

Substance Use Policy on Campus

Building community

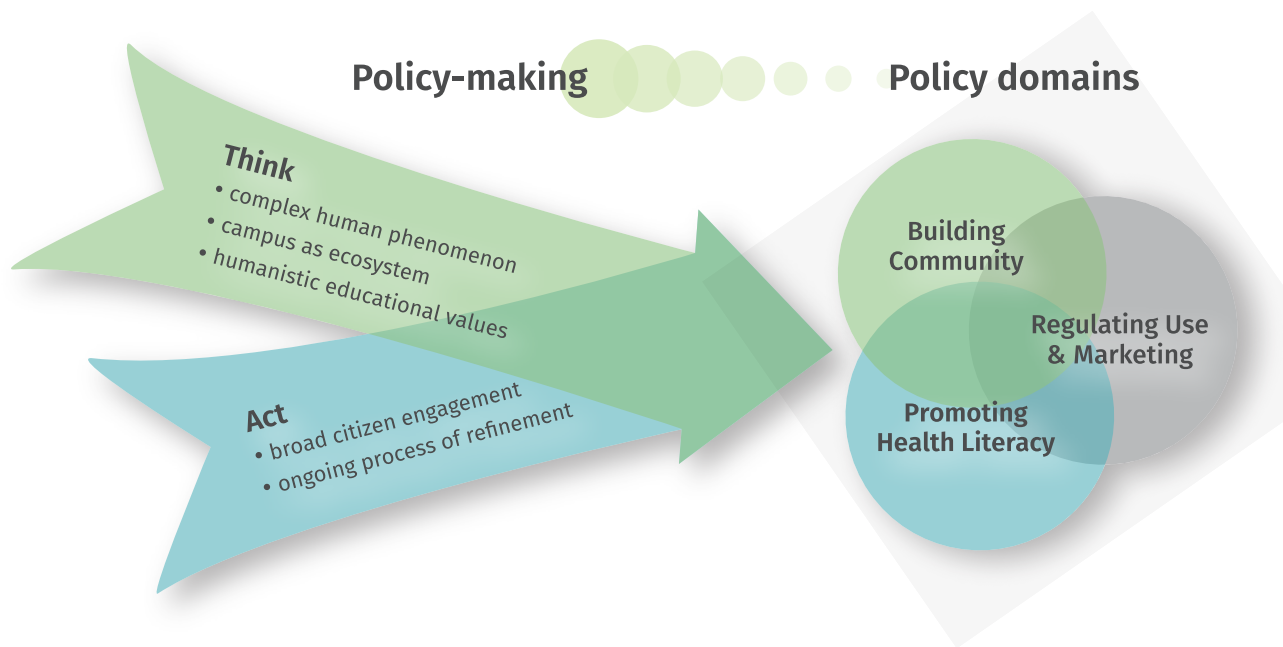
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Campus policy is one of several useful tools for promoting the health of the campus community. In particular, policy can help shape healthy relationships with alcohol, cannabis and other drugs. This is the second in a series of discussion papers on 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 context. This paper takes up one domain within the framework: building community.

Connectedness is vital for both community and individual health. Promoting health among students and staff on campus involves embracing a shared purpose, encouraging joint participation and engaging in mutual support. Studies suggest weak relational links or ties with others often prompt unhealthy substance use. Substance use can then become a primary, central or seemingly essential means of bonding. Building positive ties where substance use is not needed as the social glue can help mitigate the potential for harm. Promoting connectedness also fits with an educational mandate to develop leaders who can help build healthy communities.

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Building community among staff and faculty

In thinking about policy that might nurture community, it might be tempting to focus first, or exclusively, on students. But campus health starts with healthy relationships, attitudes and behaviours among staff and faculty. This requires awareness of how the different parts of the community function and impact on each other. Open dialogue can promote common understandings and shared values. Cultivating a climate of connectedness among the long-term members of the campus community not only makes for a healthy and effective workplace, it also provides a constructive model for students to observe and emulate. This will positively impact the communities in which they will subsequently work.

Questions to consider

Constructing policy that nurtures and maintains a sense of community requires that there be mechanisms in place that regularly bring people together and encourage them to work together. Pertinent questions to pose among staff and faculty might be **in what ways does and could our campus:**

- Enable employees to have meaningful input into how the institution conceives and carries out its mandate?
- Counter the distancing “silo” effects that can arise from organizational structures?
- Foster and reinforce a strong sense of team identity and camaraderie among its employees?
- Facilitate mentoring and ongoing development of professional skills among its employees?
- Promote collegiality among its teaching and research personnel?
- Encourage engagement of employees in the surrounding community?

Building community for students

Every campus community is unique. Yet all face the challenge of helping students thrive in an ever-changing world.

Universities and colleges have a mandate to equip students with the values and skills needed to build healthy functioning communities. These values and skills include a commitment to community and the ability to bring people together. Meeting the needs of today's students—and today's society—means post-secondary institutions need to promote more than academic achievement. Students need to experience and learn connectedness. This calls for initiatives that reach across institutional hierarchies and encourage collaborative partnerships. These should include shared endeavors to shape a campus culture that reduces inequities, fosters cohesion and inspires engagement. Promoting greater connectedness, or strengthening social capital, is about bridging (expanding, extending) and not just healthier bonding (solidifying) in cultivating relationships and networks.

Questions to consider

In constructing and reviewing policy that builds community and social capital, questions to pose among students and others might include **in what ways does and could our campus:**

- Help students identify with the mission and leadership of the campus?
- Help students feel they belong and have a meaningful and active part in the operations of the institution?
- Involve students in curricular and non-curricular learning endeavors with peers, instructors and services staff?
- Create positive socialization opportunities for students?
- Build connectedness among students through supportive residential arrangements?
- Prompt students to access services knowing that personnel are eager to help them?
- Strengthen student relationships with the local community and larger society?

Six characteristics of a *community of learning*

Educationally purposeful – a place where faculty and students share an intellectual quest and work together to strengthen teaching and learning

Open – a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed

Just – a place where the dignity of individuals is honored and where equality of opportunity is vigorously pursued

Disciplined – a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group and where well-defined governance principles guide behaviour for the common good

Caring – a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged

Celebrative – a community in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared

—From E.L. Boyer (1990) *Campus Life: In Search of Community*

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 addressing environmental conditions and cultural features. These, in turn, can affect collective and individual patterns of substance use. This paper has reflected on how policy can help **build community**. Policy can also help **promote health literacy** both at the individual and community levels. A person's ability to manage their health and draw on community resources when needed influences how they view and use substances and the harms that may result. Likewise, the level of community health literacy affects the nature and distribution of resources which again impacts patterns of use and harm.

Regulating the use and marketing of substances can also help shape the climate or ethos of a campus and directly affect individual behaviour. Subsequent 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

A strong, interconnected campus community is a healthy community. In such communities healthy relationships with alcohol, cannabis and other drugs are the norm. Campus policy is one tool for building a healthy community. Relevant policy is not limited to rules and regulations about substance use. Campus policy as a whole can express a commitment to pursue a mutually supportive campus environment. Administrative and academic departments, as well as employee and student services, can adopt principles, programs, practices and procedures that foster positive relationships. "Impact on community" can be used as a measure in all policy development, implementation and evaluation. Demonstrated contributions to greater integration and cohesion among campus members can be acknowledged through celebrations and access to funding. In short, policy can be a useful tool in building community.

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Resources

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