

PRESIDENTIAL PROFILES

Sidney Ribeau

Bowling Green State University

Sidney A. Ribeau, Ph.D., became the ninth president of Bowling Green State University in 1995. Ribeau has served on the faculty for the National Institute on College Student Values and is on the advisory board of the new electronic Journal on College and Character. Ribeau received his bachelor's degree from Wayne State University in 1971. In 1996, WSU honored him with a Distinguished Alumnus Award. He earned master's and doctoral degrees in interpersonal communication from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in 1973 and 1979, respectively.

Q: Bowling Green State University has taken an innovative approach to the problem of high-risk drinking among its students. What kinds of programs have been developed at BGSU?

A: We are very proud of our program to correct peer misperceptions, which Terry Rentner and Chris Hagman run. It has brought a lot of campuswide visibility among the faculty because one of their own is doing some very important research that's not only scholarly but also addressing important social problems.

We have a referral program run by the Wellness Connection, a part of the Student Health Services area of the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services. This relatively new campus program allows us to refer students who may have problems to the appropriate support services available to them.

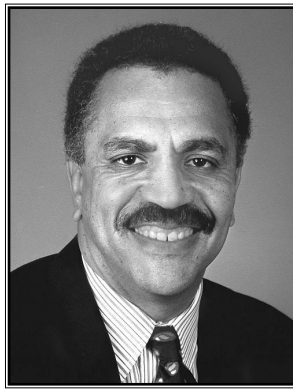
Alcohol education is a main topic for the orientation programs in interfraternity and Panhellenic councils. The strategy is to target the fraternities and the sororities, which are a major core of campus life and social life. We now have two alcohol-free fraternities, and other fraternities are considering going alcohol-free. Our judicial affairs office has been very active on the enforcement side of this issue.

As a result of these programs in the last two years or so, people have come to realize that high-risk drinking and the problems that go along with it are a campuswide responsibility.

Q: What level of support have you seen as a result of your efforts?

A: There has been a great deal of support—of course, not as much as I would like. There has been a lot of discussion among the faculty, staff, and students. I meet regularly at my home with groups of 25 to 30 students to just talk about issues. Students were reluctant at first, but now are willing to talk about these problems and what needs to be done.

In addition, the faculty has begun to make the connection between



high-risk drinking as a social problem and as an academic issue. That was an important connection to make. Student drinking is not just a problem for student affairs; it's also an academic problem because a student's ability to perform in class is compromised. Our responsibility to students is the development of the whole person. Now that we have had these discussions for a few years, it's now seen as a universitywide concern.

Q: How have you been able to gain faculty and staff support for your program?

A: A couple of faculty members were real leaders. For example, Dr. Carolyn Palmer, a faculty member in the College of Education, had one of her graduate courses in higher education look at this issue and come up with strategies for things we could do. In addition, in May 1999, some faculty members became part of a President's Committee on Campus because they saw this as an important issue. Then Dr. Palmer presented results from a survey on campus civility and the impact of a number of factors on civility. It showed that high-risk drinking played a large role.

We were able to get a faculty group together because they were very concerned about civility, particularly in classrooms, where students were falling asleep or displaying belligerent and aggressive behavior. Often those behaviors could be traced back to high-risk drinking and abuse of alcohol. In addition to student affairs, a campus civility committee was looking at some issues that were important to the teaching and learning environment at Bowling Green.

Initially the group was asked to establish a forum to talk about the kind of environment—the atmosphere in the classroom, outside the classroom, throughout our entire environment—that we would like at Bowling Green State University, and then to extend that discussion to

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Funded by the U.S. Department of Education,
with supplemental funding from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
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include what we should be doing in our academic program, in our advising program, and in our clubs and organizations to reinforce the values that are really important to our university. That was the broad scope of the group.

We have a set of core values at the university that we developed through a planning process about four years ago, such as cooperation, respect, and intellectual and spiritual growth. The committee looked at these core values and was quickly able to identify activities or behaviors that varied from them. Excessive drinking, high-risk drinking, and substance abuse, in general, became very important factors deflecting us from what we were trying to accomplish as an institution.

Q: How have you been able to establish student support for your program? You mentioned that you meet regularly at home with small groups of students.

A: Meeting with students has been very effective. And our undergraduate student government leaders have become involved. For example, last year's president for undergraduate student government was very active in his fraternity as a leader in interfraternity activities. I've tried to link high-risk drinking and its effects and to challenge students as leaders to take on this issue. We have over 200 clubs and organizations on campus and have used these existing structures to link student leaders with the kind of campus environment that we want to have.

We established a Committee on Visions and Values. This is the old civility committee with an extended scope, looking at what values should determine the direction of the university and what's important and right and wrong on our campus.

But not all the students have embraced these values. There have been some voices saying, "You shouldn't be telling me what to do." But other voices say that we want to stand for something as an institution. So it has been very healthy. The campus newspaper, *BG News*, has taken on and discussed the issue of values, behavior, and high-risk drinking, which has helped broaden the forum.

Q: How does an environmental approach to alcohol prevention advance your goals of campus civility?

A: The vision statement at Bowling Green says that it aspires to become a premier learning community. An environmental approach to prevention is commensurate with the idea of community. It's like community policing in law enforcement and community-based schooling in public schools. A problem that is as deeply engrained in our culture as alcohol abuse is not going to be resolved by conducting a few workshops in the residence halls or having a meeting once a month to talk about these things.

You need to have more of a community base, and that's where the environmental approach comes in. We need to work inside the class-

room and outside the classroom. We need to have the city of Bowling Green, public safety personnel, our faculty, our staff, our community-based organizations, and our church groups all collectively taking a new approach to this problem by creating an environment where students can develop the self-esteem required to avoid the pitfalls of alcohol abuse and drugs.

A lot of literature says that many students fall into this trap because of low self-esteem, low self-worth, peer group pressure, the need to belong. If we can give them something to belong to in the environment and in the community, something they can feel good about that is independent of alcohol and drugs, that will lead to not only minimizing or reducing problems of high-risk drinking, but will also help them develop a healthy personality and the self-esteem to keep them on a positive path for the rest of their lives.

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

A: We've been at this for a couple of years, but this is the first year where we actually have some data: The figures show a 2.5 percent reduction in high-risk drinking since 1997, a 2 percent decrease in students who said that they saw drinking as central to the social life on campus, and a 4 percent reduction in the number of students who experienced peer pressure to drink.

We also have a softer measure within our residential housing operation—about 7,000 students out of 18,000 live in our residential facilities. We have almost a 3 percent reduction in citations and alcohol-related violations in the residence halls. I think that is another good sign that those trends have turned in the other direction.

Q: What do you think a university president can bring to bear upon the effort to stem alcohol problems?

A: Rightly or wrongly, what university presidents talk about, a lot of people pay attention to. They might react against it, or they might support it, but university presidents can establish the credibility of an issue simply by talking about it a lot. I think it is essential that in public forums, such as addresses to returning faculty and staff in the fall, or when talking with the students, the board of trustees, or alumni, you make sure it's clear to all that this issue is a concern of yours.

A president can talk about it in the context of the big picture—how it fits into everything the university is doing: research and contracting grants and intercollegiate athletics. There are so many competing issues floating around a college campus at any time. If a president talks about high-risk drinking and abuse of alcohol and other drugs, it can be done within the context of the priorities of the institution and seen not just as a sore on the life of the university, but as an essential issue that must be addressed if the university is to fulfill its potential.