Addressing Substance Use on Canadian Campuses

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Agenda

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About CCSA

• **Vision:** A healthier Canadian society where evidence transforms approaches to substance use.

• **Mission:** To address issues of substance use in Canada by providing national leadership and harnessing the power of evidence to generate coordinated action.

• **Value Proposition:** CCSA was created by Parliament to provide national leadership to address substance use in Canada. A trusted counsel, we provide national guidance to decision makers by harnessing the power of research, curating knowledge and bringing together diverse perspectives.
National Priorities and Areas of Action

Problematic Substance use & Co-occurring Issues
Children & Youth
Cannabis
Indigenous People of Canada
Monitoring & Surveillance
Workforce Development
Treatment & Recovery
Impaired Driving
Prescription Drugs
Alcohol

Canada's National Framework for Action

Background

- Marijuana is the second most frequently used substance among Canadian post-secondary students.
- Around 2% of students reported past-30-day use of other illicit substances (e.g., cocaine) in 2015.
- Students believe that a majority of their peers use drugs.

Source: American College Health Association, 2015
Objective

- To gain a better understanding of the perceptions of post-secondary students towards drug use and their motivations for use;
- To uncover the current roles campus staff play and the barriers they face in addressing substance use on campus; and
- Special focus was given to marijuana use because of upcoming regulation of marijuana in Canada.
Method

• We conducted a series of focus groups.
• We recruited participants through contacts who worked for post-secondary institutions.
• Three semi-structured interview guides were used in the focus groups: one tailored for students, one for student mentors and advisors, and another for staff.
Method (cont.)

Topics for focus group discussions included:

• Popular and concerning substances on campus;
• Reasons students use or do not use substances and what influences their decisions;
• The effects of these substances;
• The approaches taken on campus to address substance use;
• How these efforts can be improved; and
• The challenges faced by staff in addressing substance use and implementing prevention efforts.
Study Sample

- We conducted 27 focus groups.
- 65 students and 58 staff from six Canadian post-secondary institutions participated in the study; 43 students and 37 staff were female.
- 61 participants were from rural or smaller institutions and 62 from institutions based in a large city.
Reasons for Substance Use on Campus

Reasons for student substance use included:

• The freedom of unsupervised college life;
• To improve socializing or prevent loneliness;
• To manage stress, escape reality and function day to day.
Marijuana was said to be the most popular substance used by students on campus:

- It can be used any time of day and does not interfere with studies.
- It was described as normalized, accepted and not considered harmful.
- It is used to address student anxiety and regulate emotions.
Prescriptions Drug Use on Campus

- A high prevalence of prescription medication use was reported, both prescribed and non-medical use.
- Adderall® was the most commonly discussed prescription drug:
  - Used during exam time to help students focus, but use may extend beyond this period;
  - Perceived as safe;
  - Added benefit of weight loss; and
  - Obtained from other students or a physician.
Other Substance Use on Campus

• “Party drugs” such as cocaine and ecstasy were also mentioned:
  - Used less often, only in social contexts;
  - Present at house parties, dance festivals, bars and clubs;
  - Provide a “boost” needed to continue partying.
• Students mixing substances without realizing it:
  - For example, a student might smoke marijuana after class, drink alcohol before a party and use cocaine late in the evening.
Understanding Problematic Use

- What do students view as problematic substance use?
  - “traditional addiction”;
  - Use of a substance drastically out of context or far too often; and
  - Drug use interferes with daily life.
Student Challenges

• Pressures of university life causing stress and anxiety:
  – Many big changes, including new friends and independent living;
  – Time management viewed as challenging for students
• Students reported being overloaded with information and messaging:
  – Many health-related campaigns are competing for students’ attention.
Student Challenges (cont.)

- All campuses reported challenges with accessing health services:
  - Long wait times (two weeks to three months);
  - Existing services might not meet student’s needs;
  - Services limited to just addiction treatment or referral;
  - Service hours or locations do not facilitate accessibility; and
  - Counsellors may not relate well to students or are not consistently available.
Staff Challenges

• The biggest barriers for staff included lack of resources and lack of education about substance use. Others included:
  – Lack of clarity of the role staff should play in intervening with student substance use;
  – Administrative barriers (e.g., lack of support for harm reduction);
  – Challenges of reaching various student sub-groups; and
  – Lack of clarity about the legalization of marijuana
Participant Suggestions

- Staff and students made the following suggestions:
  - Increase education and awareness of drug harms for both staff and students (e.g., harms of mixing);
  - Promote open discussion on campus about substance use;
  - Use peer-to-peer programming to address health service gaps;
  - Provide flexible service hours and access avenues; and
  - Develop guidelines for a campus marijuana strategy or policy.
Evidence-informed Approaches

• Changing attitudes and increasing knowledge:
  – More information about the effects of substance use is warranted.
  – Providing the skills needed to manage substance use could also support students on campus:
    • Evidence shows life skills training can improve coping skills and teach students alternative ways to manage stress.
Evidenced-informed Approaches (cont.)

• Increase access to services and support:
  – Target interventions to different populations;
  – Use appropriate platforms to provide information;
  – Extend service hours; and
  – Use peer-to-peer counselling (e.g., residence advisors) using peers with the right skill set who are provided the resources and training.
Evidenced-informed Approaches (cont.)

- Change the environment on campus:
  - Provide a safe space to discuss issues such as substance use.
  - Re-evaluate current drug policies.
  - Provide harm reduction approaches: “Low-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines.”
  - Provide alternative options, such as substance-free activities.
Conclusion

• More targeted education and awareness about substance use would benefit all campus members.
• Increase in supports and services would help to address the common stresses among students.
• Create safe spaces, use harm reduction, and plan for the legalization of marijuana.
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