

A Guide to Promoting Healthier Residence Environments



This guide is one in a series of resources intended to serve a comprehensive approach to promoting healthier relationships with alcohol and other substances in post-secondary settings. Grounded in evidence and theory, it features ideas and suggestions for supporting the creation of a healthier residence community. These ideas have been gathered through focus groups with students and other residence stakeholders from 8 campuses across BC and Alberta (see Appendix for methodology). Rather than being a “to do” list of prescribed steps to success, the content is offered for consideration and is intended to inspire residences to imagine what small (and large!) changes they can make on campus.

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Supporting Healthier Relationships with Alcohol and Other Substances in Residence

Health is about the individual, their relationships to those around them, and their community. It is not only the absence of disease but the presence of opportunity and capacity to enjoy life. Health promotion is a matter of addressing influences so that individuals can experience ongoing satisfaction in life and face challenges in ways that allow them to move forward. At the community level, it's about promoting a positively challenging environment and independent thought, as well as cultivating connectedness and supportiveness to improve conditions that affect everyone.

Humans use substances. People have been using substances for various reasons for thousands of years. What's more, our modern culture is promoting the use of psychoactive substances at an

unprecedented level. Accepting and understanding that substances hold the potential for both benefits and harms can help us reimagine what our substance use culture could look like. Evidence suggests that policies and practices related to substance use could promote wellness and the reduction of harm rather than the elimination of use and could create a healthier community for all.

Campus residences can be hubs of holistic health. Residence life provides rich opportunities for students to develop the skills needed to mature into engaged members of the community. Carefully crafted policies, well-designed and maintained facilities, and a mix of services and supports all contribute to creating healthier communities that promote learning, resilience and social harmony.

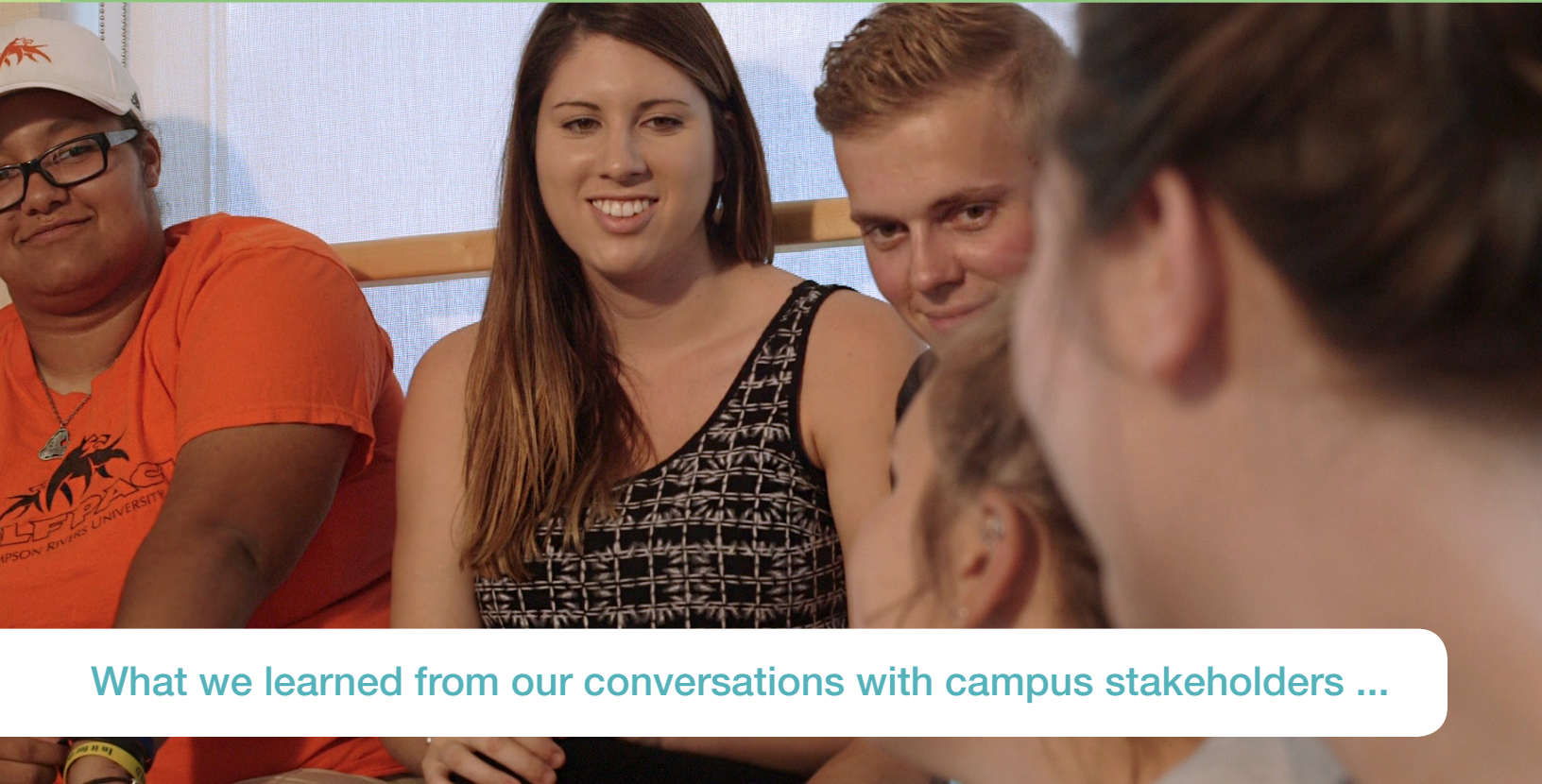
Hallmarks of Authentic Community

"Communities are the ground-level generators and preservers of values and ethical systems" (Gardner, 1990). Communities need to support social values of interdependence and belonging. At the same time, they do well to promote independence, critical thought and self-determination in appreciation of diversity. Such collaborative commitments create environments that give young people the greatest opportunity to develop into well-rounded human beings, as well as contributors to society. The following characteristics are recognized as hallmarks of real communities including those on campus:

- **Transparency:** In healthy communities, policies and practices are clearly communicated and their reasons are both evident and consistent with community goals.
- **Complexity:** Policies and practices promote active cooperation, integration and consensus building among all stakeholders.

- **Shared norms and values:** Community members actively engage in understanding one another and together forming context-appropriate cultural priorities.
- **Open communication:** Community leaders engage authentically with members to address issues, with regular information sharing and dialogue.
- **Mutual obligations:** The community establishes a wellness-focused ethos with a joint commitment to foster care, trust, and teamwork for the common good.
- **Participation:** Policies and practices facilitate, support and reward involvement in decision-making processes and in community activities.
- **Community maintenance:** Leaders attend to the development of personnel and ensure that services meet community members' needs.
- **Bridge-building:** The community focuses not only on internal cohesion, but also on forging links with other communities that share its members (i.e. broader campus and municipality).

Promising Practices for a Healthier Residence Environment



What we learned from our conversations with campus stakeholders ...

1. Healthier Residences Embed “Health” in their Institutional Identity

Embedding “health” in the identity of a residence means including it in the residence’s mission, vision and values. Health can also be supported through sustained efforts, such as cultivating an atmosphere of understanding, inclusiveness and non-judgment. Ensuring students understand that there are high expectations of their conduct in residence and that they are expected to act in accordance with the values of their resident community, can also support the goal of creating a healthier environment. Involving students and staff actively in building these ideals into the institutional identity also typically helps to increase appropriateness and ownership of these “healthier ideals” for the residence community.

How do residences make “health” part of their identity?

- They communicate the mission, vision and values of healthier living on the residence website
- They share the goal of “health” with parents and future residents prior to the start of the school year
- They discuss “healthy ideals” during residence staff training to encourage deeper understanding
- They convey “health” as a priority during residence orientation
- They apply input from other campus professionals about ways to create and contribute to a healthier environment

2. Healthier Residences Focus on Fostering Connection

Recognized as the key element in a healthier residence environment, a sense of connection can be actively nurtured between all members of the residence team, other campus professionals and students living in residence. Connection is at the heart of wellbeing. It is what gives many people a sense of meaning and value in their lives. Having a strong sense of connection with friends, family and community is a huge factor in creating resilience, particularly when difficulties arise, as they often do during the post-secondary experience. By valuing connection, a residence can build an ethos of community into its fabric and help equip students with the resilience to handle the challenges they will inevitably face during their post-secondary years and beyond.

How do residences support connection?

- They hire residence staff with great interpersonal skills and high personal standards. They encourage those staff to use an outreach approach to engaging residents who have more difficulties coming out of their shell (for more about the Best Practices Outreach Model, please see the resources section).
- They offer students the opportunity to connect with each other through the creation of a shared goal around community responsibility. It could be a project to create a community garden, beautify the residence space with student art or an effort by the students to clean up the residence on the weekends. The important aspects of this are voluntary leadership of residents to invest and demonstrate visible ownership over the space and contribute to the community. This can be beneficial to those directly involved and those indirectly involved in the effort.
- They use relational or non-authoritarian leadership to create a more connected community atmosphere. Community leaders also play a role by actively engaging with students.
- They make sure students have comfortable social spaces to connect.
- They provide peer support programs, and encourage casual support between peers in residence.
- They collaborate with people working in health services, counselling, security, athletics, recreation and other areas that offer different perspectives on challenges and opportunities in residence.

How did one residence help build connection?

“At the beginning of the semester, we had a ‘Meet and Greet’ with the RAs and the parents. It was really nice. Parents knew that they were dropping in for the first time with a good community and they learned who they could go to if they had a problem. It’s worked out really nicely.” —Residence Advisor

3. Healthier Residences Invest in their Residence Staff

All levels of residence staff—Residence Advisors (RAs), Residence Managers, and Residence Life Coordinators (RLCs)—can contribute to the creation of a healthier residence environment. But as the first line of contact with residents, RAs have a key role in ensuring the overall quality of the residence experience, and they are essential to fostering a community of support for students. Hiring RAs with a high level of social competence and interest in building community supports the development of a healthier residence environment. But even with the right skills and attitude, RAs need to be supported in performing their role.

How do residences support their staff?

- They ensure the job is reasonable. They hire a sufficient number of RAs and offer those RAs enough hours to make regular check-ins with residents and play a meaningful role in developing residence programming. They also ensure enough staff are on hand during key ‘party’ times, such as on evenings and weekends.
- They provide rich, relevant RA training. This may include self-care, campus resources, healthy eating, substance use education, how to create connection, active listening skills, motivational interviewing skills, Mental Health First Aid, Verbal Judo, non-violent crisis intervention, assertiveness training and suicide intervention. For best results, they provide programs that are interactive, involve dialogue and role play, and are delivered by the best available point people on campus.
- They offer regular support. This could be in the form of check-ins by upper level staff, or offers of support to prevent burnout and enhance RA staff experience and retention.
- They ensure RAs can act when needed. Monitoring resident activity during the evenings and weekends can feel frustrating or meaningless to an RA unable to respond when residence rules are broken. Another alternative is to avoid asking

“RAs coming in and getting to know us and also putting on activities where we get to meet new people helps us build a rapport with them. And if somebody’s worried, they can feel comfortable coming to the RAs. That has helped a lot.”

—Campus Resident

RAs to serve a monitoring or security role when parties take place, and instead ensure adequate, trained and positively-oriented security staff are on hand.

4. Healthier Residences are Integrated into Healthier Campus Communities

Healthier residences are part of a healthy campus community. A residence that is highly integrated into the campus community can benefit from the broad range of expertise and resources available at its fingertips. For instance, rather than trying to address all problems in an insular fashion, residences can capitalize on the availability of highly trained colleagues with specialization in various areas. By collaborating with other campus services, residence services can become more aware of who is in their community and the options available to them when problems arise. More directly, connecting students and campus service providers during orientation makes the students more aware of the options available to them and perhaps more likely to access them when they are needed. In collaborating with campus services, residences can also work towards a long term goal of integrating services even more effectively into residence life.

5. Healthier Residences Create a Safe, Inclusive Environment for Everyone

All students deserve to live in an environment of safety, acceptance and inclusivity regarding diversity (in race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, and abilities). By examining the key diversity issues in residence and offering progressive solutions, both educational and environmental, the residence environment can become a leader in the campus community around pertinent diversity issues. Ensuring that staff are trained to be sensitive to diversity issues can help them promote the safe and inclusive environment that will benefit all residents.

New frontiers for action!

Gender diversity in residence.

Consider offering gender neutral washrooms, or private washroom spaces for gender diverse students, where possible, and ensure students know where to find these safe spaces. Also, if your residence offers gender-segregated activities, consider whether gender-segregation is truly necessary for the activity to be successful as this aspect can leave some students feeling excluded.

Did you know...?

Some BC campus residences have created “dinner clubs” to encourage connection between students and residence staff. Dinner clubs are an opportunity for students to cook and eat a family-style dinner together and discuss thought-provoking questions about issues affecting their lives and health on campus, facilitated by a student leader. Selkirk College’s Tenth Street Dinner Club is one example.

Dinner clubs give residents and staff an opportunity to discuss issues and ideas for solving problems. For example, if some students are using alcohol in ways that disturb other residents, you could survey dinner club participants for possible solutions or ask if there’s an appetite for substance-free or substance-reduced housing alternatives.

6. Healthier Residences Offer Welcoming and Engaging Environment from Day One

Going beyond simply conveying rules and expectations during orientation and starting to develop relationships with the students can have a significant impact on the residence culture. As one RA explains, “It starts at the beginning when you introduce yourselves, not just as people who have authority over the students, but as people who want to build a connection and be friends with them and also want to care for them.” Another contributor to our scan adds, “If you’re not actively trying to build those relationships and I really do mean this, actively in the first 6 weeks, then you miss that opportunity to connect with the students.”

How do residences create a healthier and more welcoming environment?

- They organize activities at the start of the academic year, when some students are more likely to turn to alcohol to socialize or reduce anxiety. By offering a variety of challenging, creative and fun kickoff events at the beginning of the year, they offer students the opportunity to connect with each other in healthier ways. These events may or may not include alcohol. If they do, they can be used as opportunities to model healthier drinking practices and integrate alcohol into the residence environment with predominantly positive results and relatively few harms (see SNAPSHOT: Drink with Class! at TRU on page 7).
- They orient students to services that meet their basic needs. They make sure students have access to affordable, healthy and local food, appropriate transit options and opportunities for exercise, recreation and quiet spaces for peaceful study and interaction. They use flyers, maps and other means to ensure residents know how and where to access services.
- They integrate parents into the residence transition. Connecting with parents early in the year can send a positive message to residents and the broader community, and it can help make the transition to independence go more smoothly for both young people and their parents.

7. Healthier Residences Offer a Range of Housing Options for Students

Security, comfort and access to healthy food options are key considerations for all types of housing. Consider different sorts of buildings, room arrangements that will suit different types of students and the creation of vibrant common spaces. Offering a residence environment that encourages interaction between mature and younger students can help create a climate of mentorship. Some residences also integrate sub-communities into the residence environment, such as learning communities, which are showing to have very positive effects. Other factors can be important too. For example, gender-specific housing (or gender-specific wings of a building) can sometimes serve to lower rates of hazardous substance use and other risky behaviours among residents. However, if you introduce gender-segregated housing, we suggest you attend to issues of gender diversity and inclusivity when designing that option (see New frontiers for action!). Substance-free housing is another option. Keep in mind, however, students prefer to be consulted about substance-free housing and given a choice about whether or not to live there. There are strengths and drawbacks to substance-free housing as an option.

SNAPSHOT: Drink with Class! at Thompson Rivers University

TRU has developed an exciting new initiative called Drink with Class! that targets drinking culture in residence from the moment students first set foot on campus. Drink with Class! engages students during the first 6 weeks of the semester through messaging targeted at party hosts, meaningful conversations with RAs and events in residence that integrate alcohol in a more positive way and encourage dialogue around substances among campus residents. For more information on this promising new initiative, check out the resources section of the guide.

Strengths of substance-free housing	Drawbacks of substance-free housing
• Freedom from unwelcome peer pressure • May be quieter place to study and socialize • Supports idea that alcohol is not essential for having fun • Lowers vandalism rates • May attract more people to using student housing	• May give impression of an unintended distinction (e.g., residents have problems with alcohol or other drugs) • May encourage idea that a lower standard of behaviour is tolerated in other residences • May encourage excessive measures for non-compliance

Tip: We suggest that residences revisit the substance-free housing issue periodically. Changes in the community, the culture and the students will help guide thinking around whether or not substance-free housing is necessary or beneficial to students. Ultimately, working towards more balanced thinking about drinking culture might be a more sustainable solution for your residence as a whole (see Balancing Our Thinking Around Drinking in the resources section).

A Resident Manager's Experience

"When I was hired as Residence Life Facilitator, the campus was nothing but a party ground. Students weren't in their classes, they were missing, they were sick. They were putting themselves in very vulnerable, unsafe places and I got so concerned that I started to report everything. I finally decided that this wasn't working. So I decided, let's start by trying to make one of our buildings alcohol-free. That worked out well. It turned out everybody wanted to get into that building. So then, I had to make it into two buildings in order to meet the demand. And then the women's dorms were done. So building-by-building, there was more interest in being involved in staying in a dorm that was alcohol-free than there was of people who just wanted to come here and party."

8. Healthier Residences Adopt More Balanced Substance Use Policies

When substance use policies are too strict, some students will break them but not necessarily be happy about it. More balanced rules tend to be appreciated and respected. These would recognize both rights and responsibilities, affording individuals agency with regard to their own health, while also keeping in mind the interests of others and the needs of the residence as a whole. Some examples of balanced policies include designated outdoor smoking areas, alcohol permitted in rooms of those who are legal age, and area and time regulations to prevent residents from being too loud or disruptive at inappropriate locations and hours. Cannabis use policies are becoming more of a focus in residence; please see the resources section and check out the webinar and accompanying guide *Putting the Pieces Together: Low Risk Cannabis Use on Campus* for more information on what residences can do to address cannabis use.

How can alcohol fit positively into residence activities?

According to participants in the residence scan:

"We have a gambling night where we put fake money into a pot and use that to gamble with for fun. We also drank fake cocktails and stuff like that. I think that it would be really important for residence management to know that students would actually go to these activities versus simply offering more standard activities. The possibilities are extremely broad, right? Fun activities that don't involve alcohol (or involve alcohol in a more positive way)."

"If people want to go to them, having events that aren't strictly "no alcohol" is a good option. Having an event that is open to both possibilities (being sober or drinking), I think, almost in itself eliminates problems. I think people would want to go to these more sober."

9. Healthier Residences Focus on ‘the Little Things’ to Create a Climate of Caring

When smaller issues are attended to in an environment with a positive emphasis, bigger problems can sometimes be avoided naturally. For instance, New York City has largely attributed the drop in violent crime rates to its attention to maintaining public order effectively. This is not to suggest that small crimes deserve significant punishment. The focus is on maintaining a congenial environment and inspiring respect. By keeping residence clean and in good repair, and maintaining a strong staff presence at all times (but with increased presence at key times) with an interest in supporting students, larger issues may never come to pass.

How do residences focus on ‘the little things’?

- They ensure the residence is clean, with a warm and inviting atmosphere (e.g. graffiti in bathrooms and other spaces should be removed or *transformed* regularly).
- They offer life-skill information (e.g., colourful posters featuring laundry tips, cooking advice, healthy drinking and hosting practices, stress management methods).
- They are responsive to resident needs (like other accommodation establishments are).

10. Healthier Residences Provide a Stimulating and Aesthetically Pleasing Environment

People are highly responsive to their surroundings and will often suggest they feel different in different rooms or buildings. While it may not be possible to completely rebuild your residence building or transport your campus to a more beautiful surrounding, there are small ways that you can enhance the beauty of the physical space where students live.

How do residences improve aesthetics?

- They incorporate plant life into the common spaces.
- They add joy through light, colour and art.

- They provide comfortable couches and quiet places for students to socialize and study.

11. Healthier Residences Offer Supportive Options for Struggling Students

It is impossible to prevent all students from going through personal struggles, but it is possible to ensure the residence environment is supportive and responsive when problems arise. If a student is struggling, residence staff can show they care by checking in more regularly. They can also offer housing options that naturally offer a higher level of contact with staff and minimize challenges for other campus members.

“If there is an issue that we suspect, but we’re not 100% sure and it’s affecting a student’s roommates, we’ll move them to one of the single-suite bedrooms. Then they have to come by our office every day whenever they come in and out of their suite. So that way we can keep a better eye on them. It has helped, particularly with students we suspect to be suffering from major challenges.” —Residence Manager

Tips for Transforming Problem Areas in Residence

- If you have an outdoor space that students disrespect, try installing a nice set of patio furniture.
- If students are throwing parties that are too big and loud for residences, consider creating a hosting space they can use for fun while adhering to community expectations.
- If students aren’t engaging with one another, use food to get students out of their rooms and connecting with others.

12. Healthier Residences Use a Staged Approach and Consider Restorative Justice to Address Non-Compliance

Using a staged approach for infractions starts with being reflective and responsive to key details, e.g., level of infraction, number of times it has occurred. It requires consistent implementation of residence policies, ideally based on a social justice model. Contemplating how students can make amends to the community when an infraction occurs may help keep the residence environment from unintentionally compounding the difficulties of a student already struggling. A residence cannot be completely responsible for all student behaviours or infractions, but with a mentality towards supporting students for success, positive change can happen.

13. Healthier Residences Experiment with Potential Solutions

The best residences are ones that take chances, try things out and, if something isn't working, respond quickly to make adjustments. An (Observe)-Plan-Do-Check-Adjust [(O)PDCA] model can be helpful when trying new things out and looking to get feedback on how to make changes. Please see the resource section for more information on using this model to carefully experiment with innovative solutions to the residence's greatest challenges.

Tips for Promoting Health in Residence

- Meet with a local farm and discuss a model for Community Supported Agriculture that allows residents to access a box of vegetables each week.
- Approach your local public transit provider with ideas on how to better meet the needs of residents, increasing ridership while decreasing the risk of harms from drinking and driving.
- Survey residents about their strengths and skills, and match them with others interested in learning or engaging in those activities.



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References and Resources



Hallmarks of a Authentic Community

- Boyer, E.L. (1990). *Campus life: In search of community*. Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Gardner, J.W. (1990). Building community. *Community Education Journal*, 23(3), 6-9.

Student Outreach Practices

- Best Practices Outreach Model: A resource with the key elements of effective outreach by staff to those they are interested in engaging with students.

Residence Learning Communities

- Brower, A.M. & Inkelas, K.K. (2010). Living-learning programs: One high-impact educational practice we know a lot about. *Liberal Education*, Spring 2010, 36-43.
- Brower, A.M. & Dettinger, K. (1998). What is a learning community? Towards a comprehensive model. *About Campus*, 3(5), 15-21.

Using a “Balanced” Approach to Alcohol on Campus

- Balancing Our Thinking Around Drinking: Low-Risk Alcohol Use on Campus: A webinar on how to address and thinking about alcohol use on campus.

“Balanced” Cannabis Use Policies on Campus

- Putting the Pieces Together: Low Risk Cannabis Use on Campus: A webinar and accompanying guide.

Food and Dialogue in Residence

- A webinar about how food and dialogue are being used for engagement on campuses in BC. Selkirk College’s 10th Street Dinner Club blog and a video about the Selkirk Dinner Basket initiative to address substance use on campus.

Drink with Class!

- Drink with Class! is an exciting initiative from Thompson Rivers University that aims to promote the development of personal and collective identities around alcohol in young people in residence.

(Observe)-Plan-Do-Check-Adjust [(O)PDCA] Model:

- Wikipedia overview of PDSA model and its basic elements.
- A National Health Services tool with a more in-depth information as to how to use a PDSA (or PDCA(O) model).

General Resources for Residence Professionals

- Association of College and University Housing Officers—International’s (ACUHO-I) Talking Stick magazine.
- Northwest Association of College and University Housing Officers (NWACUHO) is an organization that offers resources to residence professionals on engaging with students.

Appendix: Residence Scan Methodology

Background

The scan was conducted over the 2013/14 academic year by a team at the Centre for Addictions Research of BC and the BC Ministry of Health. Through a needs assessment consultation process with several campuses and a thorough review of the available literature, the Changing the Culture of Substance Use project team identified residence as a key campus area of inquiry where there was a desire to do more around the culture of alcohol, but very little knowledge as to what works well in residence in a western Canadian context.

Recruitment

Initial recruitment for the study reached out to all residence managers across BC through personal correspondence and to Alberta institutions through a presentation at the Residence Life Professional Association fall meeting. Through this process, the involvement of 8 campuses was secured (6 from BC, 2 from Alberta; 5 universities and 3 colleges). Primary contacts (Residence Managers and Residence Life Coordinators, typically) were then charged with the responsibility to recruit a cross-section of residence stakeholders for 1-hour focus groups, including (at minimum): 1 residence senior-level administrator, 2–3 mid-level residence professionals and 3–5 representative students living in residence at the time. These students were also

engaged in their own separate 30-minute focus groups to obtain a confidential perspective on their own experiences in residence. In total, forty-six stakeholders participated in the scan. Seventeen of these participants were students living in residence.

Data Gathering Procedures and Analysis

Focus group participants were briefed on the scan, given introductory information to orient them to the study background and were briefed on all ethical considerations, and verbal consent was obtained and recorded around confidentiality. All focus groups were provided with meeting refreshments and students were provided with a food incentive for participating, not to exceed \$15 value. Focus groups were conducted via teleconference and recorded. Residence professionals were also asked to provide corroborating documents to support the self-report data, including copies of program, policy and procedural documents. The obtained data was then transcribed verbatim by a team of 4 analysts and coded using an open-coding method. The lead analyst then conducted a thematic analysis and themes were then cross-checked with background literature on the topic for crossover and consistency. This guide was developed with primary themes in mind. Prior to publishing, primary contacts were then given the opportunity to give input on the scan findings and make suggested changes.

Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses is a cross-province Community of Practice managed and coordinated by the Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division on behalf of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The lead partners for Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses are the Canadian Mental Health Association BC Division and the Centre for Addictions Research of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. The Healthy Minds | Healthy Campuses' Changing the Culture of Substance Use project is funded by the BC Ministry of Health.



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