

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE 90TH SPACE WING'S EXAMPLE

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Both US military and academic leaders face a daunting challenge as they work to combat alcohol-related problems among their ranks. Given the long-standing intractability of these problems, could anyone blame these leaders for giving in to feelings of hopelessness?

Enter Colonel Evan J. Hoapili, commander of the 90th Space Wing, which is head-quartered at Warren Air Force Base (AFB) in Cheyenne, WY. Any leader who can tout the kind of dramatic decreases in alcohol problems that he reports – a 70 percent reduction in underage drinking, a 60 percent decrease in alcohol-related disciplinary incidents, a 27 percent drop in DUI incidents—deserves our rapt attention.

How did Warren AFB do it? Colonel Hoapili's alcohol prevention program is grounded in ten basic principles:

1. An institution's top leadership must be committed to a long-term effort to reduce drinking problems. The rank and file will make prevention a priority – and keep it so—only when the person in charge demands it.
2. Broad support for the institution's policies and programs can be built by underscoring how alcohol problems compromise that institution's core mission. Most social problems faced by both military and academic institutions are exacerbated by alcohol use.
3. An institution's strategic plan should be firmly rooted in science-based knowledge and evaluation research. Planners should build on a foundation of what works, not what is customary or politically expedient.
4. Resources should be devoted to screening new entrants in order to identify those who could benefit from additional education, a motivational interview, or treatment. Universal screening gets people the help they need, while also communicating that the institution takes the problem seriously.
5. Meaningful reductions in alcohol-related problems cannot be achieved without reducing alcohol consumption across the entire population. Research has made clear that environmental approaches to prevention work best to achieve this result.
6. Success cannot be achieved without an active partnership with the surrounding community. Principal areas of focus should include reducing alcohol availability through responsible retailing and beverage service and consistently enforcing underage drinking and DUI laws.

7. Harm reduction approaches, such as alternative rides and designated driver programs, should be introduced only as part of a comprehensive program that focuses primarily on environmental change.
8. Supportive media messages are necessary to communicate the institution's expectations, correct misperceptions of drinking norms, and publicize new policies and enforcement efforts.
9. Resources should be devoted to establishing and monitoring key performance indicators to gauge progress and identify areas needing improvement.
10. The most vital lesson we can learn from the 90th Space Wing's example is this: effective prevention begins when an entire community declares the difference between acceptable and unacceptable conduct and then takes action to enforce that difference. Both military and academic leaders are well advised to work in common cause with local officials – and with each other – to change community alcohol policies and enforcement.

Colonel Hoapili states that base commanders and other Air Force brass are paying attention to what is happening at Warren AFB. College and university administrators should pay attention as well.