

## WHAT IS BACCHUS?

### The BACCHUS Network™ Mission

*The BACCHUS Network™ is a university and community based network focusing on comprehensive health and safety initiatives. It is the mission of this 501©(3) non-profit organization to actively promote student and young adult based, campus and community-wide leadership on healthy and safe lifestyle decisions concerning alcohol abuse, tobacco use, illegal drug use, unhealthy sexual practices and other high-risk behaviors.*

The organization will devote the substantial portion of its resources and activities to:

- Create and foster a thriving network of institutions and young adult led peer education groups supporting health and safety initiatives,
- Empower students and administrators to voice their opinions and needs to create healthier and safer campus communities, develop and promote cutting edge resources and health promotion campaigns that support peer education, campus leadership, and activism on health and safety issues,
- Provide exceptional conferencing and training opportunities for students, young adults and professionals to support health and safety strategies,
- Encourage national forums on young adult health and safety concerns,
- Promote and disseminate research and effective strategies that better help campuses and communities address health and safety issues, and advocate for effective and sensible policies and practices for campus and community health and safety issues.

Affiliates with our Network are concerned with the health of their students, their institution and their community. Students of all ages are faced with making personal decisions about health and safety. Developing positive decision-making skills impacts student life and prepares students to enter the real-world and the greater community to promote healthy and safe lifestyles. BACCHUS promotes respect for state and federal laws and support for campus policies that address high-risk behaviors that compromise health and safety.

The BACCHUS philosophy is that students can play a uniquely effective role – unmatched by professional educators – in encouraging their peers to consider, talk honestly about and develop responsible habits and attitudes toward high-risk health and safety issues.

## WHAT IS PEER EDUCATION? WHO ARE PEER EDUCATORS?

A peer is a person who is of equal standing with you in a group. It is sometimes advantageous, but not necessary, to have a number of characteristics that make it easier to relate and connect to members of the group, such as similar behaviors, demographics and social affiliations. The main element connecting you as peers, however, will be your identities as students.

What is the difference between a peer and a peer educator? A person who drinks to excess might be a peer to another person who drinks to excess, but to be a peer educator, you need to find different, healthier connections that will make you a peer – such as we are both students, we are both athletes, we are both members of a fraternity or sorority, etc. As an educator, you want to be able to be in a helping position for the people you call peers.

## **PEER EDUCATION AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY**

The unique impact that college peers have on each other is widely acknowledged and cited in the higher education literature (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). College undergraduate peers are the single most potent source of influence on undergraduate student affective and cognitive growth and development during college (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999). Furthermore, the frequency and quality of students' interactions with peers extends to a positive association with college student persistence (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzin, 2005).

Peer education programs provide many benefits to colleges and universities, and the students who become peer educators. Peer education impacts a campus in two ways:

1. Students who participate in peer education are impacted.
  - Peer educators make healthier choices that positively affect themselves and others.
  - Peer educators are on the front line for dealing with issues with their peers.
  - Peer educators develop stronger leadership, communication, and marketing skills.
  - Peer educators gain accurate and current knowledge about health issues and campus and community resources.
  - Peer educators develop a greater sense of community.
  - Peer education builds students leadership skills outside the classroom.
2. Peer educators impact the campuses and communities in which they live because they can:
  - Correct misperceptions about students' behaviors and choices
  - Be on the front lines to address the health and safety issues affecting a campus
  - Assist campus professional staff to reach out to students and increase the number of services offered
  - Promote healthy choices by providing factual information on issues
  - Influence policy

- Influence individual behavior
- Increase collaboration across campus and within the community by establishing shared leadership across the campus.

Peer education groups provide a quality leadership experience for students. We find students who are trained peer educators:

- Value serving others and are better prepared for their chosen career fields
- Hone their leadership skills
- See the impact and change that results from their work
- Are knowledgeable on health information and campus services and resources.

Since the National Peer Educator Survey (Wawryzynski, 2007) was first administered in 2004, more than 1000 peer educators in 200 institutions have completed the on-line survey. We discovered the following key areas of growth and development by peer educators who completed the survey:

- Higher order thinking skills (e.g., being able to critically analyze a situation or evaluating information and assessing conclusions);
- Educational gains (e.g., having a career direction, developing long range goals);
- Presentation skills and comfort in presenting;
- Appreciation and awareness of diversity; and
- Helping skills (e.g., talking with a peer about a risky behavior or choice; intervening in a crisis situation).

In addition to these areas of growth and development, we found that almost half of the peer educators completing the survey indicated they had been peer educators for less than eight months, with only 38% identifying as first-year students or sophomores. This indicates that students are becoming peer educators later in their college career. Given these results, one might also conclude that being a peer educator might serve as a catalyst for growth in the key areas identified above.

### **Why Peer Education?**

Peer education programs gained popularity on college campuses (Gould & Lomax, 1993) because peer educators can communicate with other students in ways that faculty, administrators, and staff cannot. Peer education programs continue to grow exponentially because college-age students often feel more comfortable talking with peers when it comes to sensitive issues such as sexuality and drug use (Sawyer, Pinciario, & Bedwell, 1997). In addition to how peers assist other students, peer educational programs are economical for the campus and provide leadership opportunities for the

students (Nichols & Lumley, 1999). Consequently, peer educators quickly become valued and respected student leaders on many college campuses.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) 2002 report titled, *A Call To Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges*, singles out peer educators as a proactive force in fighting alcohol abuse. In their publication that accompanies the report titled, “What Peer Educators and Resident Advisors (RAs) Need to Know About College Drinking”, they list the following reasons why it is important to include peer educators in prevention efforts:

- Peer educators are trusted by classmates to provide reliable answers and accurate information, regardless of health topic.
- Peer educators have hands-on knowledge that enables them to interpret the NIAAA report from a different perspective.
- Peer educators are a very important link between the administration and student body.
- Peer educators can assist college presidents in reducing underage/excessive drinking.
- Peer educators’ input can make college alcohol prevention programs more successful.

Regardless of the health and safety topic, these reasons hold true.

In 2007, the NIAAA issued an update to its 2002 report. In *What Colleges Need to Know Now: An Update on College Drinking Research*, the NIAAA examined the research on utilizing college peer educators in brief intervention and screening programs for high-risk behavior. The authors concluded, “Research also continues to support using trained student peers as part of the team that provides these interventions.”

## **WHY BACCUS SUPPORTS PEER EDUCATION**

The BACCHUS Network™ has always valued the role of student peer educators as change agents. In fact, our mission statement makes it clear how valuable we think students are to our organization. With this in mind, there are four key concepts that form a foundation and framework for support of peer education and clearly demonstrate why a campus should begin and maintain a peer education program. These concepts are:

### **1. Peer education is effective.**

With the ability to present programs and make referrals, peer educators are a perfect “first step” for connecting students to many counseling and health centers. Peer educators can be trained to not only conduct presentations; they can also be trained in listening and effective communication skills; responding and referral skills; role modeling and ethics; and caring and helping within limits.

When asked how peer educators best impacted or changed behaviors in others, the peer educators responded as follows:

- 83% said they taught new information
- 69% reported they changed an attitude
- 63% said they caused a positive behavior change
- 24% reported they caused a behavior change that resulted in saving a life.

## **2. Students who have a desire to be leaders in the world deserve support.**

If there are students who are willing to be part of the solution, who want to spend their time and talents to educate their peers and create safe communities, we want to identify, support, train and empower these students. The BACCHUS Network™ works because of the reality that students, if supported, are effective role models and teachers for their peers. It is also important to note that students also believe they themselves benefit from being a peer educator. When asked about being involved in peer education, students responded as follows:

- 84% believed it improved their leadership skills
- 79% believed it positively affected their relationships with others
- 78% believed it made them a better candidate for a job.

## **3. Peer educators make healthier decisions themselves.**

Because of their personal beliefs, and because of the “positive peer pressure” that exists within peer education groups, peer educators tend to make healthier decisions. Students who are involved in peer education programs take their role as leaders seriously and model the identity of a healthy decision-maker. They use less alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, they make better sexual decisions, and they engage in less high-risk activities.

## **4. Peer educators serve as role models for other students.**

We know that young people are especially susceptible to peer pressure and also pattern many of their decisions after the behavior they perceive to be happening around them. One health strategy that has proven successful for the last two decades is the “social norms” approach. The idea behind this approach is that students often overestimate the number of their peers who, for example, abuse alcohol, use tobacco, or engage in unsafe sexual activity. Peer educators, because of their own healthy choices and their willingness to be leaders, can help to reinforce a positive and, in truth, real norm.

