

# Creating Effective

## SUBSTANCE- USE POLICIES

### for Seventh-day Adventist Campuses

**S**ubstance use on college campuses worldwide has been a source of ongoing concern for many years.<sup>1</sup> Alcohol and drug use has a significant impact on campus life, creating safety concerns and interfering with learning. One of the first steps in crafting an effective prevention program is to develop clearly stated, well-reasoned, and consistently enforced policies that address the challenges faced on each campus, including increasingly diverse student bodies. In a Christian institution, these policies must grow out of

and reflect the core mission of the school. Carefully crafted and widely disseminated policies help institutions communicate predefined boundaries, integrate a redemptive and holistic approach to student discipline, and help ensure the school's accountability to its constituents. Well-crafted policies are critical in helping students understand the dangers of substance abuse and strengthen their decision-making skills, which are essential to the maturation process.<sup>2</sup>

This article will address the role of institutional policies in preventing substance use, the way students' percep-

tions shape their adherence to policies, and the role of redemptive values in policy implementation. Attention will also be given to how to craft school policies based on the authors' research regarding the factors that protect and serve as a buffer against substance use.

State and country laws, community and religious standards, and type of institution influence the manner in which substance-use policies are implemented and upheld. Seventh-day Adventist and other conservative religious institutions of higher education characteristically maintain a zero-tolerance

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policy for substance use both on and off campus, while state-funded public schools and other secular institutions often adopt more lenient measures, such as a “drink responsibly” approach, which does not serve as a deterrent for a great majority of college students.

### The Unique Position of Substance-Free Faith-Based Institutions

Faith-based institutions, whose student behavioral expectations are generally more precisely defined than the expectations of secular institutions, have a greater challenge in developing and

sities allow legal substances to be used or stored in on-campus housing, although more recently, most higher education institutions in the U.S. prohibit the use of tobacco on their campuses.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that many secular universities now offer housing designated as substance-free. These facilities do not permit alcohol, tobacco, smokeless tobacco, and other drugs, whether legal or illegal, to be stored or used on their premises. Most of these substance-free buildings also prohibit residents from being on-site while under the influence, and do not allow any

versity is likely to face more severe consequences, including dismissal.<sup>5</sup>

Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher education have carefully crafted their policies to clearly communicate that the school cares about its students in a holistic way that extends beyond concerns about substance abuse, by promoting a healthy lifestyle that encompasses mind, body, and soul. More specifically, Adventist institutions adopt a whole-person development approach, with most promoting residential campus living where students are nurtured mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. Adult commuting students who drink socially off campus with their family and friends create a special challenge for student-life administrators. When there is a high concentration of those enrollees, administrators may need to create prevention initiatives geared toward older students.

Our schools’ policies on substance use must take into consideration students’ developmental stages, while incorporating both a disciplinary and a redemptive component. The policies should mesh with the church’s belief system and embrace concepts of accountability and grace. This clarity of intent by administrators, as well as an individualized approach to student care and a student population that largely adheres to a religious lifestyle, appears to have contributed significantly to lower substance-use rates on our campuses, according to studies that have been done regarding substance abuse by students.<sup>6</sup>

### Student Development and Decision Making

School psychologist and researcher Arthur Chickering, whose identity-development model is widely regarded as a comprehensive description of the psychosocial maturation of college students, provides great insight on how college students gradually progress from focusing on achieving competence to striving for interdependence and integrity. Chickering identifies seven vectors or developmental milestones that affect decision making in college students.<sup>7</sup> His theory suggests that as students achieve intellectual competence,



articulating policies. Policies at those colleges and universities need to not only reflect institutional expectations, but also clearly communicate to students the distinctive beliefs promoted by the institution.

Whereas secular higher education institutions generally establish policies banning illegal drugs from their campuses as well as the illegal use of alcohol and tobacco by minors, faith-based institutions typically prohibit students from using alcohol and other drugs both on and off campus property. With an older student body no longer restrained by age-of-use laws, many secular univer-

items, even in private residences, that may promote substance use, such as posters, clothing, and other paraphernalia.<sup>4</sup> The policies at these substance-free housing facilities are often similar to those at religious universities, but enforcement may be quite different. A secular university may require a student violating school policies in a substance-free campus residence hall to transfer to a different building, or resolve the issue in some other non-punitive manner; whereas the student who breaks the rules at a substance-free religious uni-

they draw from a larger frame of reference and a wider scope of perspectives, which enables them to derive greater meaning from their life experiences.<sup>8</sup> However, this emerging enlightenment often stimulates a strong desire to explore and test established boundaries in a quest for self-definition.

During this stage of development, young people also pursue greater autonomy and self-sufficiency, and seek to assert their independence. Their decision making is often characterized by a determination to clearly declare themselves as emerging adults, asserting their newfound independence through an embrace of new roles and lifestyles.

Meanwhile, school administrators must create and enforce policies that send a consistent message about institutional expectations. Well-crafted policies attempt to erect boundaries, provide structure, and foster a sense of responsibility and accountability. These guidelines not only describe the school's expectations, but also help to shape the campus culture.<sup>9</sup>

### Student Usage, Policies, and Response

How effective are current substance-use policies? And what kind of policies can schools develop to promote a healthy lifestyle and prevent the negative consequences of substance use? Smoking rates among the general adult population in the U.S. have declined steadily over the past decades and are currently estimated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at 18 percent. Increased public education and greater awareness on the dangers of tobacco may have helped to curb the incidence of smoking in America.<sup>10</sup> Studies have found that students who attend a school with policies banning the use of tobacco on campus property have lower smoking rates than students who attend a school that allows them to smoke on campus.<sup>11</sup> It appears that these smoke-free campus policies, reinforced by anti-smoking campaigns, have raised the levels of awareness of U.S. students, strengthening prevention efforts.

By contrast, the use of alcohol on col-

lege campuses continues to be alarmingly high. Most U.S. campaigns focus on harm reduction, rather than abstinence, with their “drink responsibly in moderation” messages. National campaigns that stress harm reduction may cause students to react negatively toward more restrictive campus policies.

A review of the literature clearly establishes the significant role of peers in student development and decision making.<sup>12</sup> As students seek greater autonomy, moving toward independence, and attempting to establish an identity, they often adopt behaviors they perceive as accepted by their peers. Consequently, if they think that their peers are drinking, they are more likely to consume alcohol.<sup>13</sup> Peer influence is also a significant factor in students' feeling at greater liberty to use substances when off campus, although they may heed their schools' guidelines and refrain from use while on campus.<sup>14</sup>

Although students on Adventist campuses report significantly lower rates of alcohol use than their counterparts at both secular and other religious schools, as well as lower rates of other substance use, some of our youth are using dangerous substances.<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that students surveyed at Adventist colleges and universities confirm that alcohol use occurs primarily off campus, with significantly lower rates observed on campus.<sup>16</sup> The presence of trained residence-hall staff and a strong partnership between academic and student-life professionals may contribute to these lower on-campus rates.

In 2005, 43 percent of public college students in the United States reported heavy intermittent drinking.<sup>17</sup> One might think this is because a number of students reach the legal drinking age while enrolled in higher education, but levels of underage drinking are almost as high.<sup>18</sup> Many students regard drinking as a normal college experience.<sup>19</sup> College-age students' generally positive view of substance use may also be a contributing factor.<sup>20</sup> Becoming a part of the drinking culture is viewed by many young people as a sign of their emerging independence from restrictive parental norms, as well as a way of gaining peer acceptance.

Students surveyed at both public and religious universities perceive substance use by their classmates to be significantly higher than the actual usage levels.<sup>21</sup> The idea that “everyone is doing it” is potentially one of the greater threats to policy and recovery programs because of the large number of students who hold that opinion and also regularly use substances. Drinking serves as a gateway to many other risky behaviors, including the use of other drugs, increased sexual encounters, and increased injuries.<sup>22</sup>

In 2001, a Harvard School of Public Health college alcohol-use study led by Henry Wechsler surveyed students at 119 four-year colleges in 38 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The students in that study represented a national cross-section, with 13 percent attending religiously affiliated colleges. This study concluded that the mere presence of formal substance-use policies may reduce students' substance use in a location where they might be caught, such as on campus, but it did not seem to have any significant effect on whether or not students used the substance at all.<sup>23</sup> The students surveyed were asked to identify policies that they felt were helpful in reducing alcohol consumption on their campuses. Among those they cited were *clarifying alcohol rules, providing more alcohol-free recreational and cultural opportunities, and enforcing policies more strictly.* The researchers concluded that students need to have a clear awareness of school policies, including well-defined disciplinary consequences and rehabilitative procedures.

More than half of the students in that study reported experiencing secondhand effects of alcohol use, which negatively affected their sleep, their study life, and their overall feeling of wellbeing. The Harvard study's conclusions about secondhand effects correlate well with a 2005 study of university freshmen who participated in a lottery roommate assignment project. Some students lived in substance-free housing, while others were assigned roommates with various drinking habits. At the end of the term, freshmen students

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assigned to a roommate who drank prior to college had GPAs that had declined by more than a quarter point.<sup>24</sup> These studies highlight the importance of using peer influence in promoting healthier lifestyles.

The Harvard research results are consistent with many other studies exploring substance use by college students. Borsari, et al.'s 2007 study on predictors of alcohol use among college freshmen<sup>25</sup> also emphasized the need for clear and consistently enforced policies in reducing substance use, as well as promoting a culture of health and wellness. The study further noted the importance of creating policies and prevention programs with specific student characteristics in mind. Some of these factors include developmentally maturing freshmen students with higher levels of sensation-seeking behaviors<sup>26</sup>; male students, who tend to drink at higher rates than female students<sup>27</sup>; and Anglo-American students, who report drinking at higher rates than minority students.<sup>28</sup>

The Borsari study<sup>29</sup> identified policies and prevention measures that may mitigate the use of alcohol among first-year students, such as increased opportunities for developing intrinsic religiosity, an internally motivated approach to living and making personal decisions based

on adopted religious values; partnering with parents, whose influence continues to impact their children's decision making and moderate peer influence; offering strategic screening opportunities to identify students in need of help, especially at the beginning of the academic year; creating service-learning experiences, which provide students with meaningful volunteer opportunities and reduce unstructured leisure time; and disseminating accurate information to counteract misperceptions about the prevalence of student substance use.

Studies have shown that students who believe that their peers have a negative opinion of substance policies are more likely to disregard those policies. If they believe their peers are drinking, they are more likely to do so as well.<sup>30</sup> These studies suggest that social norm campaigns can have a significant effect on policy support, and possibly even on off-campus substance use.<sup>31</sup>

In preparing to write this article, the authors analyzed substance-use policies from online student handbooks of 13 Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities in North America and 10 more in other locations, including Mexico, Europe, and Australia, which provided a fairly accurate representa-

tion of the church's higher education system worldwide. It was evident from the results of this survey that the substance-use policies of our colleges send a clear message of abstinence. As a whole, these schools have adopted substance-use policies that incorporate a graduated response plan of action in order to account for individual student needs. Disciplinary measures typically included the following actions:

1. *In-house suspension* – Typically consists of one or more of the following: citizenship warning; on-campus suspension, which often entails restricted social activities for a determined time frame; referral for assessment and professional help; and, for first-time offenders, enrollment in a psycho-educational group experience, which provides education within a therapeutic context, often offered through the institution's counseling services.

2. *Major suspension* – This option is typically reserved for significant problems, including violations related to illegal substances. The student is often required to enter into an agreement to complete either a drug awareness or rehabilitation program (usually off campus), after which his or her enrollment status may be reviewed. The suspension may result in the student's banishment from school property and all campus activities for one or more academic terms. This disciplinary measure is generally implemented after consultation with parents and community professionals.

3. *Expulsion* – At this stage, students usually have engaged in illegal activities that violate school guidelines, or they may be repeat offenders. All the institutions whose policies were reviewed include this option. Although great care and attention are given to emphasize the redemptive nature of the policies, students ultimately have the choice whether to follow the rules and embrace the healthy culture of care promoted throughout Adventist campuses worldwide.

Most of the colleges and universities surveyed also include in their policies an emphasis on substance-use education, which is often offered through the university's counseling services. Avondale Adventist University in Australia in-

cludes in its student handbook a section on rehabilitative actions that include psychological testing and counseling, pastoral counseling, and education through reading, audio-visual presentations, research, and lectures.<sup>32</sup>

Several institutions also maintain an active prevention program. Andrews University's prevention efforts include presentations on targeted topics throughout each semester, health and wellness fairs, substance-abuse screenings, professional counseling, and psycho-educational group explorations where students participate in a class-like experience led by counselors.

Students are also encouraged to voluntarily seek professional help from a counselor through the institution's counseling services or from the faculty, residence-hall deans, and campus chaplains. Students are also strongly urged to reach out for help by being given the incentive that if they do so voluntarily and are faithful to the recovery plan designed for their rehabilitation, they will not face disciplinary action by the university. However, it remains a challenge to find ways to encourage students to seek help in spite of their fear.

The university works closely with students faced with substance use or abuse challenges to offer restorative opportunities even when the policy calls for separation from the campus. Even suspension is regarded as opening restorative paths that will enable the student to eventually achieve wholeness, return to the academic environment, and ultimately achieve God's purpose for his or her life. The restorative process is an integral part of school policies, and the redemptive dimension of the learning environment is clearly a priority.

The church's U.S. college and university campuses, which have a greater concentration of adult students, are subject to state and federal guidelines with respect to parental notification. These laws, which include the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) guidelines,<sup>33</sup> provide parameters within which parents of adult students can be involved in disciplinary and redemptive interventions. When



**Adventist school drug-prevention efforts include psycho-educational groups led by professional counselors.**

young adult students (ages 18 to 21) violate campus guidelines with respect to substance use, FERPA laws permit disclosure to parents. However, the older adult learner (over the age of 21) usually must make his or her own decisions, and may choose not to share pertinent information with family.

Most campuses collaborate with the local police force regarding unscheduled searches, with or without canine assistance, especially in residence halls. These interventions provide an extra layer of support to the schools' efforts at maintaining drug-free campuses.

Consistent with our commitment to Seventh-day Adventist education, the crafting of policies that reflect our fundamental belief of redemption through grace is a key element in modeling the forgiveness of Christ and the emphasis on both physical and emotional recovery.

### **Reducing At-Risk Behavior**

A large number of U.S. studies focus on factors that foster the development of resiliency in adolescents and young adults, identifying conditions that will reduce the effects of risk. Students who experience protective factors are likely

to demonstrate greater resiliency despite their risk exposure. Benard<sup>34</sup> identified three protective factors with respect to risk behaviors—caring and supportive environments, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation—from among the many researched factors associated with student resiliency.

Since the early 1980s, the Institute for Prevention of Addictions at Andrews University has conducted a quinquennial risk-behaviors study that focuses on identifying protective factors for college-age students. Although the study has yielded comparable findings throughout the years, a recent investigation emphasized two of the protective factors found in Benard's study<sup>35</sup>:

- **Spiritual Commitment.** Students with a meaningful relationship with God, who attend Sabbath school and church services, and have a meaningful prayer life have lower rates of alcohol use. In fact, the greatest correlation with reduced alcohol use was weekly attendance at Sabbath school. This stronger correlation may be explained as follows: Students attending Sabbath school may embrace a culture that includes a strong

commitment to an active spiritual life, thus significantly reducing behaviors that interfere with those activities. In addition, students whose religious commitment led to their engaging in community service also had lower rates of alcohol use. When students are able to actively express their faith through concrete activities such as giving of their time and energy in community service, their religious commitment becomes more intrinsic, and they are less likely to use alcohol.

• **Caring and Supportive Environment.** Students who have a close relationship with their parents, who feel that they can openly communicate with them, and who have strong family bonds also have reduced rates of alcohol use. Family dinner moments seem to be especially critical, providing young adults with opportunities to connect with their parents and other family members in a relaxed setting that facilitates the sharing of feelings and daily challenges. Bernard's study also suggests that students in mentoring relationships with caring and supportive teachers have lower rates of alcohol use. Since a great number of students in our schools live on residential campuses during the school year, interacting with faculty and staff on a daily basis may enable them to remain connected with more experienced adults even as they seek to become more autonomous.

• **Commitment to Personal Health.** Students who have a commitment to healthy living are keenly aware of the health message associated with their faith and are concerned about their health as well as that of their offspring, have lower rates of alcohol use.

Clearly, a significant correlation exists between the lower rates of students' substance use on Adventist campuses of higher education and the protective factors identified in empirical studies. The seamless integration of religious programming with academic life promotes a culture of spiritual nurturing in which students are given a plethora of opportunities to strengthen their spiritual commitment through actively participating in uplifting activities such as church services, residence-hall worship, chapels, volunteer service oppor-

tunities, Sabbath school gatherings, and vespers. Emphasis on prayer and personal devotion further enhances the potential for a deeper one-on-one connection with God, thus providing a more substantial buffer against risk behaviors like substance use.

Moreover, smaller college campus settings, with less-crowded classrooms and greater opportunities for teacher-student connections, promote a culture of care and mentoring relationships, foster a sense of community and genuine support, and contribute significantly to students' decisions to adopt a lifestyle free of substance use. Greater awareness of the church's health message through education and interactive explorations offers an extra layer of protection as emerging young adults, still establishing their personal identity, are exposed to the tenets of Seventh-day Adventist values in a manner that allows them to embrace those principles and assimilate them into their personal lives.

Although college students at Seventh-day Adventist institutions experiment with tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs at significantly lower rates than students on secular campuses and even at other faith-based institutions,<sup>36</sup> policies aimed at further reducing the rate of substance use at Adventist colleges and universities must draw from the identified protective factors to provide students with an academic milieu where expectations and prevention programs are unmistakably interwoven in campus life. As school administrators seek to strengthen their policies in their quest to promote a culture of healthy and wholesome lifestyle, the following considerations may be helpful:

1. *Create an attractive spiritual culture built around the worship experience.* This will encourage greater student participation in church and other religious services, while encouraging them to also develop a stronger intrinsic religious experience, which will foster in them a strong desire to embrace a lifestyle compatible with their religious values.

2. *Develop and expand mentoring relationships involving faculty, staff, church community, and alumni, especially for first-year college students.*<sup>37</sup>

3. *Develop campus-wide awareness programs, giving all students the opportunity to actively participate in small forums and group experiences.* This will enable them to process information on the impact of substance use and the benefits of embracing a healthy lifestyle.

4. *Offer peer-led programming using student leaders committed to a healthy lifestyle who have been trained to effectively connect with their peers.*

5. *Engage in marketing campaigns, with the objective of providing students with accurate information in regard to the levels of substance use by their peers.* As information is disseminated across campus through various media and opportunities are created for student discussions and explorations, students are likely to develop more positive views of campus policies.

6. *While emphasizing redemptive values, create policies that clearly communicate institutional expectations, and enforce them consistently.*

As administrators of higher education develop a vision of the culture they wish to nurture on their campus, they will also need to craft policies to achieve those objectives. Clearly articulated policies provide guidance that helps students achieve clarity of purpose and consistency within an environment conducive to academic learning and a healthy lifestyle. ☞



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