

Substance Use Policy on Campus

Promoting health literacy

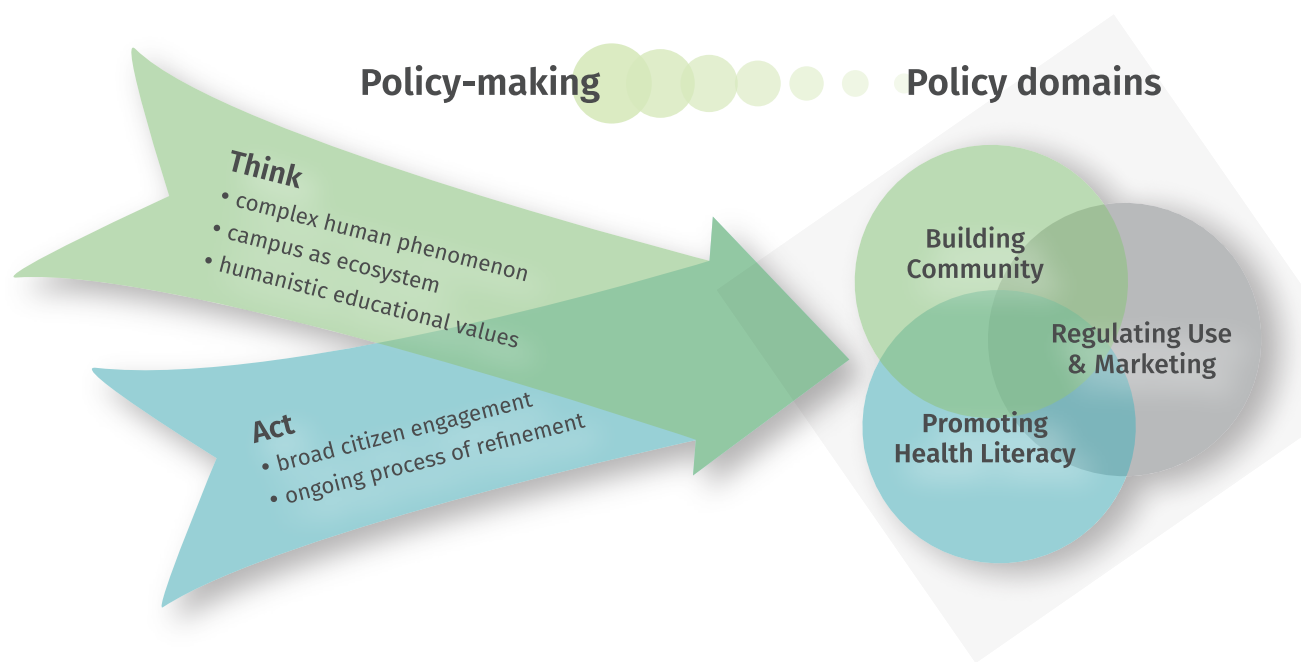
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Campus policy is one of several useful tools for promoting the health of the campus community. In particular, policy can help shape healthy relationships with alcohol, cannabis and other drugs. This is the third in a series of discussion papers on the topic. The **first paper** seeks to lay out a framework (see *image, page 2*) grounded in the humanistic tradition of higher education and a holistic health promotion approach. Regulations related to use can contribute, but are not the only or even primary means of shaping the institution's culture around drugs. Various policies that make no explicit reference to substance use can have a significant impact.

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. This paper takes up one domain within the framework: promoting health literacy.

Health literacy provides people with the knowledge and skills to manage and improve their health. It builds resilience and enables people to help shape their surroundings in healthy ways. This is much more than an ability to access healthcare and to process the information received. Health literacy is the capacity of individuals and communities to manage their well-being. This includes helping members of the campus community manage their relationships with alcohol, cannabis and other drugs. Since health literacy is critical to achieving the good life, increasing health literacy on campus is an appropriate policy domain.

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Health literacy and drugs

Promoting health literacy helps achieve the vision of the Ottawa Charter – increasing control for individuals and groups over their own health and well-being. This is more than learning how to prevent and treat disease or illness. It encompasses finding ways to face challenges and still thrive and flourish. When it comes to drugs, health literacy involves deepening awareness about the role of drugs in human experience and developing strategies for managing them.

Campuses can explore various mechanisms for improving individual and collective ability to manage and improve health. Within a humanistic frame, this should emphasize engaging people in reflection and dialogue about well-being. This is far more powerful than simply disseminating messages or creating restrictions. Top-down approaches are rarely effective. Policy should focus on the processes of bringing the community together rather than articulating a definitive predefined direction. As we become more intentional about our lives within the community we develop critical thinking and social skills. These skills are essential for managing health particularly in the face of challenges.

Policies that support health literacy in relation to alcohol, cannabis and other drugs can commit to

- understanding and influencing the campus culture within which substance use occurs,
- providing a variety of substantive educational initiatives, and
- promoting diverse opportunities for intervention.

Attending to cultural aspects of campus life

As human beings, we are all intermingled with the world and with other beings through overlapping complex cultural networks. Any attempt to increase health literacy must attend to these cultural aspects of life. So, to address issues related to alcohol, cannabis or other drugs, policy-makers should focus on cultural influences. Identifying and understanding these influences within various campus settings is the first step. The second is to stimulate critical reflection and intentionality within those cultures or settings.

Culture has to do with the beliefs, values, attitudes and practices that constitute a shared milieu. These cultural elements bond individual members to the social group (e.g., club, team, department, community). This milieu is constructed by the members but also shapes both current and potential members as they construct their own identities within the social fabric of the campus. This culture provides tools for meaning making, communication and joint action. Cultures tend to emerge, be absorbed and evolve without conscious deliberation. As a result, they remain largely transparent to their members. We might think of culture as the invisible medium through which we swim, the lens through which we see the world, or the software which drives our social autopilot systems.

Identifying and understanding these cultural influences in regard to substance use requires honest curiosity and sharp observation. Paying attention to dominant discourse and observing social events and common behaviours (not least those that appear constrained) is a good place to start. Engaging participants about the meanings and values they associate with those occasions, settings, behaviours and messages will help build cultural understanding.

Influencing culture is itself a cultural process. It often starts with facilitating collective reflection. Reflecting on how our current culture affects the well-being of individuals and groups (both internal and external to the culture) helps identify discrepancies with assumed values. This process encourages the development of critical and social skills needed in health literacy. Furthermore, it allows for the emergence of pockets of consensus. Indeed, it can create the foundation for joint efforts to experiment with and establish new attitudinal and behavioural norms.

Culture change involves helping each other be more

- reflective about common basic assumptions and beliefs
- constructively critical about shared values and ideals
- intentional about social practices and discourse
- collaborative in choosing and pursuing goals and means

One common strategy for cultural influence relates to perceived social norms. Post-secondary students tend to overestimate how much other students engage in risky substance use behaviours. These inflated impressions invite conformity to perceived norms that are less healthy. Social norms clarification initiatives seek to correct these mistaken perceptions. In so doing, they also seek to undermine the negative influence.

Typically, these programs encourage alignment with behaviours or attitudes endorsed by a less visible majority. Drawing attention to the actual popularity of healthier patterns reduces risky use. Likewise, drawing attention to high approval ratings for appropriate regulations can increase support.

There are other ways to undermine the supposed consensus. Exposing the actual diversity of attitudes legitimizes individuals who have reservations or discomfort with the alleged norms. Nurturing respect for diversity is critical in building inclusive communities. Only with respect and understanding can communities hope to reach agreement on collective goals and appropriate ways of living collaboratively together.

Social norms are a central part of culture and a key mechanism for cultural influence. But drawing attention to how cultural symbols and beliefs may misrepresent actual norms or directly promoting particular norms as “healthy” are not the only ways to use a cultural approach to address substance use. An approach more appreciative of campus members’ agency will invite and inspire them to actively participate together in shaping community norms.

Questions to consider

Some reflections around social norms might include asking about **what ways does and could our campus**

- increase awareness about the influence of social norms and draw attention to those norms within the campus community that show a healthier orientation toward substance use?
- increase awareness about broader social norms (including beyond the campus) that might support a healthier orientation toward substance use?
- promote social norms that positively influence behaviour by getting members more engaged in meaningful and challenging shared activities?
- promote social norms that positively influence behaviour by conscious efforts at cultivating a more connected, caring climate in the campus community, marked by mutual respect and support?

One of the most powerful tools in promoting cultural examination and creating an environment conducive to culture change is dialogue. Dialogue is a participatory encounter that provides an opportunity for people to listen to each other and as a result gain further understanding of the different perspectives that make up a community. It requires authentic communication, mutual curiosity and the suspension of judgment. But it also involves critically examining presuppositions, our own as well as those of others.

Dialogue is less directive than conventional health education or advocacy approaches. Rather than proclaiming, dialogue opens up possibility. Dialogue about substance use can lead to new insights. For example, participants may learn new behavioural strategies for personal protection (such as setting limits in advance, being selective of company, using a lower-strength beverage, taking a slow pace). In this way they may learn how to enjoy the benefits while mitigating the harm. Or they may come to question a previous assumption that alcohol is essential to having a good time. Participants may also begin to think through ways they might better support one another through improved social supports. At a minimum, they will have a better understanding of the issues from multiple perspectives.

Questions to consider

Questions that might help identify policy initiatives to support culturally sensitive drug literacy include asking **in what ways does or could our campus**

- increase awareness of how various social situations and settings, along with participant testimonies, provide insight into meanings and motivations attached to substance use behaviours?
- encourage constructive critical conversation on what has been taken for granted, expand awareness of other possibilities, and explore opportunities for collective endeavor?
- develop and support leaders who can model and promote inclusive approaches to socialization, entertainment, gratification and responsibility?
- engage students in healthy social activities and involvements in which they can find meaning and fulfilment, build relationships, develop skills, support one another and enjoy good times?

Engaging in holistic drug education

The goal of education is literacy – the knowledge and skills needed to survive and thrive in the world. Drug literacy is more than the dissemination of information about drugs, the dangers in using them and recommended behaviours. Such didactic campaigns have proven woefully insufficient. On the other hand, a more holistic and integrated approach involving a wide array of settings and contexts can be beneficial.

Educational efforts need to nurture a climate of inquiry. Participants should feel free to raise questions and concerns. Ideas should be exchanged and openly evaluated. Diversity needs to be respected and celebrated. This allows individuals to develop the knowledge and skills needed to navigate campus cultures in which substance use is common and, to some extent, promoted. Drug literacy includes understanding the complex roles psychoactive drugs have played and continue to play in human societies. It involves developing personal and social strategies to manage our relationships with those substances.

Didactic social marketing

- **Focus:** “right” message
- **Goal:** prevent harm
- **Means:** convince people to adopt particular behaviour

Health promotion

- **Focus:** dialogue
- **Goal:** promote health
- **Means:** nurture resilience by developing critical thinking and social skills

Educational efforts related to substance use and campus environments need to be interdisciplinary and cross-curricular. They cannot be the purview of health services, health sciences and psychology alone. History, humanities, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, English, political science, economics, law and communications are among academic departments which can – both from respective vantage points and jointly – take up questions of how substance use has been and may be addressed.

Educational initiatives around drinking and other drug use are, optimally, holistic in regard to their content and in respect of their audience. That is, they not only emphasize personal and collective well-being of campus members but also

- are respectful of students’ entitlements, curiosity and capability to both discover truth and reflect critically on the implications of data and experience,
- avoid misleading exaggerations and caricatures related to substances,
- invite investigation and discussion of drug-related issues in appreciation of real-life situations,
- encourage responsible perspective and practice that is attentive to various interests and alternative standpoints within communities, and
- capitalize on student participation and creativity in planning, preparation and implementation.

Campuses can enhance health literacy by promoting involvement of their members in dialogue and decision-making processes related to substance use. These may focus on very local (residence, clubs, teams, etc.) to campus-wide issues and policies and relate to the ever wider reach of jurisdictional and societal structures.

Questions to consider

Questions such as the following may help to consider and assess educational opportunities to increase health literacy.

- How well do our educational efforts about substance use address it as an issue within the parameters of overall personal and public health (taking into account benefits and risks)?

- How well does our campus messaging around substance use invite reflection, foster resilience and encourage helpful action rather than simply prescribe behaviour?
- If we do awareness-raising events (like health fairs), what features of them offer opportunities for interaction and are conducive to meaningful conversations and productive exchanges on substance use issues?
- In what ways does and could our campus integrate broad education on substances into the institution's academic agenda (teaching and research) across a range of departments?
- How can we encourage faculty in different disciplines to incorporate in their course content exploration of how past and present societies have related to drug production, marketing, regulation, consumption and cost management?

Building health literacy through interventions

Interventions have conventionally been regarded as initiatives in which qualified professionals employ their expertise to provide direction to others who are in a situation of need. However, a more collaborative and inclusive frame may be applied. Interventions can be viewed as opportunities to come alongside, support and help enable others in discerning and pursuing a course of action that will better serve their own well-being. This way of looking at interventions encourages attention to promoting health literacy. Service providers are less experts prescribing solutions and more facilitators nurturing the acquisition of knowledge and skills that increase the capacity or resilience of those they support.

Intervention in this sense can focus on raising awareness and increasing intentionality around substance use. Working with individuals or groups, a service provider can explore potentially more helpful stances on and patterns of substance use. These interventions can be formal or informal, clinical or casual, brief or sustained. Concerned individuals who lack the official credentials of professionally trained practitioners are often also able to intervene. Without acting as specialists, they can likewise engage in appropriate efforts to encourage their fellow campus members in reflecting on practices that might be more beneficial to them. All occasions of intervention, whether more intensive or modest, offer opportunities to build the capacity of people to take greater control over and improve their personal and shared health. This includes how they interact with alcohol, cannabis or other drugs.

“Interventions can be viewed as opportunities to come alongside, support and help enable others ...”

Questions to consider

Questions to reflect on and strategize around opportunities to promote health literacy through interventions include asking **in what ways does and could our campus:**

- link community members to self-directed interactive online resource aids?
- support non-specialists (e.g., peers, residence advisors) to engage in conversations with students and others around positive behavioural changes?
- support health fairs or similar events in which clinicians still in training (e.g., nursing and social work students) would encourage reflection and capacity building?
- provide and promote formal brief sessions in which qualified health practitioners employ a motivational and empowerment approach to encourage positive change?
- offer or facilitate more extended services (e.g., cognitive and behavioural skills building) to those with more serious difficulties?
- communicate with parents to encourage them in conversations with their emerging adult children around health challenges associated with substance use?

Links to other policy domains

A complex web of influences linking campus members and their social and physical environments impacts on substance use and related harms. Campus policy can influence this web by broadly **promoting health literacy** for all members of the campus community. Wide-spread health literacy will affect collective and individual patterns of substance use. Policy can also **build community and connectedness** among staff, faculty and administration as well as for students. Building a strong connected community can mitigate the potential for substance use related harm and provide a model for future leaders to take out into their communities beyond the academy. **Regulating the use and marketing** of substances can also help shape the climate or ethos of a campus and directly affect individual behaviour. Other installments in the policy discussion series look further at these other areas of focus.

These three distinct aspects of building community, promoting health literacy, and regulating use and marketing are interdependent and complementary to one another. Effective policy action in each can support and sustain effort in other domains. For example, efforts to build community will provide mechanisms for using deliberative democracy in the formation of regulations and encourage adherence to them. All three aspects should be considered target areas for policy review.

In conclusion

Expanding health literacy is an opportunity for post-secondary institutions to serve the public interest. This includes generating knowledge and developing skills around healthier substance use. Equipping citizens, both individually and as groups, contributes to stronger communities. Campus policy can support the development of health literacy in a variety of ways. These include promoting cultural awareness, educational efforts and interventions that promote agency and mutual social responsibility.

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