

February 22, 2007

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To Andrew,

On behalf of the scientists and research staff at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, I would like to submit this letter in support of the Oregon Tobacco-Free College Initiative. Based on the overwhelming evidence regarding the harms associated with tobacco use, environmental tobacco smoke [ETS] exposure, and the influence of tobacco among potential users, it is imperative that colleges and universities respond to this epidemic with restrictive measures designed to eliminate its use in public spaces.

Tobacco use in the U.S., including Idaho, Oregon, and Washington states continues to be the single largest preventable cause of death and disease; it is responsible for one out of every five deaths (NCI, 1997). Although tobacco use rates have decreased among other population groups, tobacco use among college students has increased markedly in the past decade. In response to this alarming trend, the National Cancer Institute awarded a grant to the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in 2002 that was administered among 30 colleges and universities in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington states. The primary goals of the Campus Health Action on Tobacco [CHAT] Study were to determine if a comprehensive tobacco control program reduces the onset of tobacco use during the college years; increases the quit rate among college students who smoke; and increases tobacco control policies on college campuses.

A random sample of students at all 30 colleges were selected to respond to a Baseline survey at the beginning of the study. The survey inquired about the students' attitudes regarding tobacco use, their use of tobacco products, and their awareness of tobacco use restrictions on their campus. Following the Baseline survey, participating institutions were randomized to either control or intervention status. At the conclusion of the two-year intervention period, another random sample of students were selected to respond to a Final survey among all 30 institutions. Respondents represented students attending public, private, rural, and urban universities, as well as those with a religious affiliation.

When asked about their preference regarding tobacco use on-campus, the majority of both smokers and non-smokers indicated that the university should provide a smoke-free environment for students. When smokers' desire to smoke conflicts with the desire to breathe clean air, the majority of both smokers and non-smokers agree that the desire to breathe clean air should have priority. As part of its overall recommendations for comprehensive tobacco control programs, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC] recommends establishing restrictive smoking policies on-campus because such policies have been shown to reduce smoking initiation rates, increase smoking cessation rates, and reduce exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. Enforcing a restrictive outdoor smoking policy not only protects the health of non-users, but also contributes to a cleaner campus environment.

Current smokers were asked whether the amount they smoke had increased, decreased, or “stayed about the same” since coming to college. The greatest proportion of students responded that their smoking had increased since coming to college, supporting data from prior studies that college is a time of transition for tobacco use. To address the rise in tobacco use among college students and reduce the number of individuals impacted by ETS exposure, several organizations, including the American College Health Association (ACHA), the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA), the American Cancer Society (ACS) recommend that colleges and universities prohibit tobacco use on-campus. By restricting tobacco use, the institution will firmly establish an environment that deters students from developing or continuing a tobacco habit and supports their efforts to quit. More importantly, this measure will contribute to a reduction in tobacco-related illnesses and raise life expectancy.

Reinforcing the value of a tobacco-free campus environment is the fact that tobacco users have lower grade point averages (GPA) than non-tobacco users. The Harvard College Alcohol Study found that smokers are 27.0% less likely than nonsmokers to have an above B grade average (Rigotti, 2000). Daily smokers were found to have even lower GPAs than high-risk drinkers (Halperin and Eytan). Lower individual performance among students results in lower academic standings for colleges.

Compounding the correlation between tobacco use and academic standing is the fact that tobacco use prevalence is lower at highly selective schools. According to the Tobacco Technical Assistance Consortium, the ready accessibility of tobacco can lower a school’s reputation in terms of academic performance and possibly detract from its ability to foster student achievement and attract motivated students. As tobacco use becomes less tolerable throughout society, prospective students and their parents are finding smoke-free campuses increasingly appealing. As schools compete for student enrollment, those who fail to restrict tobacco accessibility may become less favorable in the eyes of their potential enrollees.

In order to understand the perception of tobacco use prevalence on college campuses, survey respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of students at their university who were current smokers. True to previous research findings, students significantly over-estimated the number of tobacco users on their campus and it is this misperception that in turn, creates an environment that is supportive of tobacco use. Correcting beliefs about tobacco use prevalence is an important part of creating a healthier campus environment and when making decisions about its use, it’s important to consider not only the advantages of a tobacco-free campus for students, but the benefits for employees of the institution as well.

When establishing policies regarding tobacco use on-campus, it is worthwhile to note that restricting tobacco use near the entrance and exit of campus buildings will likely result in its increased use and visibility on sidewalks and benches and in parking lots and neighboring areas, which only increases exposure to secondhand smoke and bolsters the impression that a greater number of students use tobacco than actually do. Such a policy is of minimal benefit to the individuals who live, learn, and work on the campus; therefore a complete ban of tobacco use throughout the university is highly recommended.

Institutions that have recently gone tobacco-free cited a concern regarding the potential backlash from students and parents who might view a tobacco-free campus as paternalistic. However, the

overriding sentiment was that a tobacco-free campus would enable the institution(s) to be a leader among schools that they benchmarked themselves against and to become more competitive as a university. Demonstrating that health is a priority has greatly enhanced these tobacco-free institutions' appeal to prospective students and their parents.

Four of the CHAT Study's participating institutions maintained a tobacco-free campus and students concluded that the universities' zero-tolerance policy contributed to cessation efforts among their peers and was responsible for minimal experimentation and initiation.

Although cigarette smoking constitutes the majority of college tobacco use on campuses, other forms of tobacco are also a cause for concern: smokeless tobacco use rates are about 3.7% among college students (Rigotti, 2000). The perception that smokeless tobacco is a safe alternative to smoking is indisputably misguided; one "dip" delivers the same amount of nicotine as three to four cigarettes and stays in the bloodstream longer. Eight to ten "dips" of smokeless tobacco per day contains the same amount of nicotine as 30-40 cigarettes (OCF). Unfortunately, smokeless tobacco rates are increasing among young people in general (National Cancer Institute [NCI], 2003) and while the harms associated with its use appear limited to the user, the fact remains that health-related behaviors are influenced by one's peers, environment, and community. College campuses function as distinct communities and its 'residents' are influenced by an array of factors; therefore one of the most important elements of a comprehensive tobacco control program is addressing the environment in which students make decisions about tobacco use.

Tobacco use and ETS exposure are major public health issues that necessitate immediate action. To this end, the laws and policies restricting tobacco use in the workplace, schools, and other public locations can be credited in large part for the national decline in tobacco prevalence and consumption. Following this lead, colleges are in a crucial position to implement policy changes that promote a tobacco-free campus environment campus and support healthful decisions about tobacco use.

Sincerely,



Beti Thompson, Full Member
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