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Story 3: Feature Story

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How the Healthy Spartans Duck Became the Most Recognizable Symbol on Campus

If you are a student at Michigan State University who has lived in an on-campus residence hall at some point in the last twenty years, you've probably seen the iconic symbol of spartan safety: a round-bellied white duck with an amiable smile crossing his orange beak.

These ducks are often accompanied by a message encouraging safe behavior, and a statistic about student health that reinforces the message.

These messages can be seen all over campus, plastered in dorm hallways, highlighted in table brochures at campus dining halls and even hung on the backs of bathroom stall doors.

First year student and current resident of Bryan Hall, Brea Sofferman, said she noticed these posters right away, and it captured her attention just as it was supposed to.



“It’s one of those things you can’t help but notice.” She said, “Every time I go to pee or brush my teeth, I make eye contact with the ducks and read the little statistics. It’s actually pretty surprising, you know, some of the information they give.”

While many students are familiar with the duck character, very few are familiar with the history of this campaign, how much research and planning went into its development, and just how successful this campaign has been in improving student safety.

MSU’s Healthy Spartans campaign was conceptualized in the early 2000s during a time period that according to Sandi Smith, MSU professor of communications and Duck Days researcher, “was a time where student culture was fueled by alcohol and partying.”

“MSU had been named a top 10 party school several times in online publications,” said Smith, “And we had also experienced two huge riots in 1998 and 1999 following sporting events that led to student arrests and thousands of dollars in property damage, so there was just this sense that something needed to be done.”

As a result, researchers from the Olin Health Center, the Office for Survey Research, and the Department of Communications came up with a campaign idea that would focus on promoting safer drinking through reframing student perspectives of social norms.

For example, research showed that participants thought the average student drank around 6.4 drinks on a night out, but the actual average was around 5.1 drinks a night. The campaign wanted to fix this perception, and inform students of the truth.

Dennis Martell, Director of Health Promotion at MSU, who headed this project for over 10 years, said “The hope was that informing students about this discrepancy would change their perceptions of how many drinks they felt should be consumed in a night out, and then change their behavior accordingly.”

In 2001, students in an advertising class created a duck mascot for the campaign, and when research showed that students found the duck to be likable and trustworthy, the iconic mascot was born, and the “Duck Campaign” commenced.

Fliers, posters, and brochures were set out all across campus brandishing the ducks, and the results were incredibly positive.

By 2010 the campaign had proved to be vastly successful, with students reporting the perceived amount of drinks consumed in a night to be 5.4, while the actual average was 4.1 drinks consumed.

For a campus that large, with a party culture that big, this was a huge milestone. In 2011, the campaign [won the Pinnacle Award](#) at the PACE awards, a PR award given out by the Public Relations Society of America.

Additionally, in 2013 the campaign won a People's Choice Award. It has been recreated in its own way on several other campuses, such as [University of Virginia](#), [University of Texas at Austin](#), and [Georgetown University](#), who have taken their own spin on the duck mascot, using other mouthpieces for their statistical reporting, such as a Thomas Jefferson cartoon on UVA's campus, or Bruce the Bat at University of Texas.

The Duck Days campaign is still used on MSU's campus today, with several events for students to participate in such as rubber duck hunts, wheel spins for free prizes, and T-shirt giveaways. To this day, students recognize the duck as a symbol of safety, and a beacon of information.

"It's actually a pretty cool concept." Said sophomore student Mia Jones, resident of Landon Hall, "Last year around Halloween they had all these flyers everywhere informing students about medical amnesty and safe drinking habits when you're out partying. I just remember thinking I was glad I knew that, and glad they were spreading information at a time when things can get rowdy."

Updates on the current Duck Campaign activities can be found on Instagram at [@healthyspartans](#).

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