

Communication strategies can reduce number of drunk drivers, researcher says

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Differing interpretations of the term "designated driver" can drain the safety from even the best of intentions, according to an award-winning paper recently published by Northern Illinois University communication professor Kathleen Valde.

Valde's research shows that some college students believe that it is all right for a designated driver to drink as long as he or she drinks less – or more slowly – than the others. Some believe that a suitable designated driver can be allowed to smoke marijuana, as long as he or she does not drink. Others choose a designated driver at the end of the night after determining which friend seems the least impaired.

The paper, "Desire and Sacrifice: Seeking Compliance in Designated Driver Talk," co-authored by Valde and Kristine Fitch, professor and chair of communication studies at the University of Iowa, identifies the numerous problems groups of students encounter when attempting to communicate and negotiate on a designated driver. The paper received the B. Aubrey Fisher award in February for the best scholarly work to appear in the journal last year.

The study compared three official definitions of a designated driver (Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Harvard Alcohol Project) with respondent interpretations of what it means to be a designated driver, and explored how groups select designated drivers.

"It was interesting to see not only how people who agreed to be

designated drivers were persuaded to do so, but how the idea of designated drivers was understood and implemented in the course of interactions,” Valde said. “The fact that driving after moderate drinking is commonly viewed as successful avoidance of drunk driving is cause for concern over drivers' real level of impairment.”

The researchers learned that the ways in which college students and other groups of alcohol drinkers discuss and follow through with plans to designate a safe driver can have a profound impact on whether groups arrive home safely. They found that specific, simple steps can greatly reduce the number of drivers who drink. For example:

- Deciding on a designated driver well in advance of the outing is crucial.
- If the same group socializes often, a “round robin” system of designated drivers should be implemented so everyone knows who needs to abstain from alcohol and when. The drinkers must agree to support the designated driver in abstaining from alcohol.
- If a group fails to choose a designated driver before alcohol is consumed, describing alternatives to driving in positive ways that will offset lost autonomy can help. Statements such as “It's a nice night for a walk,” or “I'll bring you back to get your car tomorrow,” can make the difference between leaving the car parked and having an impaired person drive.
- Designated driver campaigns and conversations should pay more attention to enabling people to save face. As one survey respondent noted, “The key is to convince people there's nothing wrong with being drunk, only with driving while drunk.”
- Designated driver messages should be aimed not only at teens, but also customized to several demographic groups. The study data suggests that adults also routinely drive drunk, and media messages need to be aimed at providing adults with persuasive resources for convincing people to be designated drivers.

Valde and Fitch surveyed about 200 respondents regarding drinking and driving habits. Survey respondents ranged in age from 20 to 75, with 25 percent of the sample being older than 23 years old. Respondents were predominantly Caucasian (84 percent), female (60 percent) and educated (34 percent had completed some education beyond high school).

The study found that several factors made individuals reluctant to act as designated driver. Respondents said that not drinking is particularly difficult when everyone else is drinking heavily. Others complained that often in a social group, some members refused to take a turn at being designated driver, forcing others to take more turns than his or her fair share. Compounding the problem is the persistently American notion that driving is a “right” not to be given up.

Another finding of Valde's research counters a stereotype endured by fraternities and sororities. Often depicted as the worst offenders in college binge drinking, the Greek community seemed the most likely to have explicit requirements for designated drivers, and a framework of organizational rules and policies to support such requirements to enforce such requirements.

Source: Northern Illinois University

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