

Creating a Culture of Health: Utilizing Service-Learning to Address Tobacco Products use on College Campuses

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Abstract

The use of electronic nicotine delivery system (ENDS) tobacco products is rapidly rising among adolescents and young adults. These products are often fruit or candy flavored and are heavily marketed to attract youth. ENDS products also contain nicotine, a highly addictive substance which can harm the developing brain and predispose youth to future tobacco product and other substance use.

Students in an upper level undergraduate Educational Psychology course participated in a semester-long service-learning project which utilized a positive community norms approach as a means to address the health risks associated with ENDS products use among college students. The goal of the service-learning project was to engage students in an educational effort to change community perceptions and ultimately reduce the rate of tobacco products use among the college population. The success of the service-learning initiative ultimately contributed to a university system tobacco-free campus policy shift.

This article demonstrates that a service-learning project utilizing a positive community norms approach can cultivate a long-lasting, cultural transformation on a college campus. Students participating in the project indicated that the service-learning experience provided them with a meaningful opportunity to make a positive contribution to the overall health and well-being of their campus community.

Keywords: College Students, Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS), Health Promotion, Positive Community Norms.

Literature

ENDS Use among College Students

The increasing use of electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), is a concerning global health trend especially among adolescents and young adults (Cooper, Loukas, Harrell, & Perry, 2017; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2018; Yoong et al., 2018).

Research clearly demonstrates that tobacco exposure at any age has negative health effects, and is especially harmful among the adolescent and young adult population. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016)

All the major tobacco companies now own e-cigarette brands and the same advertising tactics used to lure young people to traditional cigarettes are being used to market e-cigarettes (Kessel, 2014; Pepper, Sherry, Ribisl, & Southwell, 2014). Aggressive marketing results in increased e-cigarette use and nicotine exposure which can harm the developing brain. Moreover, the widespread availability and popularity of fruit and candy flavored e-cigarettes attracts youth to these products with majority of first time use being flavored products (Zhu et. al., 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Nicotine exposure during adolescence also impacts learning, memory, and attention (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Furthermore, there is a link between dual use of traditional cigarettes and e-cigarettes which can result in increased consumption of nicotine and subsequent nicotine addiction (Cooper, Loukas, Harrell, & Perry, 2017). The use of nicotine products in adolescence can also increase risk for future addiction to other substances (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Even if adolescents do not progress to future cigarette smoking, any e-cigarette use among young people is considered unsafe (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Utilizing Service Learning to Promote Positive Community Health Norms

A multi-campus study conducted at the University of Hawaii demonstrated that e-cigarette use behavior within a college students' family or circle of friends not only normalized the behavior but also encouraged others to model the behavior (Scholly, Garcia, Dodge & Pokhrel, 2018). This research indicates that as e-cigarettes continue to become more prevalent on college campuses, increased visibility could lead to renormalization of the use of all tobacco products and increased levels of use among the college student population (Scholly, Garcia, Dodge & Pokhrel, 2018). In response to these findings, a service-learning project was developed to address perceptions related to ENDS use and to promote positive community norms associated with a tobacco-free campus.

Service-learning is a type of experiential learning which is becoming an increasingly valued form of pedagogy in higher education. College students often identify experiential activities outside of class as the most impactful for their learning (Qualters,

2010). Service-learning programs are distinguished from other types of experiential education because they promote equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (Furco, 1996). The benefits for students include positive impacts on social skills, increased awareness of community issues and resources, improved motivation, and enhanced knowledge (Rosenkranz, 2012). Furthermore, service-learning programs are associated with positive engagement of students beyond the classroom, enriching the university and the local community (Qualters, 2010).

Research has shown that service-learning is an effective vehicle for disseminating health education and developing public health literacy and policy (Cashman & Seifer, 2008). service-learning allows students to address the multiple factors that affect community health. service-learning opportunities also help students understand that all communities have health assets and that strengthening these assets can effectively reduce the community's level of high-risk health behaviors (Cashman & Seifer, 2008).

The positive community norms approach focuses on promoting positive behavioral change for the good of the individual and the community (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). The approach aligns itself well with service-learning projects because it allows students to be actively engaged in efforts that promote positive behavioral change for the good of the individual and the community (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Research has shown that positive community norms educational messages portray healthy choices as expected behavior and can result in increased protective behaviors and lowered health risks on a college campus (Perkins, Haines, & Rice 2005).

Methods

The Positive Community Norms Approach

A positive community norms approach was used to guide a service-learning project in an upper division Educational Psychology course. The purpose of the initiative was to provide education regarding the high-risk health consequences ENDS use and ultimately reduce the rates of ENDS use on campus. The core assumption of a positive community norms approach is that positive health behaviors exist and are worth expanding upon within a community. Although these steps are presented as if they are linear, many of the steps overlap and are utilized in a cyclical process (Linkenbach, 2003; The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Step 1: Planning and Environmental Advocacy. The purpose of this step is to build the infrastructure for the education campaign and begin to engage in the work. An Educational Psychology course that focuses on an in-depth analysis of contemporary societal issues was chosen as the infrastructure for the service learning project. The course was selected because the curriculum provides extensive information regarding adolescent/young adult health issues, including tobacco control issues.

Step 2: Gather Baseline Data. This second step requires an assessment of the actual and perceived norms within community groups. Survey data collected from a randomized sample of undergraduates was used to determine ENDS use behaviors. Service-learning students also gathered qualitative observational data using a campus-wide tobacco-use assessment tool to identify campus locations on campus where students were most likely to use ENDS products.

Step 3 and 4: Message Development and Communication Plan. PCN communication efforts involve developing messaging for formal media campaigns, poster campaigns, focused conversations, or education programs. Communication efforts are designed to heighten awareness and close normative gaps. The University of Hawaii-Manoa campus survey data indicated that college students often misperceived and underestimated the risk associated with ENDS use as well as overestimated the rate of ENDS use among their college peers. Based on these survey results, the service-learning students brainstormed what empirical data and what images should be included in the campaign that could correct these misperceptions.

Step 5: Pilot Testing and Refining. To optimize the outcomes of a PCN campaign, the messaging should be reviewed and refined before implementing the campaign community-wide. The service-learning students were actively engaged in the development of the educational messages and evaluating their effectiveness. The service-learning students also developed a system to monitor the saturation and sustainability rate of the campus-wide campaign on a weekly basis.

New messaging was developed to keep the campaign fresh and relevant. “We are smarter than that, because there is no safe way to use tobacco products”, was one of the primary tagline messages that the service-learning students included throughout the positive community norms campaign. For example, when the ENDS product Juul became available on the market, the campaign was modified to include information about the addictiveness of this new device.

Step 6: Campaign Implementation. The purpose of the sixth step is to implement the strategies on a larger campus-wide scale with ongoing monitoring and seeking campaign sustainability. Service-learning students involved in the ENDS campaign became recognized as the leaders of this campus-wide health promotion effort. The students took ownership for saturating the campus community with the ENDS education poster campaign and monitoring the strategic placement of the campaign throughout 15 academic buildings and 12 residence halls, reaching the vast majority of the 12,000 undergraduate students on campus. The service-learning students also actively promoted ENDS education in numerous classroom presentations and health fairs and through various social media platforms, reaching an estimated additional 2,000 students. The service-learners periodically gathered survey and observational data from their peers which provided feedback on accuracy, appeal, and believability of the campaign messages.

Step 7: Evaluation and Future Needs. The purpose of the 7th step is to determine what has been effective in changing behavior, what needs still exist and how to best apply this knowledge in the future. Through systematic evaluation and reflection, the service-learning students recognized that the ENDS campaign had been effective in heightening awareness and influencing behavior on campus and among their student peers. However, the service-learners also identified that there was still a need to further reduce the use of ENDS products, particularly in certain highly trafficked areas on campus. As a result, the service-learning students became involved in policy development efforts with other statewide tobacco control groups. The students took what they learned about ENDS use on campus and presented it in the form of written and oral testimony during legislative sessions. This expanded educational effort led to sweeping health policy changes and resulted in the passing of State law prohibiting the use of any tobacco products, including ENDS on all 10 University of Hawaii campuses.

In addition to evaluating the effectiveness of the ENDS education campaign which led to sweeping campus policy change, it was also important to evaluate the overall experience of the students who participated in the service-learning project. Qualitative feedback was gathered from the students' reflection journals at the conclusion of the service learning project. The students' narrative data demonstrated positive outcomes, including a strong sense of student engagement and accomplishment throughout a year-long project which resulted in a tobacco-free campus community. One service-learning student reflected, "even though I knew about these issues, I was not sure if I could even make a difference; but this thought was immediately changed after helping with the passing of the bill to ban smoking on all UH campuses. I was inspired that there were other people who were passionate about this issue and wanted to do something to change it. Because of all those people, the bill was passed. That is really inspiring to me."

Another student stated, "by simply posting posters throughout campus, and table-ing at fairs and drives we, the students, are spreading awareness about serious health issues on our campus, how we can prevent these issues, and what we can do as a community to help out. The point of these events are to prevent future health issues from arising on campus, and that is what is so vital about public health, awareness and prevention. I am grateful that I was able to partake in it this semester."

Another student discussed the link between classroom learning and service learning activities. "My favorite part of this semester was being able to do service hours in a variety of ways. One of the most interesting things that I found in this class was when we followed the tobacco free bill. I had never really had an interest in public policy, so playing a part in helping this bill pass and following it through the process was really cool. In class I learned how to write testimony which is a very useful tool if I really want to make a change. Learning how the process works and how to play a part in it, will definitely be something that I can take from this class and apply it later on."

One student reflected on the use of service-learning as a means to influence health behaviors on a college campus. "Service-learning allows us to work in the community and make the changes that we desperately need to see, and college campuses are a prime

spot to start that change. Through service-learning and through education we are able to apply what we've learned and how to attract other people to push the agenda. Creating a campaign isn't the hardest part of advocating for a tobacco-free campus, it's the execution and how we can get students to get involved and then use our resources to help others."

Finally, a student poignantly summed up their overall experience with the ENDS education campaign by saying, "Service-learning makes students feel like they are a part of something greater. When walking through campus I see all the signs and stickers put up by me and my fellow classmates and it makes me feel proud that I am helping create a change at our school."

Conclusion

Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful service and when applied can ultimately strengthen communities. Service-learning initiatives influence students' personal development and civic responsibility, which can allow them to apply their classroom learning to address key college health issues. This paper demonstrates that service-learning initiatives utilizing a positive community norms educational approach can heighten awareness and contribute to both behavioral and policy change. The success of this project also suggests that the positive community norms approach can be used by college health professionals and campus administrators to address other health issues, such as alcohol or substance misuse. The melding of service-learning and positive community norms education can ultimately create a cultural of health and well-being for all members of the campus community.

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