Virtual Training Tool Targets Underage Drinking at Colleges

Alcohol misuse among college students is a persistent public health problem. With funding from the [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)](#), [SIMmersion](#) announces the development of a state-of-the-art virtual training tool to empower resident advisors (RAs) to talk about underage drinking with their fellow students and uncover risky drinking tendencies before they escalate.

Columbia, MD ([PRWEB](#)) January 21, 2014 -- Resident Advisors (RAs) on college campuses often find themselves striking an uneasy balance between conflicting roles. Ideally, they are supposed to act as friendly mentors to their student peers, helping them navigate the complex social environment of a college campus. But, embedded as they are in the same halls where students live, they also have authoritative duties as the first line of policing and response for episodes of underage drinking or risky drinking.

As students themselves, the authority, experience and training RAs can bring to bear in an alcohol-related crisis is limited. A focus group of RAs convened at Northwestern University identified a strong need for additional training in how to talk to students about alcohol and identify problem situations before they escalate. In response to this need, [SIMmersion](#) announces the development of an innovative virtual training tool to help RAs practice strategies for talking about alcohol with their residents before dangerous or illegal drinking occurs.

With funding from the [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)](#) and support from experts at Brown University, Northwestern University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Pathways Research in Canada, SIMmersion will create an e-learning solution for RAs centered on a realistic role-play conversation with a virtual resident, Alison Monroe. Users of the simulation will learn to talk about alcohol in a natural way, peer-to-peer. RAs can practice talking honestly about drinking to find a supportive middle ground between praising and condemning the behavior. If warning signs about alcohol misuse appear, RAs will be able to get experience referring Alison to support services to preempt further harm.

SIMmersion's groundbreaking [PeopleSim](#) conversation engine will govern Alison's behavior in the simulation and make each conversation unique. Alison's personality, mood and statements will vary with each play, better preparing RAs for the variety of students they will encounter.

PeopleSim provides virtual characters with three key features:
•	An array of different personalities that vary from play to play, so conversations feel fundamentally different
•	A realistic emotional model driven by the positive and negative things the user says in the conversation
•	A memory of what's been said so far in the conversation, regardless of the order in which users went through the topics

Every time the user says something to Alison, a dynamic filtering process takes place to determine how she responds. On average, she will have three to twelve possible responses scripted for every statement the user can make. PeopleSim weighs her personality, her current emotional attitude towards the user and her memory of what's already been said to assign probabilities to each of the possible responses. A roll of the dice behind the scenes determines the final selection of a response, just as real people in conversation often change what they plan to say or how they plan to phrase their words right at the last moment. With these three key features

feeding into a dynamic filtering process, PeopleSim produces role-playing characters like Alison who are lifelike and engaging throughout not just one conversation, but many repeated plays.

The virtual conversation with Alison is the core of a training system that also includes robust, user-driven educational materials that RAs can browse as much or as little as they choose to before, during or after the conversation. Alison's responses and tone of voice during the role-play provide very clear feedback about performance, augmented by the nonverbal gestures of an on-screen coach. Detailed advice and hints are available at every exchange during the conversation, weaving the system's educational content into the act of putting skills into practice. A granular after-action review breaks down points of strength and areas for improvement and allows RAs to review the transcript of their conversation. This integrated learning model merges Knowledge Acquisition, Skill Acquisition and Feedback into a unified system to maximize the impact on users of many learning styles.

By role-playing with Alison, RAs will practice raising the topic of alcohol with their residents in a natural way and suggesting referrals if warning signs appear. In the next phase of the project, SIMmersion will expand its offerings with two new conversations for RAs and separate training systems geared for the needs of Student Affairs staff and faculty advisors who deal with students engaged in risky drinking. By supplying colleges with powerful online training tools to address the underage drinking crisis, SIMmersion can help create a safer future for students nationwide.

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Online Web 2.0 Version
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