

Contacts: Jeremiah Gardner, 952-232-8109, jjgardner@hazeldenbettyford.org
Richard Parr, The MassINC Polling Group, 617-224-1628, rparr@massincpolling.com

Survey: college administrators see problems as more students view marijuana as safe

Colleges look for ways to address the issue amid changing public attitudes

College Park, MD (Oct. 17, 2017) – A majority of college administrators in a new survey say that more students believe marijuana to be “safe,” drawing concern that changing attitudes about marijuana might have downstream effects on college campuses. Administrators say the number of students with marijuana-related problems has either increased (37 percent) or stayed the same (32 percent), while almost none say such problems have lessened. And while they report a variety of negative impacts of marijuana use, and acknowledge the need to address the problem, they are also dealing with gaps in information and policy.

These are among the findings in a groundbreaking new survey of higher education officials by the Mary Christie Foundation and the Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy in conjunction with the National Association of System Heads (NASHE). The survey of 744 professionals in academic affairs, student affairs and student health was conducted by The MassINC Polling Group and released today at a national forum on college student substance use at the University of Maryland College Park.

According to the survey results, administrators agree colleges should implement strategies to reduce student marijuana use, but relatively few think their own campuses are emphasizing the issue. Survey respondents said barriers to tackling the problem include lack of information about effective approaches, and limited coordination and training. Their responses also indicated more awareness of the problem among officials on the front lines of student health compared to those in academic affairs or other administrative roles.

“This survey underscores what many of us have been worried about: although data show that consistent marijuana use is a serious threat to students’ wellbeing and academic performance, there is a lack of urgency to address the problem in meaningful ways,” said Robert Caret, Chancellor of the University System of Maryland, Vice Chairman of the Mary Christie Foundation, and Chairman of NASHE. “While it is encouraging that administrators see a role for colleges in addressing this issue, we need more active leadership to share information and coordinate the response.”

Public health experts have long warned that regular marijuana use among college students can lead to impaired memory, lack of motivation (i.e., skipped classes), and problems with information processing and executive functioning. Marijuana use also overlaps significantly with excessive drinking and other substance use, rather than being a substitute, and is associated with mental health problems and an increased risk for psychosis in vulnerable individuals, among other health risks.

The survey demonstrated significant knowledge gaps on these issues among college administrators, but the need for training to learn more was clearly acknowledged.

Between 2014 and 2016, the annual prevalence of marijuana use among college students increased by 14 percent. In addition, the perception of harm and risk associated with regular marijuana smoking among 18- to 22-year-olds has decreased from about 58 percent in 2000 to about 33 percent in 2015, just as more states have legalized marijuana for medical and recreational use.

“Colleges find themselves on the front lines of this shift in attitudes and are playing catchup, in terms of education and training, as problems continue to grow,” said Nick Motu, Vice President of the Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy. “We know marijuana is not benign, and we need to continue to educate our young people on the risks of marijuana use and help those who develop problems. This is a serious issue for students, their families and our wider society as schools prepare students for the demands of a rapidly changing and highly competitive workplace.”

Among the key findings:

- Seven in 10 administrators said that the number of students with marijuana-related problems on campus had either increased (37 percent) or stayed the same (32 percent) over the past three years. A majority (54 percent) of respondents believe the number of students who perceive marijuana to be safe has increased over the past three years.
- A majority (55 percent) report marijuana use in college residence halls; 41 percent have observed academic problems related to marijuana use, and 36 percent have seen student mental health issues. 63 percent agreed that students who use marijuana are more academically disengaged than non-users.
- Eight in ten (79 percent) believe college campuses should implement policies and programs to effectively reduce marijuana among college students, but only a third think their campus is putting a great deal (5 percent) or a fair amount (28 percent) of emphasis on preventing marijuana use right now.
- Majorities think that a lack of resources, coordination and information are barriers to successful marijuana prevention and enforcement on campus. Student opposition is also seen as a concern.
- There is a large gap in knowledge and perception of the issue between administrators on the frontlines of combatting substance abuse (health and wellness, prevention, residential life, and campus safety) and those a step removed (academic and student affairs). Majorities of the first group think that marijuana use is a serious problem on their campuses, while majorities of the latter group think it is not.
- One way to address this gap could be to improve training and information sharing. Majorities of all types of administrators are interested in receiving training on how to handle various aspects of marijuana use among students, including impacts on student health and well-being and academic success.

- Administrators say marijuana is not treated as seriously as alcohol. Screening for marijuana use is less common than screening for alcohol, and administrators are not fully aware of research that shows marijuana is associated with as many academic problems as drinking and that a majority of marijuana users also drink to excess.

Experts are urging colleges to collect more regular data regarding the scope and consequences of student marijuana use and to utilize evidence-based public health approaches to intervention. They are also calling for better coordination among college departments and top-down communication that puts all those who support students on the same page.

“The primary mission of every institution of higher education is to promote student success,” said Dr. Amelia Arria, Director of the Center on Young Adult Health and Development at the University of Maryland School of Public Health. “These new data from the unique vantage point of college administrators indicate that marijuana use is a barrier to student achievement. Therefore, leaders of these institutions should intensify their efforts to develop comprehensive, scientifically-informed solutions to reduce student substance use.”

The new survey was released at today’s national forum entitled, **“College Substance Use: New Solutions to a Perennial Problem,”** at the University of Maryland College Park. National leaders in higher education, policymaking and substance use prevention and treatment convened to discuss the latest trends, challenges and innovations in preventing and addressing substance use on America’s college campuses.

Hosted by the Mary Christie Foundation the Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy and the University of Maryland School of Public Health, the event featured a panel of five university presidents, and several notable speakers. The Presidents’ Panel consisted of:

- Marty Meehan (President of the University of Massachusetts)
- Kim Schatzel (President of Towson University)
- Wayne Frederick (President of Howard University)
- Gregory Crawford (President of Miami University)
- Tom Sullivan (President of the University of Vermont)

Video of the entire event can be viewed at www.wirestream.tv/customer/studiobdc/2017/10-17/, and the full survey results are available at marychristiefoundation.org/reports/.

About the Poll

These results are based on a national survey of college campus officials conducted online between September 4 and 25, 2017. Seven-hundred forty-four officials began the survey, and 523 completed it. Respondents were contacted via an email distributed by the National Association of System Heads (NASH) to its members, to be shared with relevant administrators on campuses. The survey was also distributed to members of the American College Health Association (ACHA) via their listserv. The final data were weighted to better match the distribution of higher education institutions across census regions, using data from the National Center for Education Statistics. The poll was conducted by The MassINC Polling Group for the Mary Christie Foundation and the Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy in conjunction with NASH.

About the Mary Christie Foundation

The Mary Christie Foundation is a thought leadership and philanthropic organization dedicated to the health and wellness of teens and young adults. With world-renowned experts in health care policy, public health, behavioral health and higher education, the Foundation contributes to the examination and resolution of the most pressing, and often overlooked, health issues facing young people. Learn more at www.marychristiefoundation.org.

About the Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy

Our mission is to provide a trusted national voice on all issues related to addiction prevention, treatment and recovery and to facilitate conversation among those in recovery, those still suffering and society at large. We are committed to smashing stigma, shaping public policy and educating people everywhere about the problems of addiction and the promise of recovery. The Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy is part of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, the nation's largest nonprofit treatment provider. Learn more at www.HBFInstitute.org and on Twitter [@hbfinstitute](https://twitter.com/hbfinstitute).