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EIU Adopts Program Designed to Teach Students Responsible Drinking

Aug-01-2006

Officials at Eastern Illinois University are using a new approach to addressing the issue of first-year-student drinking by implementing a new mandatory online alcohol education program being adopted by public and private institutions around the country.

According to Dan Nadler, vice president for student affairs, Eastern will be the first institution in Illinois to implement AlcoholEdu for incoming freshman students and their parents. He believes the Charleston campus to be among good company.

"Basically, from the outset, AlcoholEdu has been marketed to the leading universities in the country," he said.

Villanova University was the first in the nation (2001) to require its incoming freshmen to complete the course. The program has since been used on more than 450 campuses nationwide, including Princeton University, Syracuse University, the University of Southern California and the University of California at Berkeley.

President Lou Hencken gives his full support to Eastern's implementation of AlcoholEdu, pleased that the university is addressing a major problem that affects most university and college campuses.

"We researched the AlcoholEdu program quite thoroughly before deciding to commit," Hencken said. "Results at other campuses have been very positive, and we trust Eastern will reap similar benefits."

According to Nadler, the purpose of AlcoholEdu is not to tell students not to drink; rather, the program focuses on warning students about the risks of drinking.

"We believe AlcoholEdu will help educate our students," Nadler said. "Yes, students believe drinking makes one more social and increases one's likelihood of facilitating relationships and sexual opportunities. But we also know that most disciplinary issues are connected to excessive alcohol use."

Research by Andrew Wall, an education professor at EIU, indicates that, nationally, students who completed AlcoholEdu have reported "50 percent fewer negative health, social and academic consequences related to drinking." Listed among these "negative consequences" were class absences, blackouts, hangovers, unprotected sex, vomiting in public, injuries and poor athletic performance.

Eastern's incoming new freshmen are learning about the AlcoholEdu mandate as they report for their summer orientation. The university has, for many years, included alcohol education in its orientation programs, and it has been easy to incorporate the new information into presentations given to both students and their parents.

The program calls for each student to finish the three-hour Web-based course before arriving on campus later this month. (Parents, too, may complete the program or, if they choose, just review the course's online information.)

Students are asked for information (kept confidential) regarding their individual drinking behaviors, and are then asked to take a pre-test and study three chapters, which include videos and graphics imparting facts and statistics about alcohol and its physiological effects.

Students are encouraged to complete the course in more than one sitting, taking it at their own pace.

Afterward, they are asked to take an online exam testing their general knowledge of alcohol consumption (i.e., blood alcohol concentration, activities increasing the odds of a blackout and hangover cures). If students fail, they are required to take it again until they achieve a passing score. The results do not affect a student's academic record.

"This is not a graded course, and there are no negative consequences for those who complete it," Nadler said. "Those not completing the course will have a hold placed on their educational records."

Students will be asked to complete a follow-up session approximately three weeks after classes begin.

Following completion of the program, AlcoholEdu will provide Eastern with summary reports, as well as recommendations and strategies the university could use to further aid its students in making wiser alcohol-related decisions. The company also has a staff in place to provide consultations to the university, and provides 24-hour-a-day technical support for any student who might have difficulty in accessing or taking the online course.

According to Nadler, incoming freshmen planning to attend Eastern in the falls of 2007, 2008 and 2009 will also be required to participate in the AlcoholEdu program. "We've signed a multi-year agreement (with the AlcoholEdu company), with the intent of implementing the program and letting it work for three or four years to determine its effectiveness," Nadler said.

He added, however, that Eastern may expand the program's scope "once we see how the initial roll-out goes." According to Nadler, "We may offer the program to those campus groups who are more vulnerable to high-risk drinking."