

Q&A WITH JOHN D. WILEY

John D. Wiley, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is the 27th leader of the university. He assumed office Jan. 1, 2001. From 1994 to 2000, Wiley served as the university's provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs. From 1989 to 1994, Wiley was dean of the UW-Madison Graduate School and the university's senior research officer. From 1986 to 1989, he served as associate dean for research in the College of Engineering. Since 1996 UW-Madison has participated in A Matter of Degree (AMOD): The National Effort to Reduce High-Risk Drinking Among College Students, a national initiative of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

As provost and now as chancellor, you have been leading the effort to curb high-risk drinking among your students. What made you decide to speak out on this issue?

A: It was a combination of things. We had one of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grants to address high-risk drinking among the students. When the director of our health service, who was the principal investigator of that grant, left the university he asked me if I would take over. I suddenly found myself in charge of a program that I hadn't started. I was already aware that high-risk drinking was a very serious health and safety problem on campus as it is on every big campus, probably every campus of any size. It appeared to me that this project had engaged the community in a lot of discussion, but there was too much talk and not enough action. There weren't any concrete, specific initiatives. I thought if I'm going to do this, I'd like to do something that will get

people's attention and make a difference and pass the project off to the next person with some concrete accomplishments under its belt. And that's what I tried to do.

You've talked about wanting to change attitudes both on and off campus, stating that some try to trivialize the problem of high-risk drinking, while others ignore it entirely. How have you addressed this problem?

A: In a variety of ways. This issue benefits from staying on people's radar. In other words,



most anything that we can do to publicize that this is a problem that people should be thinking about, talking about and trying to address is positive. We did a few things—held meetings jointly with local tavern owners, made proposals that we knew were going to be provocative or controversial, and generated a fair bit of community discussion. I started attending city council meetings and meetings of our alcohol license review committee, which surprised people. We decided to testify whenever an alcohol license in our neighborhood came up for review or whenever someone requested a new license. We began meeting with the applicants

for new or renewed licenses to discuss with them any concerns we had about their particular establishment or about the problem in general. As a result we've managed to get quite a number of local establishments to engage in more responsible alcohol service.

What strategies are you using to reduce the problem of students' high-risk drinking?

A: We focus on the environment—literally everything associated with this issue. We remind alumni that it's not terribly helpful if the only thing that they talk about and laugh about and remember about their college days was how drunk they got and how much fun they had at parties where multiple kegs of beer were consumed and that sort of thing. That's part of the environment. Another part is the onslaught of alcohol advertising, such as the number of establishments that advertise drink specials and things said in the student newspapers that tend to trivialize or laugh at alcohol-related behavior. We called attention to the amount of money spent on cleaning up vandalism after Friday and Saturday nights.

We are not naïve enough to think that any one measure is going to solve this problem once and for all. I suspect that it will never be solved completely. You address problems incrementally and hope to get some improvement. If we make a hundred changes and each one makes an almost trivial difference and almost all those differences are in the same direction, it will add up to something. That's our strategy.

What results, both on and off campus, have you seen in response to your efforts?

A: Last year, we got a couple dozen of the local tavern owners to agree to a voluntary ban

on drink specials, such as “2 for 1” or “buy a shot, get a free beer.” We’ve been keeping tabs on police reports for about the past six months since the ban went into effect. The ban is in effect Friday and Saturday nights only. We tried to include Thursdays, but they didn’t. Those who run the project released interim data that shows some positive improvements. It is promising interim data; I am not personally convinced that it’s statistically convincing, but it seems to be pointing in the right direction.

Do you have the support of faculty and others in administration? If so, how did you build that support?

A: I didn’t really have to build support because there was a great deal of pent-up concern and emotion about these problems. Almost as soon as I started speaking out, I began getting letters and e-mails from faculty and staff and parents, with horrifying stories about what happened to their kids or to the students in their classes. I haven’t received a single e-mail or letter or personal communication from any university employee that was critical of our efforts. Most of the messages have been personal stories and “keep up the good work.” But it’s a different reaction when it comes to students and tavern owners. The most vocal students say that this is something akin to prohibition; that the university shouldn’t have a position on it; that consuming alcohol, at least if you’re 21, is legal, and therefore we should just stay out of it. By banning drink specials, we’re raising their cost of living.

Every measure that we suggest generates hypothetical negative consequences. For example, we’re told that if we do things to make it more expensive or less convenient to drink heavily in bars, we will force students to drink at house parties that are even more unsafe. So, we’re also trying to address house parties. But, I would rather be doing something than just

sitting around saying that this problem is too hard and we can’t do anything about it.

The university has provided alcohol-free alternatives for its students.

How have students responded to these options?

A: The first time we had an alcohol-free party, which was heavily advertised, about a dozen or fewer students showed up. We have 41,000 students on campus, so I think that would have to be declared a flop. But we persevered. The second time it was more like 100 and the third time it was several hundred, and now our alcohol-free dances and parties and events get very good attendance. It just took a while to catch on. But this won’t solve the problem. By and large these events draw the students who never were a big part of the high-risk drinking culture. They’re looking for an alternative where they won’t be harassed or thrown up on or assaulted by drunks.

What kinds of policies and action would you like to see at the local and state levels to address the problems of high-risk drinking and other drug use among students?

A: On this campus, high-risk drinking is a problem so much greater than other drug use that I would stay focused on alcohol for now. I would like to see a broad ban on either sales or advertising practices—such as drink specials—that encourage or enable people to drink more than they intended to. The Tavern League is opposed to this for partly pragmatic and partly ideological reasons. They think they are regulated enough already and don’t need more government interference on how they run their business. I can sympathize with that attitude. On the other hand, if nobody could have drink specials then it would no longer be a competitive advantage for anyone. In fact,

I think a good case could be made that they actually could be more profitable businesses if they didn’t have to offer such deep discounts trying to outdo each other in lower prices. We will wait to see how our pilot project goes with the voluntary restraint. If we have good enough evidence about reduced problems, maybe we can convince them.

What are some obstacles that you have faced in addressing students’ alcohol and other drug use at the University of Wisconsin?

A: It’s mainly attitudinal. A fraction of the students here and everywhere feel that the “Animal House” experience is almost a right of people their age. They think it’s a “rite of passage,” something to look forward to and enjoy, free of consequences, and that we shouldn’t do anything to interfere with that right. I’m not saying this is a prevalent view, but enough students seem to feel this way that it has been the closest thing we have had to an obstacle to making progress. I won’t say that we have overcome it. We have probably bifurcated the student body a little bit. In other words, if it was a bell-shaped curve of drinking habits, with most people somewhere in the middle and a few at the two extremes—the complete teetotalers and those who drink heavily every day—my guess is that the middle has gone away and we have a larger number of heavy drinkers and a larger number of abstainers. I can’t prove that, but that’s my sense.

Do you have any advice for other academic leaders on how to become more involved in preventing high-risk drinking and other drug use by students?

A: Sure, just jump in and get started.