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# Addressing Substance Use on Canadian Campuses

2<sup>nd</sup> Symposium on Promoting Child and Youth Mental Health  
Anna McKiernan, M.A., and Katie Fleming, M.A.  
Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction  
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# Agenda

- Welcome and Introductions
- Background and Objectives
- Study Method
- Findings
  - Substance Use on Campus
  - Student Challenges
  - Evidence-informed Approaches
- Conclusion



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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.

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## National Priorities and Areas of Action

National Framework for Action (2005):  
*Collective action for collective impact*

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## Background

- Aside from alcohol, the most frequently used drug among Canadian post-secondary students is marijuana, with 18% reporting use in the past 30 days in 2015.
- Around 2% of students reported use of other illicit substances (e.g., cocaine) in the past 30 days in the same year.
- Students have the perception that the majority of their peers (e.g., over 75%) use drugs (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;
- Special focus was given to marijuana use because of upcoming regulation of marijuana in Canada.


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## Method

- We conducted a series of focus groups.
- We recruited participants through contacts that 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.



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## 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.

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## Study Sample

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



## 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.



## Substance Use on Campus (cont.)

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; and
- It is used to address student anxiety and regulate emotions.



## Substance Use on Campus (cont.)

- 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 student focus, but use may extend beyond this period;
  - Perceived as safe;
  - Added benefit of weight loss; and
  - Obtained from other students or a physician.

## Understanding Problematic Use

- What do students view as problematic substance use?
  - If a person is “traditionally addicted”;
  - A person uses a substance drastically out of context or far too often; and
  - If a person’s drug use interferes with their daily life.
- Any use that does not result in these types of behaviours was not considered to be problematic by students.



## 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; and
  - Students had trouble understanding “healthy” negative emotions.
- Students reported being overloaded with information and messaging:
  - Many health-related campaigns are competing for student’s attention.

## Student Challenges (cont.)

- All campuses reported challenges with accessing health services:
  - Biggest issue is lack of staff and resources resulting in long wait times (two weeks to three months);
  - Existing services might not meet student's needs;
  - Services directly addressing substance use often limited to just addiction treatment or referral;
  - Service hours or locations did not facilitate accessibility; and
  - Participants felt that some counsellors did not relate well with students or were inconsistently available.

## 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:
    - Life Skills Training can improve coping skills and teach students alternative ways to manage stress
    - Evidence shows that this training can promote problem solving and critical thinking and prevent substance use for post-secondary students

## 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 [RAs]):
    - RAs should have strong interpersonal skills, high personal standards and an interest in outreach;
    - Provide RAs with resources (time, support, personnel); and
    - Train RAs in self-care, the availability of campus resources and the effects of substance use.

## Evidenced-informed Approaches (cont.)

- Change the environment on campus:
  - Providing students a safe space to discuss the issue of substance use will increase open communication and dialogue.
  - Campuses can 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 regarding the effects of substance use and mixing substances would benefit all campus members.
- Increase in the provision of supports and services would help to address the common stresses among students.
- Create safe space for open dialogue, use harm reduction interventions, provide alternative options and plan for the legalization of marijuana.

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## CCSA Resources

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## Contact Information

**Anna McKiernan**  
Research and Policy Analyst  
[amckiernan@ccsa.ca](mailto:amckiernan@ccsa.ca)

**Katie Fleming**  
Knowledge Broker  
[kflaming@ccsa.ca](mailto:kflaming@ccsa.ca)

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