

## WASHINGTON STATE PREVENTION SUMMIT 2000

Keynote Address of Karen W. Morse  
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(*standing in for Governor Gary Locke*)  
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As you know, I am not Gary Locke. The Governor is very committed to prevention as a long-term way to address public health issues, and he has supported your efforts. Why would a university president be concerned?

When I thought about this summit, I realized that prevention is a central part of a university education. For example, we teach history in the hope that the same mistakes won't be made again. We teach science so that students can learn from the experiments -- including the mistakes -- of scientists through the years so that some can do more advanced work and discover the causes for our ills. We teach philosophy and political science and sociology in the hope that the students will help to prevent the human errors of the past and contribute to a better society. At Western, we build solar cars and study the environment to avoid dependence on nonrenewable resources and prevent pollution.

We also help students to adopt a healthy lifestyle that will prevent health and social problems in the future. I'll talk about that more in a few minutes.

Our universities take seriously the responsibility to educate tomorrow's parents, teachers, workers, managers and CEOs, public health officials and politicians. The values of *my* university are explicit in the three organizing principles of its mission -- quality, diversity and community. Our students and faculty are active and engaged in these principles.

We carry them out in many ways. In our fall convocation for new freshmen, each speaker in turn talked of the need for students to take personal responsibility -- responsibility for choices, for learning, for participating in community service. That this similarity of message was unorchestrated, brought home for me that fact that we're all on the same page -- as we should be. I know that those assembled here would agree that the more we can plant the notion of personal responsibility for prevention of problems, the more we will be able to contribute to addressing nation's health care crisis, as well as other pressing problems.

As president of a university, I recognize that we are part of a much bigger picture. In order to meet the needs of society, we must involve the community in what we do. Working in collaboration and partnership with schools and community agencies and businesses throughout the state, we are better able to assess what we're up against and better able to train students to meet the challenges that will face them.

I often have characterized the university's place in the social process as a stop along a river -- our students and their needs and problems flow to us, we intervene as we can, and they flow on into society at-large. As I thought about the purpose of this summit today, my imagination shifted from the river... into one of those floating pools at the water parks where you go lazily around and around, running into -- and on the second time around, *avoiding* -- waterfalls and other obstacles. .... because it is clear that what we do or don't do here recycles through again and again. We must teach and learn as we go and try to prevent our students from running into the most dangerous barriers to a healthy, happy experience!

The reason for a focus on prevention is probably most evident as we assess the damage caused by abuse of alcohol and drugs. And this has been one of the most prominent issues of prevention on college campuses. We're working on it. But as president of a university, I realize that the prevention efforts at the college level are only part of what our society must attend to, and clearly not the first part.

It is not surprising that alcohol is the number one drug of choice among the nation's youth. We know that abuse of alcohol can have serious, often lifelong, consequences for them, their families and their communities. We need to develop effective interventions at increasingly lower levels.

The alarming fact that children ages 9 to 15 are increasing their consumption of alcohol has elevated the need for early prevention to the national agenda. The National Institutes of Health report that:

- 3 million children ages 14 through 17 are regular drinkers who already have a confirmed alcohol problem.
- 24 percent of eighth graders have used alcohol in the last 30 days.
- More than 100,000 12-13 year-olds binge drink every month.
- Ninth graders who drink are almost twice as likely to attempt suicide as those who don't.
- 40 percent of children who begin drinking before the age of 15 will become alcoholics at some point in their lives.
- And, of course, many----most of these kids learn their drinking behavior first from adults.

Adults tend to joke about losing gray matter when they drink -- thinking of it as just so many extra cells. Yet, research shows that significant brain development continues through adolescence, and some important connections and functions continue to develop until about age 20. Thus, alcohol may have quite different toxic effects on adolescent brains than on those of adults.

I've often heard people say that college students think they're immortal. Maybe so, and even more so at age 9. The opportunity to educate kids about the toxic effects of substance abuse on their developing brains ought not to be missed.

I've talked about adolescent drinking to point out that many of our students come to college with a drinking problem already in place.... Setting the legal drinking age at 21 may be a good thing, but it doesn't make a very big dent in the problem. The university *is* in a position to take steps. We have a captive audience. There are teachers everywhere you turn. We can work with our students in ways that pay off for the whole community.

In response to the increasingly complex issue of alcohol abuse among college students nationwide, the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, one of 18 institutes that comprise the National Institutes of Health, created the Subcommittee on College Drinking in 1998. Much research and discussion has gone toward addressing this issue.

Let me tell you what we have done at Western. We have discussed and researched too. And we have acted on the research and made a difference. Western has been in the forefront of the effort to address the problem of student binge drinking. And we believe that this model can work well elsewhere.

### Social Norms Media Campaign

Over the last decade, Western has conducted several "lifestyles surveys" of students, to help us to understand the drinking behaviors of our students, and their consequences for students as students. We made some interesting findings, which our Director of Prevention and Wellness Services Pat Fabiano will be talking about in more detail in a session tomorrow.

Our surveys showed that the typical number of drinks a student consumes on a given weekend night is a significant predictor of a Western grade point average! In other words, the more drinks reported, the lower the GPA. This relationship was repeated in analysis of the number of alcohol-related problem behaviors. The data are clear. Students who drink *less* have higher GPA's and fewer behavioral problems.

Self evident? "Of course!", you say, "another research program to demonstrate the obvious." But this is not just research. We *used* these findings to design Project WE CAN: a project involving Social Norms Marketing to students at Western. Project WE CAN is a comprehensive prevention program aimed at correcting misperceptions of alcohol and drug use norms held by all groups on campus and in the surrounding community.

To make a long story short, we published two advertisements per week in the campus newspaper, containing positive images of Western students engaging in

popular student activities. The ads contained accurate statements of campus drinking norms; and they clearly state the source of the data. The slogan in the most recent ad states:

"Most (84%) of Western students drink 0, 1, 2, 3, or at the most 4 drinks when they party." This was up from 66% in 1997.

Upon implementing the campaign in 1997, the subsequent data revealed a 20 percent decrease in the high-risk consumption rate (from 34 percent in 1997 to 27 percent in 1998). The amount of high risk consumption reported in the 1999 follow-up survey decreased from 27 percent to 22 percent, suggesting that individual students who receive multiple years of exposure to a mass media, social norms marketing campaign, may further decrease their high risk drinking. This is very good news for educators!

Students' perceptions of the frequency of high-risk consumption on campus also changed dramatically between 1997 and 1998. The percentage of students who thought other students drank heavily once a week or more decreased from 89 percent in 1997 to 45 percent in 1998.

### Prevention and Wellness

Western has a number of programs for students that support a healthy lifestyle -- and peers say it best. 200 peer Lifestyle Advisors work with the Prevention and Wellness program. We value the resources that students bring to effort. Most importantly, they affirm healthy norms -- our media campaign is example of how well this works.

Many resources are made available to students. We don't hesitate to make students aware of the science of what may seem like just a lifestyle choice.

Areas of interest for alcohol/drug related topics available from the center include:

- Basic information about metabolizing alcohol and its effects.
- Physiological and psychological effects for occasional, moderate or heavy use
- Abuse and Dependency Potential.
- Use norms and expectations about alcohol.
- The biphasic response to alcohol.
- Consequences of use.
- Interaction of alcohol with other drugs.
- Various alcohol skills and strategies for management of personal use and reducing high-risk behavior

## Community Coalition

Another approach we've taken successfully embraces the others who abide in our circular river. We can't do it alone, even for our students! Last year, the mayor of Bellingham and I formalized a community coalition, which involves students, staff, and law enforcement personnel, tavern owners and members of the community including real estate managers who house many of our students. The fact that this is not just another committee is clear -- we actually have people volunteering to be part of this action-oriented coalition. They are working to establish effective working relationships and open communication among key campus and community representatives involved in the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse and related violence. We believe this partnership will contribute to the social and academic well being of students and to peaceful relationships between students, neighboring communities, and law enforcement in the neighborhoods adjacent to the University.

## Presidents' Initiative

Finally, last year, I initiated a statement of commitment, signed by 22 college and university presidents in Washington, to address alcohol and other drug abuse, the academic, social, health and legal consequences thereof, and to support collaboration among us all to support our efforts. A program of training resulted, and 20 campuses sent teams to learn how to build better coalitions for cross campus--community work.

I feel good about what Western has accomplished. Alcohol abuse is a societal problem, and if our survey results make us look better, we can feel we've contributed to a solution -- hopefully a long-term solution for those students who change their behavior as a result of our intervention. But we can't be smug. We still have students who abuse alcohol -- Each one of them is a challenge to us to do better.

## CONCLUSION

I'd like to leave you with these points about prevention, which I view as an important focus for a sustainable future.

1. Our universities can be a big help -- faculty and staff are a tremendous resource that state and community level planners can use.
2. Students are also a remarkable resource -- at Western our students provide community service on a regular basis -- at last count, almost 900,000 hours of service in one year. Their involvement is good for all of us.
3. There is new hope in the field -- we are paying attention to people who have positive behaviors. The promising results on Western's campus should lift our spirits! And in the larger frame, the fact that Nike sees a market in promoting life-long sports is not lost on us. For preventers like us, it's free advertising.

Primary Prevention is a bargain for public policy makers. There can be no doubt that it is cheaper in the long run to *prevent* the behaviors that cause disease and social problems than to *treat* them. Our universities can assist in your toughest job -- linking your efforts to what you've ***prevented*** -- through assessment and evaluation.

And all of us will benefit from your success. Thank you for your efforts.