 2005, compared with 50.2 percent of white students, 49.3 percent of Latino students, 52.6 of American Indian students, and 33.7 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander students.<sup>6</sup>

The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) has conducted the largest investigation to date of alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco use by HBCU students, surveying more than 10,000 students from 39 campuses in two separate studies.<sup>7</sup>

CSAT performed the studies between 1998 and 1999 and used different methods of data collection for them. According to the first study, 18.0 percent

### For additional information

#### The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention

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Newton, Massachusetts 02458-1060

<http://www.higheredcenter.org>

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of students drank four or more alcoholic beverages in one sitting during the two weeks prior to the surveys<sup>7</sup>; according to the second, only 15.0 percent did so.<sup>7</sup>

Other studies confirm that HBCU students drink less frequently and in smaller quantities than students at predominantly white institutions do. According to a 2001 survey of 1,587 students at three HBCUs in North Carolina, 10.1 percent of males and 7.8 percent of females drank heavily in the two weeks prior to the survey.<sup>8</sup>

In a 1995 study by the Core Institute, 22.5 percent of black students had five or more drinks during the two weeks before the survey.<sup>9</sup> The Core Institute study also indicated that black students at HBCUs drink roughly the same amount (1.4 drinks per week) as black students at predominantly white institutions do (1.7 drinks per week).<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the Core Institute study found that white students at HBCUs drink much less than white students at non-HBCUs do. Looking at survey data for more than 12,000 students, the investigators found that 22.3 percent of white students at HBCUs reported heavy drinking in the two weeks before the survey, compared with 39.6 percent of white students at non-HBCU campuses.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, research shows that black student athletes drink much less alcohol than white student athletes do. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's 2006 Study of Substance Use Habits of College Student-Athletes, 52.9 percent of African American student athletes used alcohol during the 12 months before the survey, compared with 82.1 percent of white student athletes and 70.1 percent of student athletes of other racial and ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup>



### Illicit Drug Use

Illicit drug use at HBCUs and among black students in general is a topic of limited research. The Core Institute analysis of responses from 33,379 students in 2005 found that 10.7 percent of black students used marijuana during the 30 days prior to the study, compared with 17.2

percent of white students, 17.6 percent of Hispanic students, and 8.8 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students.<sup>6</sup> That same study found that 5.4 percent of African American students used an illegal drug other than marijuana in the past year compared with 12.9 percent of white students, 7.3 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 12.9 percent of Hispanic students.<sup>6</sup>

Although no recent nationwide studies have specifically looked at illicit drug use at HBCUs, CSAT did survey the use of one illegal drug, marijuana, as part of its two studies of more than 10,000 HBCU students.

According to the first study, 14.6 percent of students had used marijuana during the 30 days prior to the survey, while the second study found that 13.5 percent of students had done so.<sup>7</sup> The 2005 Core Institute analysis of 33,379 students found that 16.7 percent had used marijuana in the 30 days prior to the study, a higher proportion than was found among HBCU students.<sup>6</sup>

Additional research is needed on the use of illicit drugs by African American students at HBCUs and at other institutions, particularly on the abuse of prescription drugs and other substances rising in prevalence on campus.



### The Nature of the HBCU Environment

Reasons for the differences outlined above can be found partly in the environment that HBCUs create for their students. For example, HBCUs put a strong focus on character development and religious expression. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that HBCUs cultivate a nurturing environment. At a 1998 symposium on alcohol and other drug (AOD) prevention at HBCUs, organized by the Higher Education Center with support from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a representative from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People commented that the HBCU campus resembles a family, in which staff members and older students assist newcomers.<sup>14</sup> A representative from the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education noted that HBCUs provide a sense of community, a cultural atmosphere supportive to African American students, a commitment

to student retention, and special assistance to students coming from inner-city secondary schools.<sup>14</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that HBCUs place a heavy emphasis on advisement, and many offer open door policies.<sup>15</sup>

Contrasting the HBCU approach with what was presented as a more typical approach to student development, a *Washington Post* journalist observed, “[R]ather than adopting the sink-or-swim attitude toward incoming students, [HBCUs’] approach leans more toward nurture and assist. And if a student is not doing well, the schools make it their mission to blaze a path to success.”<sup>16</sup>

The support HBCUs offer students continues after their graduation. Faculty members often serve as advisers beyond the classroom and help students with career decisions.<sup>14</sup> The USA Group Foundation notes that higher education policymakers used to believe that black students would have more successful careers if they were to attend predominantly white campuses.<sup>17</sup> In fact, black HBCU graduates are slightly more likely to pursue graduate and professional degrees than are black students from predominantly white institutions. They are also likely to receive salaries comparable to those of black graduates of predominantly white institutions.<sup>17</sup>

A 2000 study by the USA Group Foundation mentions another protective factor at work at HBCUs: Black students at HBCUs are more likely than black students at other institutions to participate in community service because of HBCU programs. The study found that 57 percent of black male graduates and 54 percent of black female graduates from HBCUs participated in community service, compared with 35 percent of black male graduates and 50 percent of black female graduates from predominantly white institutions.<sup>17</sup>

There are also some indications that the values and goals of black collegians differ from those of their white counterparts. These differences may explain not only why the drinking rate at HBCUs is lower than the national average but also why black students in general drink less than other students. Some researchers and prevention specialists have speculated that there

exists “a greater sense of purpose among black collegians, more pressure to succeed, a greater focus on spirituality and religion, less disposable income to spend on alcohol or drugs, fewer opportunities to party than the majority culture, and less support for substance-abusing black students to stay enrolled in college.”<sup>19</sup> There are a number of cultural factors that explain this, such as the importance of the extended family in the African American community, the high number of first generation college students, and the emphasis on spirituality in African American history.<sup>15</sup>

Strong religious affiliation is often a major factor in black students’ decision making and behavior on campus. In a study on religious involvement as a predictor of adolescent alcohol use published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, black students reported regarding religion as more important in their lives than did other students, praying and attending services more often, and holding more conservative beliefs.<sup>18</sup> The study’s authors suggest, “Religion has become the closest approximation to a corporate African identity within the African American experience and, today, is often the hub of existence in the black community, as well as a holistic ministry and a social center.” The study concludes that although it is hard to generalize, religious activity may be a key reason black students consume less alcohol than other students do.<sup>18</sup>



## Moving Forward

Campuses have been making strides in AOD prevention, and each offers a unique perspective that can be shared with other campuses to help enhance their prevention efforts. HBCUs are in a particularly good position to offer insight regarding AOD prevention, given the low rates of use on campus. Predominantly white institutions can learn from the many examples HBCUs have set in nurturing their students and fostering character development. Following is a list of specific recommendations for other institutions of higher education:

- Engage more with individual students.
- Increase faculty involvement in nonacademic issues, such as career advice and personal mentoring.
- Provide more opportunities for community service.
- Offer more mentoring programs.
- Strengthen ties to the community, for instance through more involvement with faith-based organizations and volunteer opportunities.

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# INFOFACTS RESOURCES

The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention



## Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS)

U.S. Department of Education  
<http://www.ed.gov/osdfs>; 202-245-7896

OSDFS supports efforts to create safe schools, respond to crises, prevent alcohol and other drug abuse, ensure the health and well-being of students, and teach students good character and citizenship. The agency provides financial assistance for drug abuse and violence prevention programs and activities that promote the health and well-being of students in elementary and secondary schools and institutions of higher education.

## The U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention

<http://www.higheredcenter.org>; 1-800-676-1730;  
TDD Relay-friendly, Dial 711

The Higher Education Center offers an integrated array of services to help campuses and communities come together to identify problems; assess needs; and plan, implement, and evaluate alcohol and other drug abuse and violence prevention programs. Services include training; technical assistance; publications; support for the Network Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues; and evaluation activities. The Higher Education Center's publications are free and can be downloaded from its Web site.

## White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities

<http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/list/whhbcu/edlite-index.html>; 202-502-7900

The White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities was established to strengthen the capacity of HBCUs to provide excellence in education. Its Web site offers a list of HBCUs, information on the Department of Education's National HBCU Week Conference, and other resources.



## Other Organizations

### African American Family Services

<http://www.aafs.net>; 612-871-7878

African American Family Services (AAFS) is an umbrella organization comprising the Institute on Black Chemical Abuse, the African American Counseling Center, the African American Resource Center, and the Technical Assistance Center. Technical Assistance Center staff provide training and technical support to help college health educators and administrators nationwide develop and improve AOD prevention programs for African American students.

### HBCU National Resource Center for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Infrastructure Development

<http://web.msm.edu/hbcunrc>; 1-888-422-8672

The HBCU-NRC is committed to establishing a national network among HBCU institutions to facilitate collaboration among HBCU institutions, supporting culturally appropriate substance abuse prevention and mental health treatment, and student health and wellness needs on HBCU campuses, and facilitating the design of course minors and majors and undergraduate and graduate degree programs that encourage student interest in substance abuse and mental health.

### National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education

<http://www.nafeo.org>; 301-650-2440

The National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO) is an association of HBCUs. NAFEO's chief objective is to implement programs and policies that increase minority student enrollment, using diverse strategies to ensure an increase of black students into HBCU establishments. To advance the agenda of HBCU presidents and chancellors, NAFEO coordinates regional, statewide, and national policy forums.

## The Network Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues

<http://www.thenetwork.ws>; see Web site for telephone contacts by region

The Network Addressing Collegiate Alcohol and Other Drug Issues (Network) is a national consortium of colleges and universities formed to promote healthy campus environments by addressing issues related to alcohol and other drugs. Developed in 1987 by the U.S. Department of Education, the Network comprises member institutions that voluntarily agree to work toward a set of standards aimed at reducing AOD problems at colleges and universities. It has more than 1,600 members nationwide.

## Office of Minority Health

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
<http://www.omhrc.gov>; 1-800-444-6472

The Office of Minority Health helps to improve the health of racial and ethnic populations through the development of effective health policies and programs aimed at eliminating disparities in health. The Office of Minority Health offers training and technical assistance to college health educators to help them develop AOD prevention programs for students of color.

## United Negro College Fund

<http://www.uncf.org>; 1-800-331-2244

The United Negro College Fund (UNCF) provides financial assistance to students, raises operating funds for member colleges and universities, and increases access to technology for students and faculty at HBCUs. UNCF houses the Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute, an organization that conducts research to help guide policymakers, educators, and the public toward improving educational opportunities and outcomes for African Americans.



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