

**The “Reign of Error” in Student-Athlete Alcohol Use: A Multi-Site Study at Institutions of
Higher Education in the United States**

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Abstract

Although student-athletes are more likely to engage in alcohol misuse compared to other students in college, case studies have suggested that this subgroup may also misperceive their athlete peers as engaging in more risky drinking than is the reality. This presentation presents research examining this phenomenon and its negative effect as a general pattern among student-athletes in higher education. Data were collected in an anonymous online survey conducted between Fall 2001 and spring 2007 (N= 3,756) at 13 institutions in 12 states across the U.S. Students most commonly overestimated the alcohol consumption norms (both quantity and frequency) in every instance. Students’ perception of their peer athlete drinking norm was one of the strongest predictors of the amount of alcohol personally consumed. Perception of the peer athlete drinking norm was also a much stronger predictor of personal use than the variation observed in actual norms across schools. These data on student-athletes extend the evidence that peer drinking norms are grossly misperceived and that misperceptions produce a highly detrimental “reign of error.” The data also suggest that student-athletes will benefit from implementing intervention strategies that can reduce their misperceptions.