

Research Brief: Compliance with University Tobacco-free Policies

Summary

- From Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, seventy-six students and employees who self-reported the use of tobacco products at two tobacco-free four-year public universities participated in discussions regarding knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to campus tobacco-free policies.
- Non-compliance with university tobacco-free policies was a result of the interplay of three factors: the desire to smoke or vape, lack of policy enforcement, and an individual smoker's interpersonal efforts to reduce the risk of others' secondhand smoke or aerosol exposure.
- Policy enforcement was carried out by a variety of campus stakeholders but was done so inconsistently and perceived as aggressive by participants.
- Ongoing and consistent efforts tailored to various campus constituents are needed for greater compliance with university tobacco-free policies. This includes mass communication campaigns, patrolling by institutional entities, cessation services, and programs to address the underlying motivators of smoking and vaping.

Introduction

As of July 2021, there were an estimated 2,500 completely smoke-free university campuses in the United States,¹ with existing evidence suggesting these policies are well received by the general campus community.²

An evaluation of university smoke- and tobacco-free policies found that they are associated with reduced smoking behavior and secondhand smoke exposure.³ Policy compliance, however, remains a challenge on smoke- and tobacco-free campuses with lack of enforcement being a particularly significant factor.⁴ Evidence for why individuals are non-compliant with university smoking policies is limited. This study examined non-compliance with campus smoking policies at two tobacco-free universities in California.

Methods

From Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, students and employees from two tobacco-free four-year public universities in California who self-reported the use of tobacco products on university property were recruited to participate in the study. Seventy-six individuals age 18 or older (20 employees and 56 students) participated in focus groups to examine knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors associated with tobacco use on a tobacco-free campus.

Findings

Knowledge

Only 11.8% of participants could correctly identify their university as being tobacco-free, with over three-quarters (78.9%) classifying their university as smoke-free. When asked what products were included in the policy, there was confusion as to whether nicotine gum, lozenges, chewing tobacco, and marijuana were included as part of the policy in addition to products that produce smoke or aerosol (e.g., cigarettes, e-cigarettes). A few respondents also expressed confusion about

"[I] need something to try to like help me with my stress and [smoking] does help me."

- Student

"This is why e-cigarettes are so good, because you can sneak them in the office and nobody knows."

-Employee

"I'm going to [smoke]. But I'm going to do it in as respectful a way as possible."

-Student

whether parking lots were included in the policy or not. Knowledge of the policies was most often acquired through signage on campus with a few students mentioning other sources, including orientation, student outreach groups, and resident assistants; employees recalled receiving emails during the rollout of the policy and mentions during employee onboarding. Students at University 1 had negative attitudes towards the tobacco-free policy suggesting that it was unfair or inconsiderate towards smokers and vapers. Students at University 2 acknowledged the policy as a health-driven effort and supported the effort to reduce smoking and vaping on campus although they themselves were non-compliant. Employees at University 1 also generally supported the policy and described it as "a good thing as an educational institution to implement," and to promote "healthy lifestyles on campus for young people developing." In contrast, employees at University 2 were more likely to oppose the policy as being too restrictive, citing walking long distances and minimal harm of outdoor smoking as reasons for a less restrictive policy.

Non-compliance

Non-compliance was a result of the interplay of three factors among participants: the desire to smoke or vape, lack of policy enforcement, and an individual user's efforts to reduce the risk of others' secondhand smoke or aerosol exposure.

Stress was cited as the main driver of tobacco use on campus for both students and employees. Smoking and vaping were not only utilized for relief in response to stressful schoolwork or working conditions but also to separate from a stressful situation and gather oneself before returning and continuing to be productive. While some students mentioned smoking or vaping for enjoyment or out of habit, most did so for instrumental purposes (e.g., a source of stimulation to study, get through a boring class, or stay awake in class

after a long day).

Participants described policies as unenforceable in principle and not enforced as a matter of practice. The size of campuses was seen as making consistent enforcement impossible especially with the ease and discretion with which e-cigarettes could be used. Respondents also suggested that even if they were caught using a prohibited product, there was no formal penalty.

Finally, there was a near-universal sentiment among study participants that when they would smoke or vape, they were conscious of not bothering or being respectful of others. They reasoned that because they were cognizant of others' health (e.g., they would find places away from others to smoke, only smoke or vape around other users, or ask the consent of others) that it was acceptable to not strictly adhere to the policy. Furthermore, e-cigarettes in particular were perceived as more socially acceptable than cigarettes. One employee suggested that e-cigarettes have "changed the whole theory of smoke-free" and questions the very utility of clean air policies as they relate to vaping.

Enforcement Experiences

Policy enforcement was carried out by an array of campus constituents including formal entities (e.g., police, community service officers) and general campus constituents (e.g., students, faculty, staff). Enforcement was perceived as aggressive, which prompted participants to want to respond in an equally aggressive manner. Though various entities initiated enforcement experiences, the policy was perceived as being inconsistently or not enforced, with less than one-quarter of participants reporting an enforcement experience. The lack of enforcement signaled to participants that the university did not care about the policy.

Recommendations

Results of this study suggest that knowledge of and attitudes toward university tobacco-free policies are variable within and between campuses. Increasing voluntary compliance with university tobacco-free policies will require more robust educational and enforcement efforts. Most study participants learned of the university smoking policy through signage. Educational efforts need to be ongoing and consistent, and communication campaigns should include multiple messages that address the assumptions and objections of various campus community members. These will be specific to each campus but may include perceptions of unfairness or overreach of prohibiting outdoor smoking or vaping. Educational campaigns should also articulate the rationale for the policy in clear terms. Equally as important is ensuring cessation support services are more widely known and accessible. More concerted efforts to promote cessation may support compliance and strengthen perceptions of the institutional intent behind the policy.

Furthermore, this study suggests that non-enforcement signals an implicit acceptance of smoking or vaping by the university in spite of formal policy. Inconsistent enforcement and lack of formal authority for enforcement compound this perception by shifting enforcement to interpersonal interactions which may result in a mismatch in compliance expectations and heighten the likelihood of aggressive interactions around smoking or vaping. Communication campaigns should thus include non-tobacco users on how to approach policy violators to elicit compliance along with regular patrolling and education by institutional entities to signal the prioritization of a healthy campus.

Structural motivations for smoking or vaping

on campus such as stress relief, boredom, or separation from difficult situations should also be addressed through new and innovative programming.

Finally, the growth of vaping among young adults marks a challenge to smoke- and tobacco-free policies in various settings. The perception of low or no risk from vaping, ease and discretion with which vaping can be done, and less stigma compared to conventional cigarettes pose barriers to community acceptance of restrictions on vaping and policy enforcement. Therefore, while e-cigarettes are often included in a smoke- or tobacco-free policy, they should be treated as unique products in policy implementation efforts. Tailored policy rationale, outreach materials, and communication campaigns should be developed for each product type covered under a smoking policy to account for differences in perception and use patterns.

Sources

¹ Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation. Smokefree and Tobacco-Free U.S. and tribal colleges and universities. Berkeley, CA; 2020. <https://no-smoke.org/at-riskplaces/colleges/>.

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³ Roditis ML, Wang D, Glantz SA, Fallin A. Evaluating California campus tobacco policies using the American College Health Association guidelines and the Institutional Grammar Tool. *J Am Coll Health*. 2015;63(1):57-67. doi:10.1080/07448481.2014.963108

⁴ Baillie L, Callaghan D, Smith ML. Canadian campus smoking policies: investigating the gap between intent and outcome from a student perspective. *J Am Coll Health*. 2011;59(4):260-265. doi:10.1080/07448481.2010.502204

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For more information on GHPI's work regarding California smoke-free campus policies, please visit <http://ghpolicy.org/tobacco/college.html>

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