



CHAPTER 8

Advice for Established and Emerging College AOD Misuse Prevention Professionals: A Conversation with Dolores Cimini, University at Albany

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—Dolores Cimini, Director, Center for Behavioral Health Promotion and Applied Research, University at Albany

In this final chapter of the guide, we provide an inside look at the lessons learned by a prevention professional with a history of addressing AOD misuse among college students. We provide advice for both established and new professionals.

For over 30 years, Dolores Cimini has been a mentor in the field of college AOD misuse prevention. Based at the University at Albany, one of the university centers of the 64-campus State University of New York system, Cimini has spent her career working directly with students. She has produced numerous peer-reviewed public health studies and is the co-editor of *Promoting Behavioral Health and Reducing Risk Among College Students: A Comprehensive Approach* (2018). Cimini currently runs the award-winning Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program at the University at Albany and is the director of the Center for Behavioral Health Promotion and Applied Research.

Cimini is passionate about teaching and educating emerging professionals, and she is a well-loved educator in the School of Education at the University at Albany. She is also excited about the changes in the field of prevention: **“We have steadily moved beyond traditional counseling services toward early intervention and universal intervention that reflect a true public health approach and engages the entire campus.”**

Cimini’s hard-earned advice is offered below.

For Established Professionals

Dealing With Changes in Upper Administration

In her long tenure at the University at Albany, Cimini has worked under 13 university presidents. AOD issues are a charged issue on campus, and the fear of an unsupportive upper administrator is shared by many who do prevention work in these spaces.

Cimini offers advice for weathering changes in transition:

“When new presidents come in, by and large, they have a lot on their plate. They are learning about a new campus, meeting new people—their time is at a premium.”



In response, Cimini and her team introduce themselves while remaining in the background. “We want new administrators to know that they have a program on their campus that is running well and moving forward,” she says. “We let them know that we’d love to talk to them about our program, but we know they have a lot on their plate right now. When we do that, we’ve found that they are not as concerned, and they let us do our work.”

Cimini has found that using this approach establishes the competency of her office up front and also provides concrete data and program information for the president when they do have the time to meet with her and her team. Says Cimini, “When new administrators come visit, we provide a more comprehensive, data-driven picture of what we are doing. We also make it clear to them what support from their office looks like so they aren’t guessing about how they can help us or inform our work.”

Diversify Funding and Share Ownership to Embed Prevention into the Lifeblood of the Campus

For professionals who have worked to establish a successful AOD misuse prevention program on their campus, Cimini offers methods for integrating programming into the day-to-day functioning of campus: “We look for ways to engage the whole campus: This is not the job of one office.”

Cimini points to two areas for established professionals to pursue to ensure their prevention work remains central to the campus:

1. **Diversification of resources:** “As part of their budget, many new prevention professionals may get some funding to implement strategies or programs. It’s important not to just rely on that one funding source,” Cimini explains. “If one is working in a grant-funded program, it’s important to not depend on that. Grants come and go, and budgets can be higher or lower depending on the particular academic year or institution. It’s important to look for other sources of not only funding support but also looking at how to sustain funding you do have.” One program that has benefited from this approach is the [Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program](#), which is supported by a wide range of campus partners, including Student Affairs, Academic Departments and Student Government.
2. **Connection to academics:** Another method Cimini uses at the University at Albany is to foster links between prevention programming and academics. She points again to the 50-year lifespan of the Middle Earth Peer Assistance Program as an example: “We’ve linked ourselves with the School of Education and are able to offer 3 credit hours each semester to students who participate in the Middle Earth Program. It’s wonderful because the students benefit, the university benefits, and our program benefits.” In the 2019-2020 academic year, Middle Earth had 157 student peer assistants and peer educators, a testament to the value of the program for all on campus.

Using Data to Stay Abreast of Emerging Drug Issues

From cocaine in the 1980s to the rise of ecstasy and other club drugs in the 1990s to the misuse of prescription medications as study aids starting in the early 2000s, Cimini has seen a lot of trends in drug use over the course of her 30 years at the University at Albany. Throughout it all, she says, the popularity of cannabis has remained unchanged: “College students tend to believe that cannabis isn’t harmful and that perception has remained constant over time.”

So how does Cimini handle changes in drug popularity at the University at Albany? “We value data and collection of data. We also rely on receiving valuable information from our peer leaders since they work directly with the students,” Cimini says. “They serve as our eyes and ears for what’s happening on campus.”

Cimini also stresses the importance of data analysis as a key part of the process, explaining that she has seen many colleagues collect data but then have challenges with finding the resources and expertise for data analysis. She acknowledges that she is lucky: “We have a graduate program with students and faculty who are interested in this area.”

For those who are struggling to find help with data analysis, Cimini suggests, “Partner with faculty on your campus who may be interested in data collection and analysis, even if it’s a slightly different field. The skills are transferable, and it’s a win-win for everyone since you’re all working to build a healthier campus.”

Working toward Holistic Prevention

Cimini is sympathetic and attuned to the many challenges facing college students today:

We can’t deny that college students are coming to campus with much more complex substance use and co-occurring mental health challenges. As a result, what we are seeing is an increased number of students who are facing potentially dropping out of school, stopping out of school, not graduating, or not moving into the workforce as has historically been the case. In addition to that, college students, particularly those at many public universities, are facing challenges such as financial concerns, food insecurity, or not being able to afford professional clothing when they do get job interviews. At times students need to decide between going to classes and doing their classwork as a top priority or needing to work and hold on to some role in supporting their families.

As research has shown, financial stressors and mental health conditions are risk factors for substance misuse.

With that in mind, Cimini believes in fostering partnerships and developing a comprehensive holistic approach to prevention. She explains, “Our goal is not necessarily to chase the drug when we are developing interventions but to see what the bigger issues are, the environmental issues, and hold on to what the best practices are at the individual, campus, and policy levels.”

Cimini currently works with departments across campus to find ways to reduce the impact of risk factors, from establishing supports for first-generation college students to supporting the university’s growing initiatives around mindfulness and well-being programming aimed at reducing student stress and anxiety on campus.

Innovate Using Evidence-Based Programs as a Framework

For established prevention professionals, the list of evidence-based AOD misuse prevention programs is well known. Conducting screening and brief intervention programs, establishing alcohol-free spaces on campus, and advocating for increased enforcement of AOD policies are the backbone of campus prevention programming. For many prevention professionals, implementing evidence-based prevention programs and policies comprises the majority of their efforts for their first 5 to 10 years on campus.

Once those key evidence-based programs have been established, however, Cimini encourages professionals to innovate using the principles central to the success of evidence-based prevention programming. For example, her office received a federal grant to work with fraternity and sorority students on establishing a BASICS-like screening and brief intervention program. Fraternity and sorority leaders involved in the program's creation advocated for the program to highlight fraternity and sorority values around shared identity, brotherhood/sisterhood, and campus reputation, in addition to providing individual and aggregate alcohol use feedback and alcohol expectancy data for each fraternity or sorority compared to all fraternities and sororities.

While the program looks like BASICS and uses motivational interviewing principles in its approach, it's entirely designed to fit the needs of the population. "We have to be willing to adapt our interventions, while keeping fidelity in mind, to meet our target population's needs and to be responsive to their cultures," Cimini explains.

For New Professionals

Understand Your Campus's History around AOD Issues

Taking the time to dive into your new campus's past efforts at addressing AOD issues is well worth the effort, says Cimini. "You are walking into a living history," she explains. "To conduct effective prevention, you must understand how your campus has worked with these issues in the past. What types of programs have they tried? How did the campus respond? How much support has the person working on these issues received in the past? Why is that? What resources has the program had in order to operate?"

New professionals can gain a valuable perspective on the history of AOD misuse prevention on their campuses by using archival data, such as student newspapers, to learn how AOD use has been reported over time, along with conducting interviews with long-time campus leaders.

In addition, Cimini advocates establishing a linkage with your primary supervisor and other campus leaders: "It's really important to work with your supervisor or director to get the history and guidance of where your challenges may be and brainstorm how to address them. How did the program that I'm going to run in the next few years get to where it is? And what can I do to contribute to it in a unique way?"

Go on a Listening Tour

Along similar lines, Cimini recommends taking a semester to conduct what she calls “listening tours” with your likely stakeholders. She recommends not only talking to faculty leaders and student life department heads but also interviewing student leaders and conducting focus groups with students who are traditionally considered “high risk” based on research. Learning how these groups of students have traditionally viewed the work of the AOD misuse prevention office is imperative before embarking on new prevention programming. Just as important is learning how the office has traditionally worked with faculty and other campus departments.

For example:

- » **How do faculty feel about the work you’re doing?**
- » **Are there clear lines of communication between faculty and the AOD office?**
- » **How have other student life departments worked with the AOD misuse prevention office in the past?**
- » **What types of initiatives do student life departments and faculty want for students around AOD issues?**

Don’t Rush into Programming—Take Your Time

As a professional who has mentored generations of prevention professionals, Cimini understands the zeal of newly minted professionals to get started with the important work of crafting a prevention program. However, she cautions against jumping right in without doing a comprehensive needs assessment: “It can be tempting to start right in with prevention programming, but it’s important for us to really understand our stakeholders and target population groups, understand their cultures and their concerns, and be open and responsive to that.”

For new professionals who may be worried that they might be viewed as ineffective if they don’t rush into enacting programs, Cimini recommends keeping key stakeholders engaged in your needs assessment and strategic planning processes. She says, “It’s really important to have a mind-set of collaboration with any stakeholder, not only how to collaborate with them, but to assess the strengths that they will be bringing to your work. Ideally, you want to place them in a position that will capitalize on their strengths. That may take some time to figure out. Don’t feel rushed.”

A Final Note

Like many others who have been in the field for years, Cimini is continually impressed by the quality and passion of new prevention professionals, saying, “We have come so far in how we understand these issues on campus, and there is a great deal of talent coming into these positions. It’s a truly exciting time for AOD prevention on campus!”