

Perception vs. Reality: Marijuana Usage among College Students

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Michael Phelps, Olympic champion swimmer, sparked a national debate about marijuana when pictures of him with a marijuana smoking device were made public. The evening news, talk shows, and radio shows were flooded with stories and calls about the incident. In recent years, a number of fraternity incidents tied to possession, use, and distribution of marijuana have been seen. While it seems everybody had an opinion about these incidents, what was lost in the public debate was valuable dialogue regarding the harmful effects of marijuana use.

Marijuana comes from the cannabis plant, and when smoked, more than 400 chemicals are taken into the body. One of the main chemicals found in marijuana is tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Marijuana is classified as a psychoactive drug because THC alters and acts upon the brain. THC enters the bloodstream where it is absorbed by most tissues and organs of the body. THC affects users within the first ten minutes, reaching its peak in 30 minutes, and lasting about two to six hours. Marijuana is both a depressant and hallucinogen. The experiences one has while using marijuana can vary based upon how the brain responds to the drug. Some users cite a state of relaxation and calm, while others become defensive, depressed, and paranoid. Other users have noted feeling that everything is funny (The BACCHUS Network, 2006).

The data on student marijuana usage at any given campus can range from 5% to 40%. However, the 2007 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) reported that 12.7% of college students reported using marijuana in the past thirty days. Additionally, 31.2% reported using marijuana in their lifetime (American College Health Association, 2008). The 2006 Core Institute reported similar numbers; in the past 30 days, 16.7% reported usage and 30.1% reported usage in their lifetime (The Core Institute, 2007). A comparison of prior NCHA studies show that marijuana usage in the past 30 days peaked in 2003 at 19.1% and has steadily decreased since (American College Health Association, 2008).

Misperceptions are plentiful. One of the challenges in addressing college marijuana use is that students tend to misperceive the usage rate among their peers. The 2007 NCHA surveyed students about their perceptions of the marijuana usage rate for the typical student. Eighty percent of the survey respondents believed their peers used marijuana in the past thirty days, clearly overestimating usage. Studies have noted that, despite the actual campus norm, college students tend to behave in accordance with what they believe to be the expectations and behaviors of their peers. Many campuses are now working to combat these misperceptions by focusing their prevention efforts on the actual campus norms (American College Health Association, 2008).

It is important for fraternity and sorority professionals and volunteers to understand the actual campus norms in order to reinforce and promote healthy and positive behaviors. To influence behavior, start by challenging the misperceptions that exist on your campus or in your organization. When a student says, "A lot of students smoke marijuana here, it's no big deal," respond, "Actually that's not true; 80% of our students do not smoke marijuana."

Students also often have a misperception about the effects of marijuana, believing that it can help one to relax, be creative, and concentrate. However, marijuana has a number of serious effects. Educate yourself on the harmful effects of marijuana use to correct some of the misperceptions.

The risks to marijuana users are extensive.

- The short term effects of marijuana use include memory loss, distorted perception, trouble with thinking and problem solving, loss of motor skills, decrease in muscle strength, increased heart rate, and anxiety. As a result, many college students struggle in classroom performance.
- According to the National Institutes of Health (2008), someone that smokes five joints per week may be taking in as many cancer-causing chemicals as someone who smokes a full pack of cigarettes every day.
- Smoking marijuana weakens the immune system and raises the risk of lung cancer.
- In 2004, 298,000 people entered treatment for marijuana abuse and dependence (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2005).
- Marijuana users have delayed responses while operating a motor vehicle.
- Marijuana has been used to treat patients dealing with nausea and vomiting resulting from cancer chemotherapy. However, advances in medicine today have resulted in more and better options in dealing with these medical conditions. The American Medical Association continues to recommend that marijuana remain a Schedule I controlled substance (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.).

Despite the misperceptions about marijuana and its usage on college campuses, studies continue to show that 87.3% of college students are abstaining from marijuana use (American College Health Association, 2008).

Professionals can continue to foster growth and development among students by educating them and reinforcing healthy behaviors on campuses. This can be accomplished by challenging the perceived norms, educating on actual norms, and promoting healthy behaviors.

References

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The BACCHUS Network™ provides a number of resources on substance use and abuse. If you have any questions or comments feel free to contact Cody Siewert at cody@bacchusnetwork.org or 303-871-0901.