

Faculty, Staff and Student Reactions to a University Smoking Policy: Perception for Change

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The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions held by faculty, staff, and students regarding the smoking policy at a medium-sized, master's granting institution in the Midwestern United States. Findings from the study indicate that the majority of faculty, staff, and students support a change in the school's current smoking policy. Recommendations for further research are provided.

Keywords: Smoking, smoke-free college campus, campus perceptions, health policy

The student senate of one Midwest state funded university surveyed students, faculty and staff regarding the perceptions of smoking on campus. This survey set out to follow-up on the current policy established in 2008. In 2008, members of the university's smoking policy committee made recommendations for a new university smoking policy. The policy addressed the issue of secondhand smoke and the rights of students. The United States Department of Health and Human Services Surgeon General Report of 2006 indicates that secondhand smoke is an avoidable cause of disease and death. In order to protect students, the recommendation included prohibiting smoking 25 feet from any building or bus stop on campus as well as the outdoor sidewalk and bridges on campus. Since these recommendations, there has been no change in the smoking policy on the university's campus. The goal of this study is to review the current policy and compare it to perceptions collected in a more recent survey conducted in February 2014.

Literature Review

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2014), there is no risk-free level of exposure to secondhand smoke, and it is the responsibility of the smokers to make the choice not to smoke in public areas. This may mean smoking in a less populated area or disposing of cigarette litter to minimize on-campus pollution. It is the responsibility of everyone to enforce the policy. The policy is not actively enforced by the campus police, but it is by others, who are expected to report any smoking violation. If the problem persists the university then takes action.

According to the American Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation (2014):
1,372 college or university campuses in the U.S. have adopted 100% smoke-free campus policies that eliminate smoking in indoor and outdoor areas across the entire campus, including residences. Of these, 938 are 100% tobacco-free, and 176 prohibit the use of e-cigarettes anywhere on campus. (para. 1)

In the Midwest, there are several universities that have adopted smoke-free policies, including University of Michigan, the Ohio State University, and University of Chicago (American

Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation, 2015). The policies aimed to respect the rights of those who choose to smoke and non-smokers who did not want to be exposed to second-hand smoke. While this rule is in place, it may not be followed by all smokers. A study found increased levels of carbon monoxide outside non-smoking bars and restaurants in Athens, Georgia (Harris, Stearns, Kovach, & Harrar, 2009). Since smoking was banned indoors, smokers were forced to congregate outside in designated areas, thus creating an unhealthy environment around the building. Those walking in or out of the building were exposed to carbon monoxide gases emitted by second-hand smoke. For this reason, a new smoke-free policy would prohibit smoking and/or tobacco use on all university property, including parking lots and vehicles.

Studies reveal the effectiveness of a campus-wide smoking ban is limited, but one survey comparing Indiana University and Purdue University shows promising results. According to the survey, the percentage of students who agree smoking among students is acceptable declined between 2007 and 2009 (Seo, Macy, Torabi, & Middlestadt, 2011). After implementing a smoking ban at Indiana University, the percentage of student smokers declined 4% (Seo et al., 2011). This is an added benefit to having a smoke-free campus as it poses less risk to the health of students, faculty and staff. Other benefits associated with a smoke-free campus include a cleaner environment and healthier air quality (Berg, Lessar, Parklkar, Thrasher, Kegler, Goldade, & Escoffery, 2011). The disadvantages of a ban on smoking campus wide would be the burden placed on smokers and difficulty enforcing the new rule (Berg et al., 2011). Colleges and universities must also take into consideration international students and their cultural background, since smoking is an acceptable social behavior in some countries, so a smoking ban may have a negative effect on enrollment of international students.

Methods

In February 2014, a survey conducted by the university's student senate set out to address the issue of respect and the current smoking policy. The survey, containing three qualitative and 19 quantitative questions, was sent out by email to a random sample of faculty, staff and students. The survey comprised of questions pertaining to smoking behavior, rights of smokers, and policy enforcement and effectiveness. A total of 2,622 individuals participated in the survey.

Demographics

Participants reported their gender, affiliation with the university (faculty, staff and students), number of years with the university, years anticipated to remain employed or attending the university, and their primary work area on campus.

Smoking Behavior

Participants were asked if they currently or have ever smoked, and if they were smokers, the reasons why they smoked. Those who were current smokers were also asked if they abide and respected the 25 ft. rule set by the university and the areas they usually smoke on campus.

Policy Enforcement

Participants were asked if they see someone smoking less than 25 ft. from a building if they said anything. They were also asked how they thought the enforcement of the policy was

working, as well as thoughts about a better way to enforce it. Finally, participants were asked if smokers respect requests from non-smokers to move to or stop smoking with regards to etiquette.

Attitudes Toward the Smoking Policy

Participants were asked if the university's smoking policy should 1) become 100% tobacco free, 2) become 100% smoke free, 3) become a designated smoke-free campus, or 4) keep the current policy. Following these questions, students reported whether a change from the current policy would change the overall health on campus. Participants were asked if a smoking ban would inhibit the university's ability to recruit international students.

Smoking Rights

Participants were asked if the current smoking policy respected the rights of both smokers and non-smokers. They were also asked if the following were considered a threat to a healthy environment: 1) litter caused by cigarettes, 2) second-hand smoke, and 3) smoking distance from campus buildings.

Attitudes Toward Change

Participants were asked if they would allow the use of electronic cigarettes on campus sites. They were also asked if they would be interested in a tobacco-cessation program and if they were aware of a local health organization offering a six-week program for tobacco cessation. They were then asked to share thoughts on other programs or initiatives they would like to see pertaining to tobacco cessation.

Data Analysis

The study used a 95% confidence interval (CI), which is an interval estimate that indicates the precision, or likely accuracy, of point estimate (Finch & Cumming, 2005). The study obtained 95% confidence intervals for the population proportion using a standard error of $\hat{p} \pm 1.96^*$

Results

There were 1,321 students, 413 faculty, and 547 staff members along with 341 survey participants that preferred not to state their affiliation with the university ($n=2,622$). An overall trend is observed between how long participants planned on being affiliated with the university and their preference for change. Those who planned to attend the university for less than three years were likely to be in favor of keeping the 25 ft. rule. Those who plan to attend the university for more than three years were more likely to prefer a change.

Table 1 provides participant demographics of faculty, staff and students as well as smokers, those trying to quit, occasional tobacco users (including smokeless tobacco), ex-smokers and those who have never used a tobacco product (smoke and smokeless). Faculty, staff and student perception pertaining to a change from the current policy to designated areas or a smoke-free change revealed that the majority of the survey participants believe that a change would impact the overall health of the university.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Sample

| Variable | N | % |
|---------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Total, <i>n</i> | 2,622 | |
| Gender | | |
| Male | 808 | 36.31% |
| Female | 1395 | 62.32% |
| Gender non-conforming | 30 | 1.36% |
| Affiliation with the University | | |
| Student | 1299 | 57.91% |
| Staff | 536 | 18.11% |
| Faculty | 407 | 23.98 |
| Smoking Behavior | | |
| Never Used Tobacco | 1877 | 72.69% |
| Ex-Tobacco User | 305 | 11.97 |
| Trying to Quit | 45 | 1.76 |
| Occasional Tobacco User | 211 | 8.26 |
| Regular Tobacco User | 134 | 5.32 |
| Expected Number of Years* | | |
| Less than 3 years | 794 | 35.82 |
| 3 to 5 years | 672 | 30.44 |
| More than 5 | 747 | 33.73 |

*Number of years projected to be a student or employee at one of the university's campuses.

Confidence Intervals

Based on the survey, we can state with 95% confidence that the population proportion of all students attending the university for less than three years that favored a change in the current smoking policy is somewhere between 63.05% and 70.01%. On the other hand, for all those who are employed at the university for less than three years, we can state with 95% confidence that the proportion that favor change in the current smoking policy is somewhere between 40.73% and 74.44% for faculty and 53.29% and 78.79% for staff.

We can state with 95% confidence that the population proportion of all students attending the university for 3-5 years that favored a change in the current smoking policy is somewhere between 68.03% and 92.92%. On the other hand, for all those who are employed at the university for less than three years, we can state with 95% confidence that the proportion that favor change in the current smoking policy is somewhere between 69.54% and 95.17% for faculty and 62.27% and 82.03% for staff.

We can state with 95% confidence that the population proportion of all students attending the university for more than five years that favored a change in the current smoking policy is somewhere between 72.62% and 97.083%. On the other hand, for all those who are employed at the university for more than five years, we can state with 95% confidence that the proportion that favor change in the current smoking policy is somewhere between 63.68% and 73.70% for faculty and 66.85% and 75.93 for staff.

Overall, even though the length of stay at the university varied, the majority of students, staff and faculty prefer a change regarding the current smoking policy. Note that since all three confidence intervals overlap, students, faculty and staff do not differ significantly regarding their opinion on favoring a change in the current smoking policy. This trend is observed within each group of participants.

Table 2
Length of Time Spent at the University and Affiliation

| Length of time spent at university (in years) | Affiliation | LL | \hat{p} | UL |
|---|-------------|--------|-----------|--------|
| n<3 | Student | 0.6305 | 0.6653 | 0.7001 |
| | Faculty | 0.4072 | 0.5758 | 0.7444 |
| | Staff | 0.5329 | 0.6604 | 0.7879 |
| n=3-5 | Student | 0.6009 | 0.6406 | 0.6803 |
| | Faculty | 0.6953 | 0.8235 | 0.9517 |
| | Staff | 0.6227 | 0.7215 | 0.8203 |
| n>5 | Student | 0.7262 | 0.8485 | 0.9708 |
| | Faculty | 0.6368 | 0.6869 | 0.7370 |
| | Staff | 0.6685 | 0.7139 | 0.7592 |

Note: LL=Lower Limit; \hat{p} =sample proportion; UL= Upper Limit

Table 3
Would the Impact of a Change from the Current Policy to Designated Areas or Smoke-free Change the Overall Health on Campus?

| Affiliation | Yes | No |
|-------------|------|------|
| Students | 68.0 | 32.0 |
| Faculty | 68.2 | 31.8 |
| Staff | 68.1 | 31.9 |

Discussion

This study used a mixed-method survey to evaluate the perceptions of a smoking policy established in 2008 on the university's campus. The findings suggest in 95% confidence that the majority of the faculty, staff and students were in favor of a change in the current policy. Though other higher education institutions within the area have successfully implemented smoke-free policies on their campuses, it is not clear whether administration at the university would be in favor of policy change. Currently, no resolutions have been passed regarding designated smoking areas or a tobacco-free campus; however, data from this survey may impact the decision to pursue a change at the university.

Faculty, staff and student perceptions pertaining to a change from the current policy to a designated area or a smoke-free change revealed that the majority of the participants believed a change would positively impact the overall health of the university. This is relevant when considering tobacco use such as e-cigarettes, which some use as an alternative to cigarettes. Many believe that e-cigarettes aid to quit smoking and are less harmful, but there is little scientific evidence supporting this theory (Sugerman, 2014). Sugerman suggests that this type of nicotine is still harmful and poses a threat to the younger generation. The use of e-cigarettes may soon be regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) because of the nicotine content:

E-cigarettes are currently unregulated at the federal level. But in April 2014 the FDA moved to change that, issuing a proposed rule that would give the agency the authority to regulate e-cigarettes as a tobacco product, banning their sale to people under 18 and prohibiting free samples, among other constraints. (Goldman, 2014, para. 4)

Further scientific evidence is needed to assess the public health standpoint to determine if e-cigarettes should be included in the university smoking policy.

The adoption of a new smoking policy may require monetary support as well. Whether the campus changes to smoke-free or to designated smoking areas, enforcement of the new rules would need to be addressed and this may require a larger police force which would require the monetary funds to support their employment. Should the university decide to implement designated smoking areas, funding is needed to construct some type of shelter in those areas to accommodate smokers. Adopting a smoke-free policy at the university may result in lost revenue from those who do not support the policy and lower enrollment rates from international students who smoke regularly. Overall gains and losses must be assessed before decisions are made.

Limitations

The findings of the current study are not without limitations. First, the sample consisted of faculty, staff and students. The survey was not broken down to address specific demographics such as student standing (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior or graduate), transfer students, race/ethnicity, and international student status. Therefore, generalizations in the data do not consider diversity on this college campus. Second, particular questions in the survey resulted in unclear responses from participants. Participants were asked to express opinions about the current policy, but the current policy was not explained while another question provided two possible answers, which were similar in context. The final limitation pertains to the number of students surveyed. The total student population that received the survey remains unknown. Additionally, there were 341 participants who opted not to respond to the question regarding affiliation with the university. These participants were not included in the data analysis, but had they responded to the question, the results could reveal different conclusions.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this research study demonstrated support for a change in the current smoking policy. Further research is required to evaluate what specific changes are warranted (i.e., 100% smoke-free, 100 % tobacco-free, or designated smoking areas). It is important to note that inquiry by the administration is required to implement any change at the university level, and there are many factors that affect this process. The results from this research study can be used to gain insight into perceptions of faculty, staff and students regarding a change in the smoking policy and perceptions toward overall health of the campus.

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