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The misuse of alcohol and other drugs is a major contributor to the global burden of disease. Substance use prevention programs grounded in evidence aim to stop people from misusing alcohol and drugs before they start. As Benjamin Franklin famously advised his fellow Philadelphians in the early 1700's, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. For it is much easier to prevent a problem than it is to try and fix one after it occurs.

Students today need healthy coping strategies to navigate life's challenges. Early prevention programs in schools equip students with the practical tools and skills they can use throughout their lives to increase emotional health and well-being. At Millersville University, where I teach, first-year college students are provided an opportunity to study success strategies that promote wellness and explore harm reduction strategies that keep students safe.

In class, students investigate a wide range of individual and public health concerns that explore the perceived informal and unwritten rules that define human behavior within a given group or community known as [social norming](#). They identify different ways unrealistic expectations can drive high-risk and dangerous behaviors such as binge drinking and alcohol poisoning on college campuses; and analyze how risky these

behaviors get fueled by social media, advertising, movies, and “tall tales” from older friends and siblings.

Unfortunately, excessive substance misuse during college is associated with numerous [negative outcomes](#) that include lower academic performance, higher probability of unemployment after graduation, and increased risks of committing and experiencing sexual assault. Research suggests the [first six weeks](#) of the new semester is especially fraught with significant risks for students because of heightened demands of academics, work, family obligations, and a new social life that can make students vulnerable.

A core component within the general education program at Millersville University is college-specific harm reduction strategies. Students in our Wellness courses focus not only on financial, emotional, physical, spiritual, and environmental health, but dig deep into the protective strategies that support college student needs. These protective factors can help to negate the daily messages students receive that tell them excessive alcohol and other drug use is normal, even healthful—as addiction becomes increasingly normalized and more concerning. Across Pennsylvania and around the country there is a growing demand for [prevention education](#) and [state-funded initiatives](#) that seek to lower morbidity (illness) and mortality (death) rates caused by substance use related disorders. This is why I was drawn to Compass Mark, because of their ongoing work with early prevention education.

I recognize that a comprehensive approach to prevention must take place long before our students graduate high school and enter college. Prevention needs to occur throughout the K-12 academic experience. By preparing students during their developmental phases of growth, student decision-making, communication, and healthy coping strategies can thrive later in life. Furthermore, social and emotional approaches to prevention are [more effective than scare tactics](#) and graphic depictions that some adults might believe work better.

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[Adult and teen brains work differently](#). It is not until the mid-20s that the brain finishes developing and maturing. Research has shown teens process information through the amygdala, or the emotional part of the brain whereas adults think with the prefrontal cortex, or the rational part. Therefore, it is critical that students receive prevention education that is appropriate to their developmental needs and facilitated by experts who understand these characteristics.

Many teens embrace risk-taking. It is a normal part of their adolescent development. Protective factors such as participation in safe and healthy recreational activities and clubs, groups, and programs like Compass Mark's [Leaders of Future Generations](#) can create belonging through shared goals which help to counteract adolescent risk-taking. Participation in these programs builds personal resiliency, increases self-awareness, and motivates students to think through the decisions they make.

Other programs facilitated by Compass Mark include [Positive Action](#), a school-based curriculum designed for elementary, middle, and high school that gives students practical skills and knowledge they need to make healthy, responsible choices. Students enrolled in Positive Action learn to identify how thoughts, feelings, and actions are interconnected. They also learn foundational coping skills which can [decrease the risk of developing a substance use disorder](#) in the future and improve overall health throughout the lifespan. In addition to these programs, Compass Mark offers other evidence-based prevention that teach refusal skills to resist peer-pressure for e-cigarettes and vaping, and support programs for students exposed to trauma.

Because of these early prevention programs available through Compass Mark, and academic wellness courses like those offered at Millersville University, local students can acquire the skills and tools to take on life's challenges and positively respond to daily stressors when they arise.

About the Author

Jeffrey Wimer, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Wellness & Sport Sciences at Millersville University and member of the Board of Directors at Compass Mark. His research interests include Prevention—an interdisciplinary field that seeks to decrease risk factors and increase protective behaviors for individuals, schools, and community.

At Millersville, Dr. Wimer teaches a mix of undergraduate and graduate courses for student majors in Sport Administration, Sports Medicine, Pre-Athletic Training, and the first-year Wellness course. He studied Alcohol and other Drug Counseling at Villanova University and earned his K-12 Teaching Certificate in Health from Slippery Rock University. He holds national certifications and state licensure as an Athletic Trainer—the healthcare specialists for athletes and physically-active populations. At Compass Mark, he serves as the Program Committee chair to the Board.

