

Comparing Students' Tobacco-Related Attitudes at UNLV in 2012 and 2022

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Abstract

Over 2,000 colleges and universities in the United States have implemented a campus-wide smoke-free policy. Prior to implementation of a comprehensive campus tobacco-free and smoke-free policy in Fall 2022 at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), students were surveyed about their tobacco use attitudes and behaviors. This study compared tobacco attitudes of UNLV students in the Spring 2022 semester to those of 2012 UNLV students obtained through cross-sectional surveys. Using chi-square tests of independence, results indicate the majority of students in both years preferred to socialize in smoke-free environments (2012: 74.2%, 2022: 84.6%), though the difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2=20.0$, $p<0.001$). More students believed university administration was responsible for enacting a tobacco-free policy in 2022

(74.8%) than in 2012 (67.9%; $\chi^2=7.7$, $p=0.006$), and, 85.1% of students in 2022 believed that enacting a tobacco-free policy was fairly important, a 9.8% point increase from 2012 ($\chi^2=18.58$, $p<0.001$). Lastly, similar beliefs that smoking is a serious health hazard were observed in 2022 (72.2%) and 2012 (71.9%; $\chi^2=0.01$, $p=0.88$), and a lower—though not statistically significant—proportion of students felt second-hand smoke exposure was a serious health hazard in 2022 (52.4%) than in 2012 (56.6%; $\chi^2=2.5$, $p=0.12$). This study demonstrates that student attitudes and perceptions generally align with support for a campus-wide tobacco-free policy in both years, with some important changes when comparing responses over time.

Keywords

policy, smoke-free, college students, tobacco, tobacco-free, smoking behavior

Introduction

Tobacco use remains the leading preventable cause of disease, disability, and death in the United States (U.S.) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Smokers are three times more likely to die prematurely than their non-smoking peers (CDC, 2020a). Nearly half a million adults prematurely die annually due to tobacco use in the U.S. (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2021). In addition to premature mortality, smokers may experience harm to nearly all organs of the body, leading to the development of several chronic conditions, including chronic bronchitis, emphysema, vascular disease, and certain cancers (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2021). Despite these harms, and although smoking is down about eight percentage points from 2005 among U.S. adults, in 2020, about 13% of U.S. adults still currently smoke. This translates to about 30.8 million adults (CDC, 2022a). In Nevada, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey data indicates that 14.2% of Nevada adults currently smoke cigarettes which translates to about half a million Nevadans (CDC, 2021).

Smoking is also harmful to people around a smoker. A plethora of harms are associated with exposure to secondhand smoke (SHS) (CDC, 2020a). Research consistently shows that there is no risk-free level of exposure to SHS (CDC, 2020a). Individuals who are exposed to SHS have an increased risk in developing lung cancer by 20-30%, and even brief exposure to SHS can begin damaging blood vessels and increase the risk of heart attack (CDC, 2020a). SHS exposure is also associated with coronary heart disease, stroke, and lung cancer in nonsmoking adults (CDC, 2020a).

Adolescence and early adulthood are critical time periods for tobacco-related behaviors. Over 90% of adults who smoke daily begin smoking before they turn 18 (CDC, 2022), and over 99% of adults who smoke daily begin smoking by age 26 (CDC, 2022). For adolescents, middle- to high school-aged minors are disproportionately affected by tobacco use. In 2021, approximately 2.55 million U.S. middle and high school students reported currently using tobacco products (Food and Drug Administration (FDA), 2022). Nationally, 19.5% of middle and high school students reported using tobacco products (FDA, 2022). In Nevada, 21.4% of high school students reported current tobacco product use (Nevada Cancer Coalition et al., n.d.) and 3.6% of youth reported smoking cigarettes (CDC, 2021a). Youth tobacco consumption has recently increased due partly to the popularization of electronic nicotine delivery system (ENDS) products and "vapes." Youths who use multiple tobacco products and/or ENDS products are at a higher risk for developing nicotine dependence and might be more likely to continue using tobacco into adulthood (CDC, 2022).

University students' previous experience with tobacco products might influence their health-related beliefs, social perception of smoking, and behavior patterns, such as continuing smoking in adulthood (NCBI, 2012). Young adults, generally defined as ages 18 to 25, make up a significant proportion of the college student population and are particularly vulnerable to becoming regular smokers. Transitioning from youth to young adulthood also comes with dramatic social change; individuals are put into different social settings, such as work or new education environments, and their values, behaviors, and peer groups can change (Hammond, 2005). Results from the American College Health Association (ACHA) nationwide survey of university students (undergraduate, graduate, and professional) indicated that 22,000 respondents (33%) reported nicotine usage in their life (ACHA, 2022).

As such, colleges and universities provide a key environment to either prevent the initiation of or aid in cessation of tobacco product use. Promoting smoke-free and tobacco-free campuses is an important avenue to target tobacco use among young adults (Wang et al., 2018). As of 2017, over 2,000 U.S. college and university campuses were smoke-free, while 84% were tobacco-free (Wang et al., 2018). Smoke-free campus policies are connected to improvements in health. By reducing the number of cigarettes smoked per day and supporting cessation and lower smoking rates, smoke-free policies serve as an environmental intervention that influences behavior and positively impacts the health of current smokers (CDC, 2018). For previously exposed non-

smokers, the introduction of smoke-free policies is associated with a decrease in reported respiratory problems, improved cardiovascular health, and improved lung function (Hyland, 2012). In conjunction with broader laws (e.g., Tobacco21; Dobbs et al., 2021), instituting smoke-free and tobacco-free policies can reduce the burden of tobacco-related diseases for young adults.

Effective August 15, 2022, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) prohibits smoking, vaping, and other tobacco use on the UNLV campus (University of Nevada, Las Vegas, n.d.). This new policy applies to all UNLV properties and restricts tobacco or ENDS product use indoors and outdoors. It goes beyond the previously approved smoke-free policy, which prohibited smoking indoors and within 25 feet of buildings.

To understand tobacco use attitudes and behaviors of UNLV students after the policy was approved but before it took effect, this study compared tobacco attitudes and behaviors of UNLV students in the Spring 2022 semester to those of previous UNLV students in 2012.

Methods

Data for the present study were collected from students through a cross-sectional survey administered between April 18 and June 16, 2022. Results were compared against previous student attitude survey data collected in 2012 and sponsored by the Southern Nevada Health District (SNHD).

A total of 172 classes were randomly selected from different units (e.g., College of Hospitality, School of Public Health, College of Engineering) to participate in the survey. Course instructors were contacted via email and asked to distribute a Qualtrics survey link through the e-learning platform (i.e., Canvas) or by email to all students enrolled in the selected course(s). A second wave of sampling was employed to gather additional responses by distributing the survey through Rebel Announcements Via Email (RAVE), a university service that distributes a weekly electronic email containing various happenings and announcements to all registered student emails. A total of 29 classes responded and agreed to participate in the survey. Participants who completed the survey were entered into a raffle to win one of 30 gift cards valued at \$25 each. Data were collected anonymously, and the study was deemed exempt by the UNLV Institutional Review Board.

Participants were presented with five questions regarding their perceptions and attitudes about smoking, tobacco, and related policies: (1) "Would you prefer to socialize in a smoke-free environment?" [yes or no], (2) "In general, do you

feel that smoking is a [serious, moderate, minor, or not a] health hazard?”, (3) “In general, do you feel that secondhand smoke is a [serious, moderate, minor, or not a] health hazard?”, (4) “Do you think it is the responsibility of the school’s administration to enact a policy that protects the campus community from secondhand smoke?” [yes or no] and, (5) “In your opinion, how important is it to enact a comprehensive tobacco-free policy?” [not important at all, fairly important, very important, and unsure]. All questions asked for the 2022 survey were the same as questions asked for the 2012 survey. To compare differences in attitudes, a series of chi-square tests of independence were employed to examine differences between the 2022 survey data and the 2012 data.

Results

A total of 397 students participated in the 2022 survey. A majority of participants identified as White and non-Hispanic. The mean age of student participants was 25.32 years (SD=7.45); at the time of the 2022 survey, about 70.9% of UNLV students were ages 18 to 24 in 2022 (UNLV Office of Decision Support, 2022). A majority of participants identified as female (69.95%). An overwhelming majority of participants, 90.63% (n=363), were non-smokers and 8.56% (n=34) were smokers. Smokers were defined as smoking tobacco products in the last 30 days (not including electronic nicotine delivery systems or ENDS). About 10.37% (n=41) reported using only ENDS products, and 3.5% (n=14) reported using both smoking products and ENDS. Table 1 contains additional data about the 2022 survey participants. A total of 2,525 students participated in the 2012 survey. Demographic data for the 2012 sample are not available.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants in the 2022 Survey from a Sample of University of Nevada, Las Vegas Students

Variable	Number	Percentage (%)
Race (n=391)		
White	202	51.66
Asian/Asian-American	94	24.04
African American/Black	15	3.83
Middle Eastern or Arab	8	2.04
American Indian or Native	4	1.02
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	0.25
Biracial or Multiracial	39	9.97
Other	28	7.16
Ethnicity (n=394)		
Non-Hispanic/Not Latino	295	74.4
Hispanic/Latino	102	25.6
Age (n=397)		
18-24	236	59.45
25 or older	161	40.55
Sex (n=396)		

Male	119	30.05
Female	277	69.95
Smoking Status (n= 397)		
Cigarette Smoker	22	5.54
Non-Smoker	375	94.46
Current Tobacco Product Usage (n=397)*		
Tobacco Products	34	8.56
ENDS Products	39	9.82
Both ENDS and Other Tobacco Products	13	3.27
Class Enrollment Status (n=394)		
Full Time (12 or more credits)	348	88.32
Part Time	46	11.67
Type of Learning (n=394)		
Fully In-Person	91	23.09
Blended (some online and some in-person)	223	56.59
Fully Online	80	20.3
<p><i>Note:</i> All participants answered some of the questions but not others. The number of participants who answered each demographic question is listed next to the variable, e.g., (n=...). *Participants were coded as a tobacco product user if they indicated past 30 day use of cigarettes, cigars, cigarillos, pipe with tobacco, smokeless tobacco, or hookah with tobacco. Participants were coded as ENDS (electronic nicotine delivery system) users if they indicated past 30 day rechargeable or disposable e-cigarette use, medium or large tank use, e-cigars, or e-pipes.</p>		

When comparing attitudes related to smoking and tobacco, in both 2012 and 2022, most students preferred to socialize in a smoke-free environment. However, there was a statistically significant increase from 74.2% in 2012 to 84.28% in 2022 ($\chi^2=20.0$, $p<0.001$).

Participants in the 2022 survey were significantly more likely to see it as the university's responsibility to adopt a smoke-free and tobacco-free policy than the students in 2012; in 2022, 74.8% of students believed it was the school administration's responsibility to enact such a policy, compared with 67.9% in 2012 ($\chi^2=7.7$, $p=0.006$). Significantly more students believed it was fairly to very important to

enact a comprehensive tobacco-free policy in 2022 (85.14%) than in 2012 (75.3%) ($\chi^2=18.58$, $p<0.001$).

While slightly more participants in 2022 viewed smoking as a serious or moderate health problem than participants in 2012, the differences were not statistically significant (2022=72.2%, 2012=71.9%, $\chi^2=2.5$, $p=0.12$). Slightly more participants also believed that smoking is a moderate to serious health hazard in 2022 (72.2%) compared to 2012 (71.9%), though the difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2=0.01$, $p=0.88$). Slightly more participants perceived SHS to be a serious health hazard in 2012 (56.6%) compared to 2022 (52.4%), though, again, results were not statistically significant ($\chi^2=2.5$, $p=0.12$). Figure 1 displays the

statistically significant differences in attitudes among students surveyed in the two years.

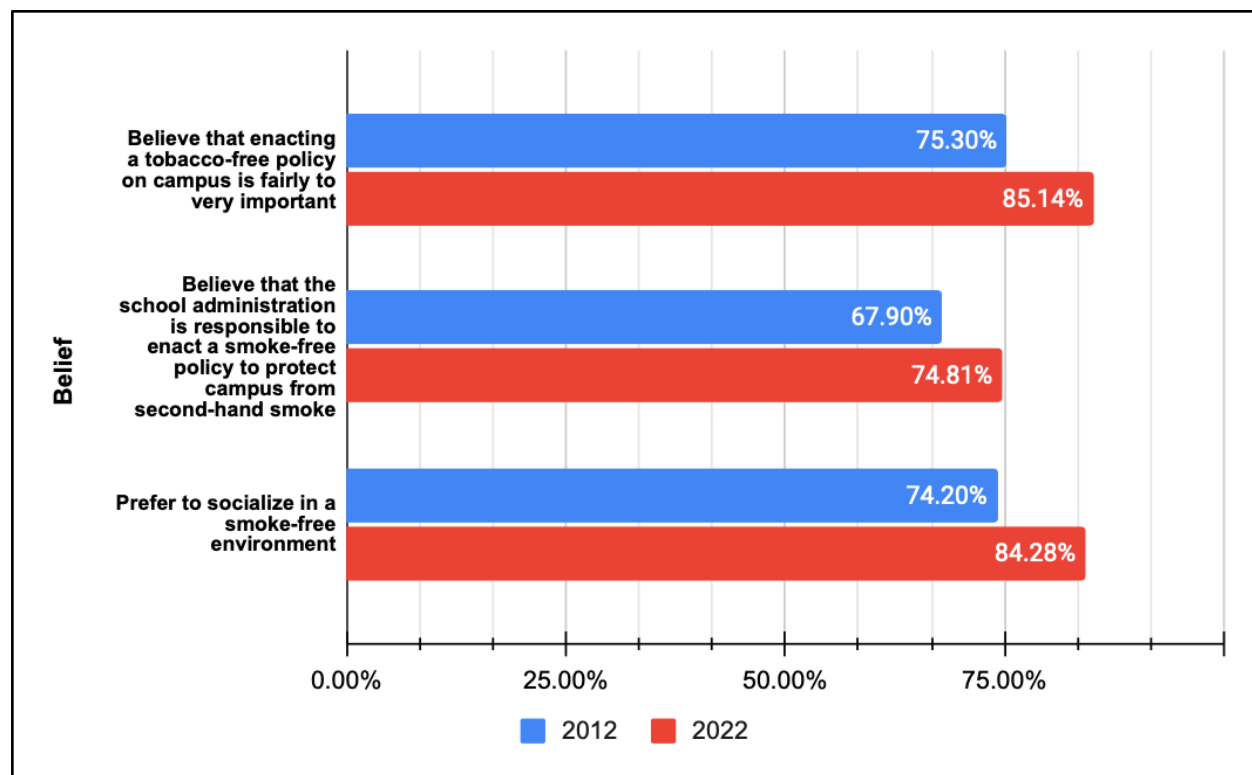


Figure 1. Statistically Significant ($p < 0.01$) Differences Regarding Attitudes Towards a Smoke- and Tobacco-Free Campus and Related Policy from University of Nevada, Las Vegas Student Respondents in 2012 ($n=2,525$) and 2022 ($n=397$)

Discussion

Despite some notable improvements over time resulting from concerted efforts across sectors, smoking and tobacco use continues to be a serious public health problem. Younger adults are an especially susceptible group, as smoking and tobacco use at younger ages can drive subsequent tobacco-related behaviors (CDC, 2021a). It is critical that we recognize the importance of campus environments to promote or inhibit experiences of smoking and exposure to SHS. Specifically, we found that a greater proportion of students in 2022, compared to 2012, (1) preferred to socialize in a smoke-free environment, (2) believed that the administration was responsible to enact a smoke-free policy to protect the community from second-hand smoke, and (3) believed that enacting a campus tobacco-free policy was important. Implementing comprehensive and effective policies can impact tobacco-related behaviors, attitudes, and norms (Wang et al., 2018).

The results of our study show increasing support for preferences to socialize in smoke-free environments. According to a recent systematic review and meta analysis that relied on data from 99

studies published between 2004 and 2022 of nearly 900,000 participants from 33 different countries shows support for novel smoke-free policies is generally high, particularly in areas where children are commonly exposed to tobacco smoke (Boderie, 2023). Non-smokers and ex-smokers preferred smoke-free policies more than smokers. Our findings are consistent with growing support for socializing in smoke-free environments and for smoke-free policies, and extends recent work to explore these attitudes among a college student population.

It is noteworthy that this trend occurs despite an increasing incidence of ENDS usage among young adults, ages 18-25, during the examined time period (Hammond et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2022). It is unclear whether students consider “vapors” emitted from ENDS products to be included in definitions of “smoke-free” policies. These findings also occur across a time period when the public’s perceptions and social and cultural attitudes about smoking, as well as attitudes about smoke-free places and smoke-free policies, have changed. More recently, smoke free policies have a relatively high level of public support and

compliance (CDC, 2018). This appears to be part of a broader trend in increased support for smoke-free policies. A Gallup Poll showed a shift in attitudes from 2001 to 2011; the percentage of Americans favoring a ban on smoking in all public places increased from 39% to 59% (Sadd, 2012). Future work is needed to understand perceptions of ENDS use in settings where smoke-free policies are implemented.

Our data indicating support for a smoke-free policy is consistent with previous research with college students. For example, a 2012 survey of Broward College students in Florida revealed that over 60% of Broward College students polled said they support a tobacco free policy. Nyman et al. (2022) also surveyed five U.S college and university campuses. Surveys showed that, in both fall 2017 and spring 2019, students supported the implementation of a tobacco free policy to ensure smoke-free air. Students in their survey were also asked why they supported the tobacco-free policy; many cited desires to discourage tobacco use (58.6%), ensure smoke-free air (77.5%), and prohibit tobacco marketing on campus (82.0%). Regardless of the motivation, a majority of the students supported a campus-wide tobacco-free policy (Nyman et al., 2022). The Broward College study was conducted in the same year as the initial survey in our study; whereas Nyman and colleagues (2022) conducted their surveys closer to our second year of analysis. Similar to this study, others have indicated increases in the number of students who approve of smoke-free policies on college campuses.

We also found that approximately 67.9% of 2012 students believed it was the campus administration's responsibility to enact a smoke-free policy and this increased significantly to 74.8% in 2022, suggesting majority of students believe the campus administration is responsible for enacting a smoke-free policy. This finding is consistent with previous research. A survey conducted at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in 2020 showed that most students agreed that colleges have a responsibility to adopt tobacco-free policies that reduce the risk of tobacco addiction (62.4%) and to ensure smoke-free air to breath (81.5%) (Do, 2020). We were not able to locate studies that examined students' perceived roles of the campus administration in adopting smoke-free policies around the year of our baseline data, and this is an important area of research for campus settings where implementation of smoke-free policies have been unsuccessful. This temporal analysis provides insights into how opinions have evolved and whether there is a shifting societal perspective towards the

role of educational institutions in promoting healthier environments.

This study had several limitations. First, we compared current data to historical data collected in 2012. We lacked details regarding the 2012 student population's demographic characteristics, making comparisons difficult. Second, data from these two-time points involved two different cross-sectional surveys; we cannot assess within-person changes in tobacco attitudes or perceptions nor can causal connections be made. Third, we used a combination of random and convenience sampling approaches for the 2022 survey and the results may not generalize to the student population at UNLV, particularly because certain demographic groups (e.g., females) were over-represented in our sample. Due to our recruitment strategies, we are unable to calculate student response rate as we did not know how many students in the classes that participated actually viewed the survey. Furthermore, course instructor and student participation was voluntary, which could have led to selection bias, and survey information was disseminated through official university channels, which may have introduced desirability bias.

Nevertheless, our study suggests college students show support for a campus wide smoke-free and tobacco-free policy. These findings are consistent with the general public's attitude towards smoke-free environments. The findings also suggest the need for further research on college students' perceptions of tobacco and related policies. Future research should aim to understand if attitudes about ENDS products differ from traditional tobacco products, use a larger sample size, and also assess the attitudes of faculty and staff in regard to policy implementation and enforcement. Few studies examine college and university student attitudes about tobacco-free policies and their implementation or enforcement. Such research is important to understand the impacts of these policies on college and university students' behaviors and health.

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