Anti-drug official eyes NU plan

Dr. Bertha Madras, deputy director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy’s Demand Reduction Office, recently met with university health officials to gauge the success of an alcohol screening and intervention program here.

Under consideration is Northeastern’s BASICS (Brief Alcohol Screening and Intervention of College Students) program, a risk-assessment program run by the University Health and Counseling Services and the Institute on Urban Health Research.

The program, funded through a $500,000 annual grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, offers students a way of assessing their alcohol and drug use patterns in a nonjudgmental way, said Hortensia Amaro, director of the urban health institute.

Students participating in the survey are asked questions about their conduct as they relate to alcohol and drugs. Students are asked to think about their behavior in their cars, while relaxing, while alone, or with friends and family. They are also asked about their level of forgetfulness, according to a press release.

A registered nurse interventionist also conducts brief interviews to help flag students who have developed drug dependence or other mental health problems. Those found to have severe alcohol or drug problems are referred to campus counselors or collaborating treatment programs.

The effort is aimed at filling a gap in alcohol/drug education, said Amaro.

“There’s been a gap in attention paid to older students,” she said. “It’s fairly common for a college student to develop a drug or drinking problem once they get into college, but most outreach and education occurs in the lower grades, in middle school.”

It is important that the college student not be forgotten in process because so much is at stake.

Noting that binge drinking can lead to poor grades, academic discipline, problems with the law and other debilitating issues, Amaro said this program will help to identify at-risk students.

So far, approximately 400 students have participated in the survey. Administrators hope to enroll 1,500 in total. Each is paid $60 for participating, Amaro said.

A spokesman for Madras said the Northeastern program could be used to help set larger, national policy.

Philomena Mantella, senior vice president of enrollment management and student life, said she is proud Northeastern is taking a strong leadership position on an important national issue. “I am pleased that our university and health and counseling center is partnering with the institute for urban health under the leadership of Dr. Amaro to examine ways to address alcohol use among college students,” Mantella said.

— Susan Salk