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Clearing the Air: Lower-Risk Cannabis Use on Campus



Helping campuses promote the safer use of alcohol and other drugs.

This is one in a series of resources meant to guide the development of specific tools to promote elements of a comprehensive approach to psychoactive substance use within a post-secondary institution's community.

The current atmosphere around cannabis on Canadian campuses and in surrounding society is hazy. This is partly the result of conflicting messages around the impact of consumption on those who use the substance. Conventional messaging from health organizations and regulatory bodies has tended to emphasize harmfulness (leaving the impression "it's all bad"). Conversely, proponents and defenders of use have accentuated benefits (suggesting "it's all good"). Competing values add further to the haze. For some the use,

production and trade of cannabis ought to be regarded as a right since it poses no clear threat to public welfare. This contrasts with support for a long-standing but recently abandoned policy stance of the federal government that the illegal status of cannabis must be maintained in order to adequately protect Canadians. These conflicting perspectives often leave post-secondary institutions and individuals in a fog about appropriate thinking, messaging, regulation and enforcement related to cannabis.

Understanding Cannabis Use on Campus

This resource aims to dispel some of the haze. It considers the prevalence, motivations for and effects of use, offers some suggestions on content for communication to encourage lower-risk practice among those who choose to use cannabis, and alludes to means through which that messaging can be shared on campus. The guide also points to how attention to campus culture and taking a constructive orientation in policy can contribute to a healthier environment around cannabis. Reference is also made to potentially useful tools for addressing related concerns.



Among those attending Canadian post-secondary institutions that have recently employed the National College Health Assessment (Spring 2013), 16% have reported using cannabis within the past 30 days. This modest prevalence is comparable to a decade ago (Canadian Campus Survey 2004). So most students are not regular cannabis users, and awareness of this can be helpful and assuring for them and their peers, who often assume a higher rate of use among their campus mates.

Post-secondary students who report cannabis use cite a range of motives for doing so. Predominant reasons include:

- enjoyment of effects (feeling good, finding it fun)
- a felt need to conform (to be included, appear cool, relieve social pressure)
- use as a coping mechanism (distraction from problems, being depressed, life concerns)
- experimentation (curiosity, finding out what it is like)
- relief of boredom (something/nothing better to do)
- celebration
- altered perceptions (a different perspective, outlook on the world)
- alleviation of social anxiety (more comfortable, confident, relaxed)
- an aid to sleep and rest

Some of these motivations (e.g., for enjoyment, boredom relief, altered perception, help with sleep) are associated with more frequent use. Some (e.g., coping, assistance in sleeping) are particularly linked with adverse consequences. Other cited prompters of use include the impression of relatively low risk to health, ready availability and being under the influence of alcohol.

Near-term and long-term problems from consumption of cannabis are associated respectively with dose and frequency of intake (especially on the part of those who began regular use at an early age). Mode of intake (e.g., eating, smoking) can be a factor for difficulty in both time frames. Possible near-term (acute) harms include:

- impairment of memory, learning capacity, and psychomotor functioning (for instance, reducing the ability to drive)
- adverse psychological consequences (e.g., increasing anxiety symptoms)
- potential long-term (chronic) harms include:
 - » respiratory difficulties ranging from shortness of breath to regular coughing to persisting bronchitis (with the contribution to cancer being far less demonstrable than in the case of tobacco smoke)
 - » development of dependence (in a small minority of cases)

Cannabis use can impede academic performance and get in the way of opportunities for social interaction and gratifying engagement.

An accurate understanding of the levels of use, the reasons for use and the potential harms that might result provides a clearer foundation for addressing the ambiguities around cannabis. *All in all, the real risk profile for cannabis seems modest when*

compared to alcohol or tobacco despite the illegal status it has had. But it also does not qualify as an entirely innocuous substance as some advocates have claimed. For those who choose to use, whether students or others, the collective insight of various cultures around drug use applies: in short, **not too much, not too often, and only in safe situations.**

Basic Guidance Related to Low-Risk Cannabis Use

Most college students (and employees) decline to use cannabis. A minority, however, do choose to use it for various reasons. While the drug may confer anticipated benefits, its use is associated with some risks and many of the benefits may be attainable in other ways. Basic messaging around cannabis should be simple, honest and elicit critical dialogue among members of the campus community.



What does “not too much” cannabis mean?

The main psychoactive agent in cannabis, THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), can deliver various effects. Those who consume too much cannabis on a given occasion can compromise alertness and dexterity to a degree that leaves them liable to injury or inability to function responsibly. They may also experience anxiety, panic or even paranoia or hallucinations. There are a number of reasons a person may consume more than intended. Drawing attention to ways to avoid using “too much” may be a useful strategy for promoting safer use. These include:

- **Take it slow**—since THC levels are difficult to determine – this is particularly important when

eating baked goods or drinking tea made with cannabis as the effects take longer to be felt

- **Avoid tar and toxins**—inhaling deeply or using cigarette filters or water bongs increase one’s exposure to harmful elements and do not increase the desired effect—a vaporizer may be the safest way to use cannabis
- **Be cautious about “dabbing”**—inhaling heated concentrated extracts – in view of greater exposure to THC, more immediate and intensive effects, and increased risk of excessive dose
- **Know your product**—this is difficult in an unregulated market but familiarity with the strain and the supplier can help

What does “not too often” mean for cannabis?

Patterns of frequent consumption that extend across a period of years are the strongest indicator of use that is likely to result in or at least correlate with more sustained problems for people. Such adverse effects may involve habit formation as well as respiratory and cardio-vascular difficulties, along with greater vulnerability to modest cognitive impairment and to conditions of psychosis (especially for those already more at risk). Suggestions for messaging on “not too often” can include:

- **Use little or none when you’re young**—those who begin to use regularly in early adolescence and continue that pattern through young adulthood are more susceptible to impairment in brain development
- **Use occasionally rather than frequently**—this can facilitate the use of alternative mechanisms for dealing with challenges one is facing in life and preserve the “specialness” of occasions of use
- **Avoid using on a daily or almost daily basis**—long-term habitual exposure lends itself to routine heavier doses and with that the greatest potential for harm

What does “only in safe contexts” mean for cannabis?

As with other drugs, cannabis use is not entirely risk-free. Safe contexts are situations in which there is reduced or minimal chance for use to prove harmful for the person using or for others around them. Examples already mentioned above are obtaining cannabis from a trustworthy source and reducing exposure to tar and toxins as much as possible.

Other contextual factors that influence the level of risk include these:

- Smoking cannabis mixed with tobacco makes efforts to reduce use more difficult and substantially increases the risk of cancer
- The combined impairing effect of using cannabis in combination with alcohol makes the risks associated with each drug more severe than either would be alone

- Cannabis use is a liability when a person needs to maintain strong mental alertness (e.g., to be vigilant or watchful over young children) or be in a physical condition to perform adeptly (e.g., playing a sport)
- Cannabis within 3–4 hours (or longer in the event of high doses) prior to driving can compromise ability behind the wheel
- Using cannabis while alone or in the company of strangers when one is not well acquainted with the effects raises risk of adverse outcomes
- When dealing with a mental illness (or when there is a personal or family history of such difficulties) or a chronic condition, the potential for negative developments from use is increased
- Cannabis use by pregnant women or men middle-aged and up with cardio-vascular problems carries elevated risk
- Wherever it retains an illicit status, using cannabis in locations where one is liable to be detected and detained by law or policy enforcement officials can have severe consequences
- Amateur do-it-yourself operations at home that extract cannabis concentrates (“dabs”) using butane gas risk causing destructive explosions and fires

People might well be encouraged to consider whether use at all is worth the hassle and the risk. For those who do choose to use, especially for those with a history of difficulty or who might be considering use for therapeutic purposes (e.g., to relieve troubling or debilitating symptoms), encouraging them to consult with knowledgeable experts (e.g., credible compassion clubs or trained professionals) might be a useful way to encourage reflection and reduce harm.



What can Campuses do to Promote Low Risk Cannabis Use?

As with alcohol, a combination of interconnected (environmental and individual-focused) initiatives that address various factors of influence on cannabis use will be required to effectively promote safer consumption. In combination with messaging efforts, this will need to include attention to what shapes the campus culture. Social and structural initiatives, strategic practices, programs and policies can all contribute toward enhancing the ethos. Such efforts need to promote social inclusion and shared responsibility as well as focus on risk management and harm reduction.



Getting Messages on Cannabis Out to the Campus Community

Messaging around safer cannabis use can be disseminated in different settings and through various vehicles similar to those employed in communications around low-risk drinking (see the companion piece, *Balancing our Thinking around Drinking*). In light of the lower prevalence of cannabis use, however, message and placement need to be carefully planned. Broad distribution mechanisms might focus on supporting the dominant choices not to use or to use in very limited ways. More targeted messaging, using conversational and motivational approaches, could be used to address those considering use or currently using in potentially harmful ways.

The aim is not to prescribe particular behaviours à la “social marketing” but to enhance critical literacy and action competence, that is, to prompt further reflection, elicit increased intentionality and develop individuals’ capacity to manage their use in a beneficial manner. This entails nurturing a climate of open communication and dialogue within the campus community that encourages members to engage with each other on topics that are considered taboo in some contexts, including discussions about how best to manage cannabis use at a personal level and within the community.

Cultivating a Community of Connectedness and Care

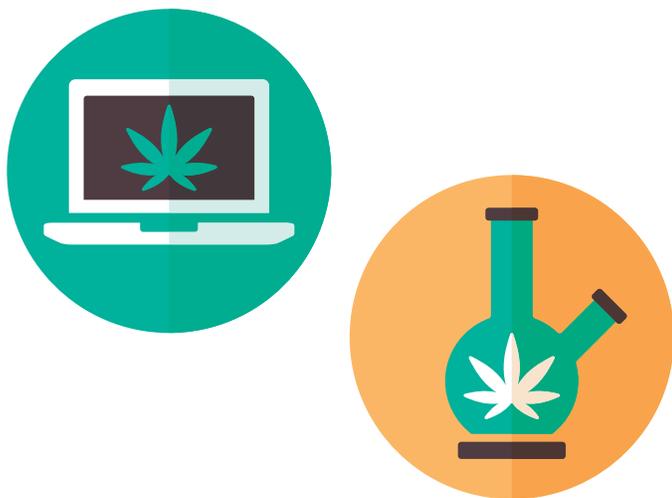
Building a community involves ensuring that all members of the community are connected and that they have opportunities to contribute and to receive care. Initiatives that promote a spirit of openness and exchange are critical to community-building and will nurture a culture that is less conducive to members needing recourse to psychoactive substances such as cannabis in order to deal with alienation or other social ills. Helpful in this regard may be:

- initiatives to facilitate supportive interaction between instructors and students in curricular and non-curricular contexts and that nurture critical thinking and respectful dialogue and debate
- provision of regular means by which campus members can relax and have fun, form positive relationships and develop helpful networks
- opportunities to be involved in voluntary (or credit-earning) service on campus and in the surrounding local community
- institutional support for adaptations of academic demands to relieve harmful stress that may prompt resort to cannabis or other substances

Multidisciplinary collaborative participation among campus members is required for complementary undertakings to have the strongest cumulative impact. Forming a campus community of practice may be useful for cohesive collegial implementation (and Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses is a helpful resource for orientation to this approach and the process of recruiting and activating such a dynamic shared learning and working group).

Mobilizing Knowledge

Post-secondary institutions are settings in which knowledge is generated, shared, leveraged and applied. Within most institutions and communities there will be a rich resource of knowledge related to cannabis and cannabis use. Post-secondary institutions, therefore, have an opportunity to mobilize this knowledge in order to support safe personal practices, helpful professional services, effective institutional and public policies and informed public discourse. By drawing on expertise in the community and giving campus members opportunities to be exposed to, interact with and benefit from various perspectives, institutions can build safer campus communities. This might involve the use of forums, lectures and debates as well as other mechanisms for knowledge dissemination such as accessible information on available services and supports. This could extend to providing information about resources for those who choose to use, including services for engaging in reflective discussion and accessing safer products (e.g., from compassion clubs or other reputable vendors) within a variously regulated marketplace.



Applying Regulatory Measures

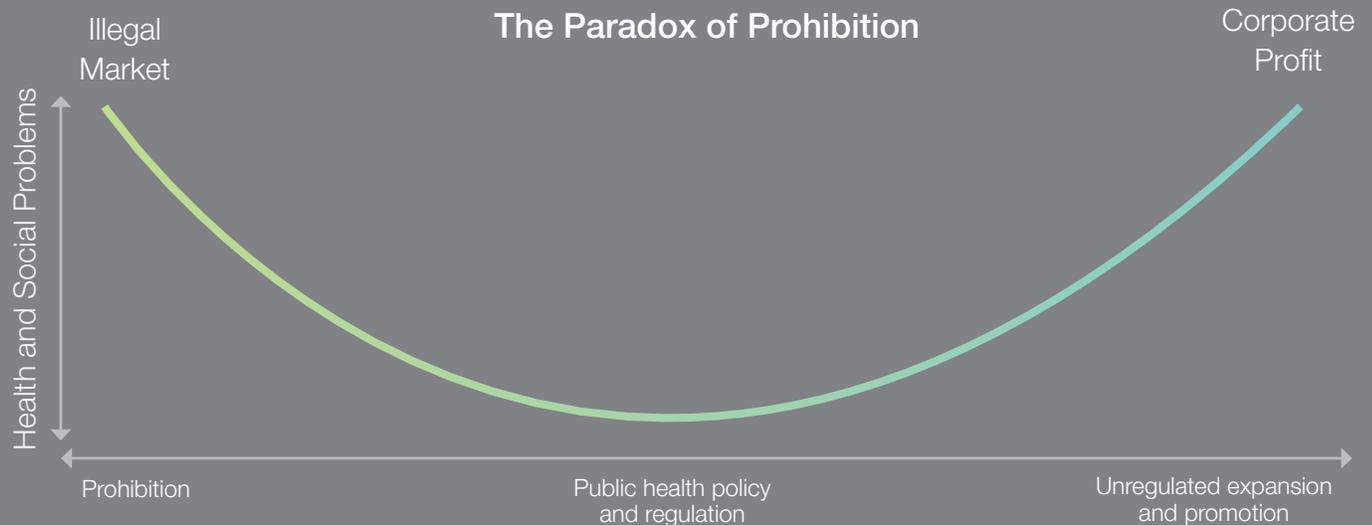
The long-time illegal status of cannabis, in which production, possession and trade has been generally prohibited with non-compliance handled through a punitive criminal justice approach, has posed special challenges for public institutions. An additional challenge relates to the confusion about the medical cannabis regulations. In any event, campus communities are encouraged to critically reflect on their own mandates and responsibilities and to maximize their opportunities to educate and support the members of their communities. Some of these might include opportunities to:

- encourage members of the community to actively participate in developing institutional policies that are instructive rather than punitive in thrust, uphold social justice and promote equity
- review and adapt policies to ensure they promote a comprehensive approach to psychoactive substances that encourages responsible patterns of consumption, regulates supply and access in ways acceptable to the community that minimize harm, and ensures access to a range of services and supports
- give particular attention to appropriate accommodation for cannabis use for therapeutic purposes while protecting the rights of those who choose not to use
- encourage members of the campus community to engage with credible citizen organizations that advocate constructive, evidence-informed approaches to cannabis regulation in Canada (e.g., Students for Sensible Drug Policy, Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, Sensible BC, Health Officers' Council of BC)

Post-secondary institutions, as bodies that receive funding from the public purse, can be expected to promote public order. However, this does not mean that schools are obligated to actively enforce all laws or operate as agents of the state when such laws run counter to the institution's mandate or responsibilities of support to its members.

Food for Thought ...

As the woefully failed international war-on-drugs proves and the curve below illustrates, a rigorous criminalization approach to psychoactive substances which is supposed to reduce adverse outcomes has instead served to increase harms, even as a heavily commercialized consumerist stance tends to do as well. In between these very costly poles of prohibition and of profit-driven easy-access provision, a health conscious strategy which employs judicious regulation offers the best prospect for the lowest overall public experience of negative impacts. Campuses can consider how appropriate restrictions (alongside complementary endeavors to build connectedness and enhance health literacy) rather than wholesale non-allowance of cannabis use could be beneficial and feasible in their context.



Schematic adapted from Marks, J. 1990. "The paradox of prohibition." In *Controlled availability: wisdom or disaster?*

Clearing the Air?

The confusion around cannabis undermines the wellness of the campus community. Clearing the air involves gaining clarity about the available evidence and knowledge, honestly communicating this

through clear messages, engaging the community in critical assessment and meaning-making processes and collectively developing policies and practices that respect the needs and nurture the potential of all members of the community.



Available Tools and Samples to Support Implementation

Learn about cannabis (marijuana)

- www.healthycampuses.ca

Safer cannabis use

- www.heretohelp.bc.ca

Cannabis use and youth: A parent's guide

- www.heretohelp.bc.ca

Australia's National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre

- <https://ncpic.org.au>

Articles

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- Hall, W. (2014). What has research over the past two decades revealed about the adverse health effects of recreational cannabis use? *Addiction*, 110(1), 19-35.

Discussion Papers

- Canadian Public Health Association (2014). *A new approach to managing illegal psychoactive substances in Canada*.
- Health Officers Council of BC (2011). *Public health perspectives for regulating psychoactive substances: what we can do about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs*.

Books

- Babor, T.F., Caulkins, J., Edwards, G., Fischer, B., Foxcroft, D., Humphreys, K. et al. (2010). *Drug policy and the public good*. Oxford, UK: OUP.
- Booth, M. (2003). *Cannabis: a history*. London, UK: Transworld Publishers.
- Earleywine, M. (2007). *Pot politics: marijuana and the costs of prohibition*. New York: OUP.
- Earleywine, M. (2005). *Understanding marijuana: a new look at the scientific evidence*. New York: OUP.
- Holland, J. (Ed.). (2010). *The pot book: A complete guide to cannabis*. Santa Cruz, CA: MAPS (Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies).
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Discussions

- Canadian Public Health Association. Marijuana, is it safe? www.cpha.ca
- Rick Steves. My take on drug policy reform. www.ricksteves.com

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Canadian Mental Health Association
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University of Victoria

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