

## Substance Use Policy on Campus

# A framework for thought and action

Campus policy can be a useful tool in a strategic effort to promote the overall health of the campus community and, in particular, healthy relationships with alcohol and other drugs. This is the first in a series of discussion papers that offers and applies a potential framework for guiding thought and action with regard to substance use policy. It is grounded in the humanistic tradition of higher education and a holistic health promotion approach. Readers are encouraged to carefully consider and discuss the broad theoretical perspective of the frame, and then reflect with colleagues on how that frame might be applied to policies within their own campus community context.

## Thinking about policy for promoting health

Health encompasses “physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1946). At the collective level health manifests itself in such cultural features as equity, widespread literacy, inclusivity, community connectedness and constructive public engagement. As such, health is integral to (rather than just instrumental for) the attainment of post-secondary educational ideals, and a worthy objective for campus policy.

Policy is not the sole determining factor in shaping a culture. Nor is it, on its own, able to ensure the health of the community. Nonetheless, policy is an influential mechanism and can effectively contribute to a healthy campus environment. Policies, to be effective, need not be reactive and specific. Indeed, the most constructive policies tend to proactively set the conditions for healthy living. So, for example, many policies may make no explicit reference to alcohol or other drugs at all but still have a significant influence on use and related harms. However, especially for development of policy that intends to directly address substance use, an understanding of that use and the context for it is important.

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## Substance use: On the global stage and in the campus setting

For thousands of years, people in societies around the world have used psychoactive substances to feel good, to feel better, to do better or to explore. As in the past, substance use in our society still has the capacity to:

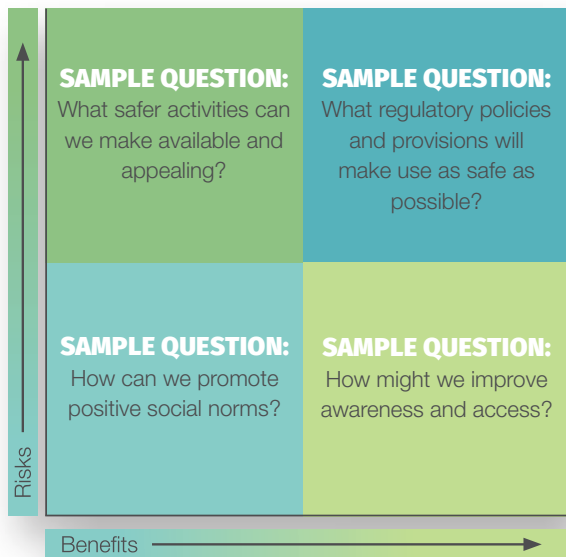
- aid social interaction and enhance celebration
- add meaning to ceremonies
- facilitate spiritual exploration
- enhance or provide physical pleasure
- improve performance and defer fatigue
- alleviate pain or grief
- satisfy curiosity and/or curb boredom

But the use of these substances also has the potential to expose people to personal and social harms, at times resulting in property damage, regretted decisions, serious injury and even death.

Today, the use of alcohol and other drugs is a common occurrence on our post-secondary campuses. For many, alcohol contributes to a positive social experience and is a part of the transition into adulthood. For a smaller number, other drugs may serve similar functions. However, the use of alcohol or other drugs also has the potential to interfere with students' abilities to fulfill academic requirements, impinge on instructors' performance in facilitating learning, and

impede administrative and other staff in rendering their services. It can also contribute to disturbances, disruptions and conflicts among campus members and in surrounding communities.

Policy makers need to take into account that complex reality and shape campus policies that allow for benefits and minimize the risks for harm. A dual continuum model may be of help in doing this. Both benefits and risks range from very low to very high on intersecting axes. Each quadrant in the model suggests a different set of concerns. Engaging together in formulating and exploring the questions that emerge will help build competencies in individually and collectively managing drugs.



### Starting questions for campuses to consider

- How well do we acknowledge the real motivations people have for using substances? Do we support appropriate rewarding experiences from substance use? At the same time, do we respectfully affirm those who prefer not to use?
- How factual and balanced is our messaging and communication on substance use? Does our messaging about potential harms suggest greater frequency and damage than tends to occur? Or do we ignore adverse outcomes or downplay their likelihood and gravity?
- Can we allude to benefits and risks in ways that encourage responsible avoidance of harms? Do our policies promote help-seeking to address adverse impacts of substance use?

## Campus community: An ecosystem to enhance

Policy in the campus context can always be purposefully oriented in part toward upholding or furthering the welfare of campus members and the wellness of the campus community. The Okanagan Charter (2015) urges our post-secondary communities to “embed health in all campus policies” and lead health promotion action. Within the Charter, health promotion is understood as efforts to:

- enable people to increase control over their health and the factors that influence it and
- move beyond a focus on individual behaviour towards a wide range of social and environmental efforts.

This approach reminds us of the incredible scope of factors that influence health. At the same time, it suggests we consider how policy also shapes and influences this plethora of factors. All campus policies, including those explicitly addressing alcohol and other drugs, have the potential to support strategic efforts to cultivate healthy physical environments and positive social cultures, while influencing individual relationships with substances. In fact, the environmental setting, culture and individual experience are so interconnected that no policy can really effectively address any one in isolation.

We may be inclined to think of particular policies as serving to change the thinking and attitudes (and actions) of community members. It may be more helpful to think instead of an institution’s consistent expressions of its commitments – in and beyond policy stances – as motivating community members to uphold particular policies.

### Some questions to consider

- To what extent is health and health promotion conceptually integrated into the educational mandate for our institution as we understand it?
- To what degree do our existing policies directly or indirectly:
  - Empower individuals and the community to act on factors that influence their well-being?
  - Respect diversity and promote equity in the campus community?
  - Facilitate social integration, encourage academic progress and help develop our campus members as citizens?
  - Seek to minimize the institution’s contribution to *avoidable or unrequired* stress that might contribute to substance use for the purpose of coping?

## Our tradition and values: A place from which to lead

The campus is not just a setting within which substance use happens. Post-secondary institutions have a strong traditional foundation in humanistic education that seeks to develop citizenship literacy. This makes it an ideal place for campus members to engage together in shared learning experiences that explore the safer use of substances, as part of a larger pursuit of holistic health and a socially responsible community. Advanced educational institutions are viewed by the

public as places where students are equipped with the analytical and relational skills needed to function in society as actively participating citizens and competent leaders. The Okanagan Charter emphasizes the importance of this role by calling on colleges and universities to ensure “the development of future citizens with capacity to act as agents for health promoting change beyond campuses” (Okanagan Charter, 2015).

Policy can be seen as a value-laden social mechanism employed for purposes of efficiency and effective organizational control, often imposed to ensure compliance to expectations or standards of conduct. But in the context of developing citizenship literacy, policy needs a more positive orientation – it can also be viewed as an equipping tool to empower a group’s members to achieve shared aspirations and goals. This task calls for the creation of settings conducive to deliberative communication in which different views are expressed and challenged, opinions are formed but respect for the other is maintained. Collective will emerges, to the degree it is able, in the ongoing process of communicative action rather than being imposed by a privileged elite.

#### Appropriate questions to consider

- How consciously does our campus apply its humanistic educational values and interdisciplinary expertise to concerns around, and responses to, substance use?
- How effective are we on our campus in developing citizenship literacy through our discourse and actions related to substance use?
- How might this be done more consistently on our campus?

## Constructing Policy for pursuing health

It is easy to think of policy primarily in terms of product and ignore the critical importance of process. Rather than just being a transient means to an enduring end, the manner in which policy construction takes place will shape the continuing character of a policy initiative.

### Deliberative democracy and dialogue: Considerations for practice

One common measure of policy effectiveness is degree of compliance, with consistent enforcement regarded as vital to secure it. But in keeping with the loftier orientation encouraged above of collectively pursuing shared aspirations, research indicates non-authoritarian approaches

work best in securing support both when creating and applying policy. People are more disposed to promote standards that emerge from processes in which they have been meaningfully involved. Furthermore, policies are more likely to take into account a variety of relevant environmental factors if they reflect wide community participation rather than

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being imposed. Collective action is vital to putting in place campus policies that are truly conducive to well-being.

A theoretical foundation for this democratizing of policy lies in the philosophical traditions of *critical theory*, *hermeneutics* and *communicative action*. Critical theory challenges people to acknowledge the self-serving interest built into all attempts at social control and to consider how political inclusion of multiple points of view can promote collective wellness. Hermeneutics (as elaborated by Gadamer among others) recognizes the limited range of vision in all finite, fallible perspectives and invites the expansion of horizons through appreciative interaction towards collective exploration. Habermas's theory of communicative action complements that appeal to shared understanding as a basis for communal collaboration. It does so by calling for widespread public participation in dialogue without privileging technical expertise. Such a constructive goal intends to respect areas of continuing disagreement with greater empathy, while also pursuing cooperative efforts that enable a community to function.

Post-secondary institutions can model inclusive participatory practice that obtains strong diverse stakeholder representation. And, as institutions that are situated within local communities, campuses can also engage municipalities in collaborative efforts to craft consistent “town and gown” approaches to substance use. These approaches can share a mutual commitment to relate to substance use as a public health issue that promotes well-being and seeks to reduce harm at both collective and individual levels.

### Worthwhile questions to start with

- How well does our campus cultivate a climate of dialogue (in contrast to an ethos of debate)?
- How might we better foster dialogue on campus in regard to substance use?
- What have we done to ensure campus community participation in our substance use (and other) policy processes?
- How have we demonstrated commitment to constructive interaction with and contribution to our surrounding constituency in regard to substance use policy?

## Key principles for developing effective policy

**Inclusion** – Ensuring diverse groups are represented in the policy process by removing any social or structural barriers to participation

**Participation** – Involving community members in policy implementation, from start to finish, thereby contributing to consensus-building and ownership

**Accountability** – Being respectfully answerable to the community, its organizational framework and ethical standards; and routinely clarifying the submission and decision-making process

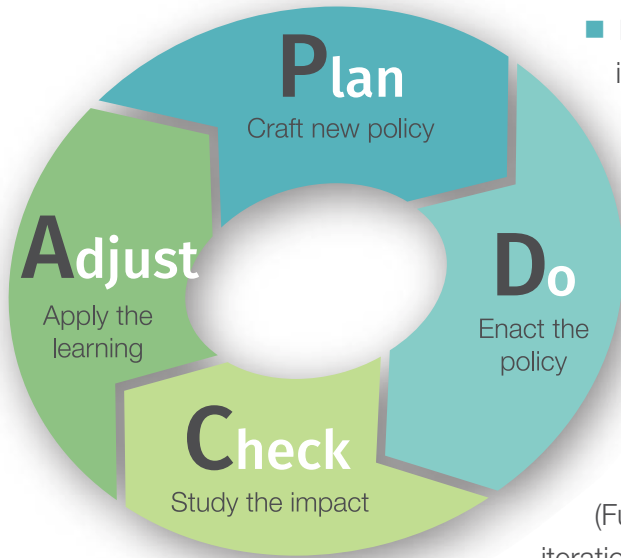
**Transparency** – Operating in an open, candid spirit that is receptive to stakeholder concerns, questions and proposals; and disclosing pertinent information related to policy formation and enactment

**Responsibility** – Making every effort to secure equal opportunity and access to necessities for health while avoiding discrimination, systemic deprivation and exploitation

**Legitimacy** – Basing policy stances and regulations on sound theory, research evidence and local community experience

## Policy process: An ongoing exercise

Policy work is always a provisional, never-finalized process. It involves continuing community conversations on existing positions and their impact, either confirming the value of current practices or revising them and implementing newly formulated positions. The Deming cycle of Plan-Do-Check-Adjust provides a simple model of the policy process.



- **Plan.** With strengths and liabilities of current practices in mind, define objectives for improvements and sketch out a path for moving toward these goals through deliberate, thoughtfully formulated changes in policy.
- **Do.** Put the new policy in place by promoting, implementing and upholding it.
- **Check.** Monitor the performance and impact of the policy against its desired ends and any other effects it is having.
- **Adjust.** Consolidate, tweak or refine the policy, as needed, to raise prospects for attainment of goals. (Further review following this adaptation will initiate the next iteration of the cycle.)

### Relevant questions might be along this line

- What kind of measures and mechanisms do we employ to indicate, monitor, evaluate and improve the impact of our policies?
- How well are those applied in regard to healthier relationships with substances on our campus?

## Policy Domains for progressing in health

The complex web of influences on substance use reaches across several levels of interaction between campus members and their surroundings. Often without even alluding to substances, campus policy can address environmental conditions and cultural features, impacting their broad

bearing on collective and individual use patterns. Critical in this regard are three prime areas for policy action:

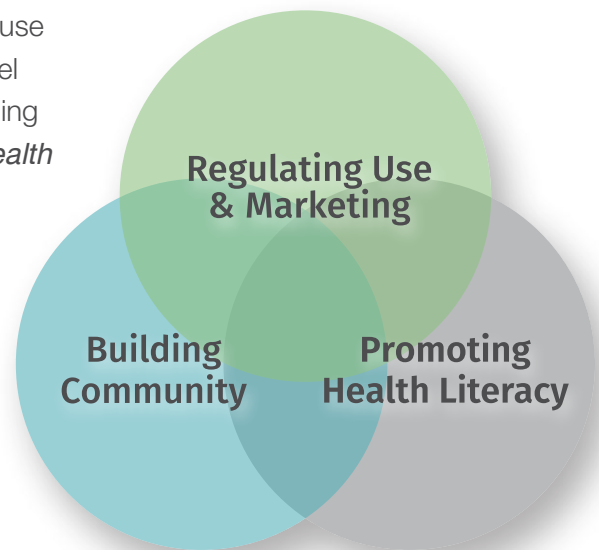
- building strong, connected, resilient communities
- promoting health literacy related to substance use
- regulating the use, sales and marketing of alcohol and other psychoactive substances

Substance use often reflects some of the satisfaction that people enjoy or are missing in their relationships with

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others. A person's ability to manage their health and draw on community resources when needed also influences how they view and use substances. This idea likewise applies at the community level with its collective capacity, common perspective and prevailing practices. Therefore, *building community* and *promoting health literacy* should be the mainstays of any institution's policy toolbox, with both endeavors aiming to increase capacity, enable action and provide opportunities to advance health. *Regulation of use and of marketing* can serve as a useful supporting instrument when employed carefully. These three distinct aspects are interdependent and complementary to one another. Effective policy action in each domain will take into account concerns the other dimensions focus on. All three aspects should be considered target areas for policy review, as advances in each area can be reinforced and sustained by progress in the other areas.



#### Appropriate questions at this point could include

- Which policy areas identified above has our institution focused on and why?
- What has perhaps hindered us from recognizing and improving the impact of the social environment on choices around substance use?
- What might success in enhancing health literacy around substance use look like for our institution?

## Conclusions

Carefully crafted policies, along with well-designed and maintained facilities and a mix of services and supports, can contribute to a healthy post-secondary institution and, ultimately, to healthy future communities that promote learning, resilience and social harmony. Campuses have an opportunity to model both forward thinking and corporate action on how people can relate to substances in low-risk ways, for the benefit of their community and beyond.

This paper invites discussants to contemplate a higher role and much broader range than regulation for policy initiatives relevant to substance use. It also calls for this in candid acknowledgment that substance use has often-realized potential for meaningful benefits rather than only being to some degree associated with significant harms. This paper proposes a deliberate employment of policy in the interest of health as a capacity that is part and parcel of rather than just a favorable condition for fulfilment of the post-secondary educational mission. The appeal is therefore grounded in a time-honored purpose for advanced education to equip learners to contribute collaboratively to the well-being of communities in which they will live and serve with others through their work and leisure activities.

## Resources

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