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OPINION

The Problem *With* Smoke-Free Campuses

The trendy prohibition at many colleges is not only dishonest and misguided, but might well be dangerous to students, too, one professor argues.

Some 10 years ago, Ozarks Technical Community College became the first higher education establishment to ban smoking even outdoors. Since then, several hundred more universities and community colleges, especially in the South and Midwest, have followed suit. In a sense, the outdoor bans seem like a logical extension of 30 years of efforts to reduce tobacco use, given the harmful effects of smoking.

The majority of the most elite schools, especially Ivy Leaguers like Harvard and Princeton, have yet to jump on the bandwagon, however. I can't help but think that this is because they have more common sense than the rest of us: it's only a matter of time before this "smoke-free campus"

Does this sound alarmist? I shouldn't think so, given that the sequence of events is perfectly foreseeable, and quite likely, in the aggregate. Here's why:

Some 20 percent of university students smoke. On big campuses like mine (over 20,000 students), many of these make the university residences their home. At some late-night hour after my university implements its intended ban, a student will want to go out for a smoke. To avoid or comply with the new rules, she'll end up on the far periphery of the campus, in one of the dark places of the university, or on a street off campus.

The university's "walk safe" escort program will have informed her that they don't have the resources to escort her, especially for an activity that university administrators want to stigmatize further. Later, the statistic in the newspaper may or may not mention why she was out there in the first place. Her bereaved parents may or may not have sufficient grounds to sue the university (but if other parents even suspect that one of their children smoke, they would do well to send them to study somewhere without a draconian outdoor ban).

I find this, along with other aspects of the latest temperance movement, intensely depressing. I respect the new president at my university and think he does a good job in general (rare praise from a faculty member, I know), so I sent him a letter outlining some of my concerns with a complete outdoor ban on smoking. Besides the safety issue, I listed some of the following concerns:

Taking a conservative estimate of 20 percent of students who smoke out of a university body of 20,000 gives us the figure of 4000 smoking students. Consequences of an outdoor ban on campus would include:

1 – Increased vehicle traffic. If just half of these 4000 students who smoke have access to a car and use it to leave campus just once more a week for lunch or a break (as a result of the ban), this equals two thousand extra car trips a week around the university. Unlike tobacco outdoors, vehicle exhaust does pose a significant health risk to others, and the extra traffic (some 60,000 extra car trips an academic year as a conservative estimate) will increase the university's carbon footprint accordingly.

2 – Increased risk of harm to students and other members of the university community. If students are forced off campus when they want to smoke, this will lead them to negotiate traffic on foot or by car. In the case of differently abled students and those with reduced mobility, pushing them off campus seems a particularly hard to justify and even cruel approach.

3 – Avoidance strategies. If avoidance strategies of people addicted to tobacco are half as strong as tobacco researchers say they are, student enrollment will suffer as a result of the complete outdoor smoking ban. Particularly students in the arts and international students from countries

such as China, which have higher smoking rates, have many choices and may look elsewhere for their education. Additionally, students who smoke will likely spend less time on campus and avail themselves less frequently of campus dining options – leading to a reduction in university revenues and a less vigorous student presence on campus. All these factors remain extremely difficult to measure, and anti-smoking activists who claim to have measured no impact from smoke-free campus policies elsewhere misrepresent the situation.

4 – Morale. Judging from student comments many of us have already heard around campus, the complete outdoor smoking ban alienates many and breeds resentment toward an administration seen as having gone too far. Faculty in particular may find it frustrating to work so hard for student retention and morale only to see their efforts hampered in this regard.

5 – Honesty. The implication that tobacco smoke poses a significant health risk to others outdoors is disingenuous. A university's first mission centers around truthful discourse, and we should be teaching our students to differentiate between significant risks (such as smoking) and totally insignificant risks (such as secondhand smoke outdoors). We should be teaching our students to deconstruct misleading government and advocacy group statements, such as the claim that "there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke." By such criteria, there is no safe level of exposure to sunlight either.

6 – Liberalism. With the notable exception of some "Bible colleges," which also ban alcohol, dating and other practices, most universities in this country value tolerance of people's lifestyles and individual preferences. We enshrine this policy when our university handbook advises the following: "Don't attempt to impose your values -- whether political, religious or cultural -- on others."

My university president actually agreed with most of the points I made. He replied, however, that he couldn't rescind the coming ban because other universities in our state were also implementing similar policies, and the state legislature in neighboring Arkansas just legislated complete outdoor smoking bans at all universities there.

“Besides,” he said, “I would have all the true believers on this campus banging on my door in outrage.”

How misguided. Instead of respecting our students and offering them a safe, liberal environment on campus, our university administrators feel cowed by the new political correctness of the latest temperance movement. How distressing that the groups pushing these policies, from the “true believers” to Anheuser-Busch funded organizations like the Bacchus Network (which would divert universities’ attention from alcohol to tobacco) or pharmaceutical company groups (who often get universities to buy their smoking cessation products and distribute them for free or at a subsidized price), couldn’t care less about the fallout.

Call me old fashioned, but I think I actually prefer the image of a university with pipe-wielding, pontificating professors and arts students smoking and arguing politics by the campus fountain. In any case, the proportion of the campus community and population in general that smokes has been steadily declining since the 1970s, without these draconian “smoke-free campus” bans.