

## College administrators see problems as more students view marijuana as safe

*Colleges look for ways to address the issue amidst changing public attitudes*

Public opinion on marijuana use is shifting nationally. Surveys find Americans view marijuana as safer than alcohol and other drugs, and an increasing number of state are legalizing marijuana for medical and recreational uses.<sup>1</sup>

College campuses are on the frontlines of this shift in attitudes. This first-ever survey of campus administrators on marijuana use and responses confirms that these shifts in law and attitudes are having an effect on student behavior. Most administrators in this survey said a growing number of students see marijuana as safe (Figure 1). Data on drug use bears this out: Between 2014 and 2016, annual prevalence of marijuana use among college students increased by 14 percent.<sup>2</sup>

As more students view marijuana as safe, administrators are seeing problems associated with marijuana use. These include issues with academic performance (41 percent), decreased student motivation (37 percent), and mental health issues (36 percent).

In the face of this change, 79 percent of administrators believe that colleges “should implement policies and programs to effectively reduce marijuana use 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 the issue (Figure 2).

There are substantial barriers to implementing effective policy, including disagreement across different roles on campus over the seriousness of the issue. The survey shows an opportunity for training targeted at higher education professionals on the impacts of marijuana use on academic success and student well-being, as well as how to identify problematic marijuana use and successful intervention strategies. There is also a role for professional associations, which are well-trusted, to disseminate actionable information about marijuana to administrators.

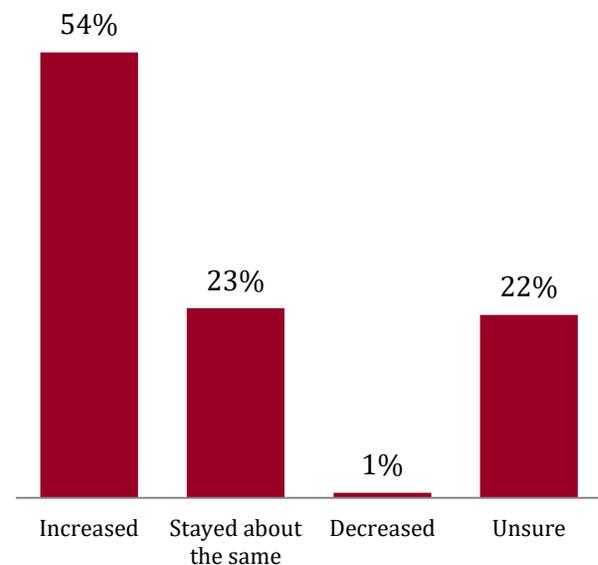
**Administrators perceive student marijuana use is on the rise.**

### KEY FINDINGS

- Administrators are seeing increased marijuana use and related problems, and think colleges can and should address the issue.
- Administrators do not think their campuses are putting much emphasis on the issue now. Lack of resources, coordination, and information are seen as the biggest barriers to prevention and enforcement.
- There are wide gaps in opinion between different administrative roles on campus. Health, residence, and safety officials are much more aware of issues around marijuana than those in academic or student affairs administration
- Officials across all roles are interested in more training on marijuana-related issues. There is an opportunity for campus leaders to use training to even out knowledge about the marijuana across departments on campus.

### Figure 1: Administrators report students increasingly view marijuana as safe.

*Q: During the past 3 years, would you say the number of students attending your school who perceive that marijuana is safe has...*



<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/support-for-marijuana-legalization-at-all-time-high>

<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/college-age-young-adults>

Nearly seven in ten administrators (69 percent) report that the number of students with marijuana related issues has increased (37 percent) or stayed the same (32 percent) over the past three years. A majority (55 percent) report marijuana use in residence halls on campus, including a near-universal 95 percent of administrators in working in residence or fraternity/sorority life.

A majority (55 percent) of administrators who are closest to the issue – those working in health, wellness, alcohol and other drug prevention, residence life, and campus safety – see an increase in marijuana-related issues. Administrators at larger institutions (52 percent) and schools with a larger share of residential students (68 percent) are also more likely to say marijuana issues have increased.

These trends also apply to the perception that marijuana is safe. A majority (54 percent) of all administrators believe that the number of students who perceive marijuana as safe has increased. This figure is even higher among front line administrators (64 percent) and those at larger and more residential campuses.

**Campus response is seen to be lagging behind.**

With marijuana use and associated problems seemingly on the rise, a large majority of administrators (79 percent) agree that campus should do something about the problem. But it is not clear whether the current campus response is up to the challenge. Only a third of administrators said their campus put a great deal (5 percent) or a fair

amount (28 percent) of emphasis on preventing marijuana use. Just 23 percent said that their campus planned to increase prevention activities over the next few years.

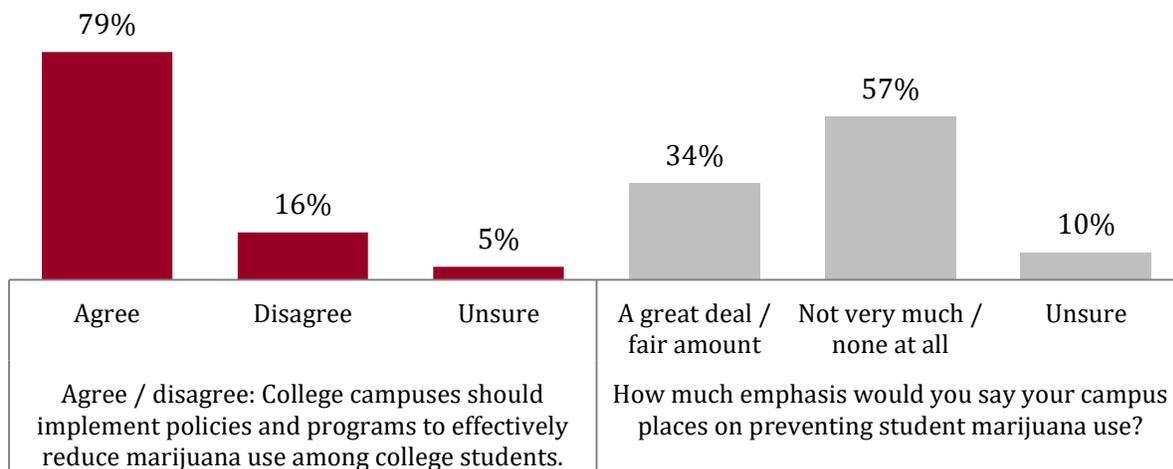
When it comes to evidence-based approaches, there are gaps in campus prevention strategies. A third or fewer administrators report their campuses regularly screen students for marijuana problems at health centers, counseling, or when they violate campus policy. These figures are consistently lower than for screening for alcohol problems in the same scenarios.

Only 30 percent reported the existence of a task force to address substance use in general, and just 1 percent knew of a marijuana-specific task force. Just 16 percent report participation in a coalition with other schools or community organizations that address marijuana use.

Many administrators are unaware of their campus’s plans for marijuana prevention (40 percent) or whether marijuana related problems have increased (30 percent) Nearly half (49 percent) of administrators did not know how often their campuses collected data on marijuana use.

When a student is found to have marijuana on campus, the most common response is disciplinary action, usually probation for the first offense. Education and counseling were much less common. For problem users, the most common campus response was referral to off-campus treatment. That may be because the large majority of administrators reported their campus had no physicians

**Figure 2: Administrators agree campuses should work to reduce marijuana use, but few think their own institutions are putting much emphasis on it.**



specializing in addiction medicine (72 percent). Less than half (48 percent) had one or more counselors on campus specializing in substance abuse, although they are more common on larger residential campuses.

**Barriers to action on marijuana.**

Administrators report several barriers to prevention and enforcement, including a lack of resources (64 percent), information (59 percent), and coordination (58 percent). A majority (55 percent) also cited opposition among students (Figure 3).

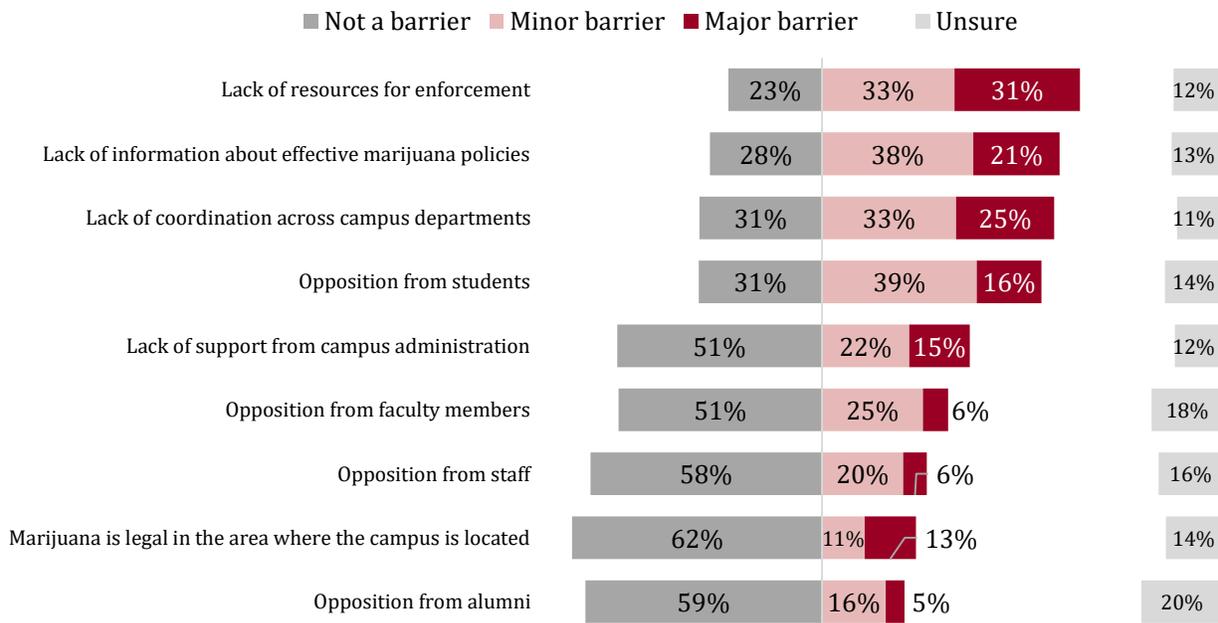
Lack of coordination is especially noteworthy given the very different levels of concern and knowledge among administrators in different roles on campus. Front line professionals – those working in health, counseling, and addiction; fraternity, sorority and residence life; and student conduct and safety – were more likely to perceive an increase in marijuana use on campus than were those in academic or student affairs administration. They were also more likely to see barriers to effective policies addressing the issue.

This knowledge and opinion gap between different types of administrators is itself an illustration of the lack of coordination and information cited as top barriers to implementing marijuana policy. Indeed, front line roles rated a lack of coordination between departments as their top concern (68 percent). They also rated each issue as more of a barrier to successful policy than those working in academic and student affairs. Nearly half of these respondents cited a lack of support from campus administration as a hindrance (47 percent).

This gap was seen on other questions as well. When asked if they agreed or disagreed that “Marijuana use on campus is a serious problem” administrators were almost evenly split, with 49 percent agreeing and 44 percent disagreeing. But 64 percent of front line administrators agreed with the statement, compared to only 30 percent of academic and student affairs professionals.

**Figure 3: Lack of resources, information, coordination seen as top barrier to marijuana prevention and enforcement.**

*Q: Keeping in mind that your answers are confidential, how much of a barrier do you think each of following presents to successful marijuana prevention and enforcement policies on your campus?*



### Information and training are potential ways to bridge gaps and address student marijuana use.

If the survey points to gaps between campus departments as a potential issue, it also suggests a solution: more training on the impact of marijuana and potential solutions to preventing use. Across all occupations, there is a strong desire for more information and training about the impacts of marijuana on health and well-being (85 percent very or somewhat interested in training), identification of problematic use (82 percent), intervention strategies (77 percent), and academic impacts (85 percent).

There is also a role for official communication. Academic journals and communications from professional associations were the two information sources about marijuana use and associated health issues rated most reliable by administrators (52 and 41 percent “very reliable”, respectively). These were rated more reliable than administrators’ own training, which suggests again the potential benefit of more widespread education on the issue.

Academic research and professional associations are almost universally trusted by administrators and could be leveraged to help disseminate information about the health and academic effects of marijuana use and abuse. There is already a substantial body of academic research on marijuana use and its effects on health and academic performance that could be translated by professional associations or other outside groups into useful and actionable information.

### Conclusion: A role for campus leadership.

College campuses are front and center as Americans’ opinions shift on marijuana. More permissive attitudes pose numerous challenges to higher education, starting with making students aware of how marijuana use might affect their educational goals and how it might pose risks to their mental health and productivity. This survey suggests that administrators are seeing the effects of this shift in public opinion first hand and understand the need to address it, even if some on campus do not see it as a *serious* issue. There are administrative and

### Pop Quiz: Administrators’ knowledge about marijuana

Administrators are not fully familiar with the latest science on marijuana use. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about the effects of marijuana. On most issues, a majority administrators gave answers that were in line with the consensus of scientific research. On issues of the relationship between marijuana use and alcohol, administrators were both less certain and less likely to give the correct answer. Public health research suggests that students who use marijuana are *more* likely to drink excessively than those who abstain. When asked, 37 percent gave the wrong answer, compared to 34 percent who gave the correct answer. Administrators in academic and student affairs were more likely to answer “unsure” than those working in health, drug prevention, residence life and campus safety.

	% correct	% unsure
The earlier the age that marijuana use begins, the worse the cognitive effects are.	78%	16%
More frequent marijuana use is associated with more cognitive problems.	73%	16%
Marijuana can be physically addictive.	71%	10%
Students who use marijuana are more academically disengaged than non-users.	63%	16%
Students who use marijuana are at risk for other forms of substance use	62%	12%
Students who use marijuana skip more of their classes than non-users.	61%	24%
Marijuana use is related to an increased risk of mental health problems.	56%	22%
Marijuana use is an effective way to reduce stress.*	45%	19%
Marijuana use is associated with fewer academic problems than excessive drinking.*	40%	27%
A substantial proportion of marijuana users do not consume alcohol excessively.*	35%	33%
Students who use marijuana are much more likely to be excessive drinkers than non-users of marijuana.	34%	28%

\* Agreement with the statement was the correct response on all items except those with asterisks, where disagreement aligns with the scientific consensus.

attitudinal barriers to dealing with marijuana use on campus, including differences of knowledge and opinion among campus staff in various roles.

Fortunately, there are also some indications that training and information sharing might bridge some of these gaps, and that educational professionals

would be open to such an approach. Ultimately, it will be up to campus leaders and senior administration to dedicate time and resources to smooth out gaps in knowledge about marijuana use on campus and enable a more effective approach to prevention and enforcement.

**National Survey of Higher Education Professionals  
Topline Results**

Field dates: September 6 - October 3, 2017

Thinking about your position on campus, which of the following best describes your sector?

Health Center	8%
Counseling	9%
Health and Wellness	9%
Academic Affairs	21%
Residence Life	9%
Student Conduct	4%
Campus Safety	6%
Student Affairs	23%
Alcohol and Drug Prevention	4%
Fraternity and Sorority Life	1%
Other	6%

How many years have you been in your current position?

0 to 1 years	19%
2 to 5 years	36%
6 to 10 years	18%
More than 10 years	26%

Is marijuana use legal for recreational use in the state where your campus is located?

Yes	11%
No	88%
Unsure	1%

Is marijuana use legal for medical use in the state where you campus is located?

Yes	45%
No	44%
Unsure	11%

*Asked of 394 respondents indicating that marijuana was legal for medical or recreational use.*

Are advertisements for marijuana allowed or not allowed in each of the following?

<i>Order rotated.</i>	Allowed	Not allowed	Unsure	Not Applicable
Campus newspaper	3%	56%	30%	12%
Campus radio station	1%	55%	27%	17%
Campus bulletin boards, kiosks, etc.	1%	66%	30%	2%
Athletics publications	1%	63%	24%	12%

In the past 3 years, would you say the number of students with marijuana-related problems on campus has...?

Increased	37%
Decreased	1%
Stayed about the same	32%
Unsure	30%

What kinds of problems have you seen or heard about associated with marijuana use on your campus?  
*Multiple responses allowed; percentages total more than 100 percent.*

Use in residence halls	55%
Academic issues	41%
Decreased student motivation	37%
Mental health issues	36%
Campus safety issues	22%
None selected	11%
Other (broken out below)	14%
Marijuana not a problem on campus	6%
Student conduct / legal issues	3%
Use among athletes	1%
Medical beneficial uses of marijuana	1%
Medical problems	1%
Unsure	1%
Remaining other	1%
Students' employment prospects	<1%

In the past 3 years, would you say the number of students on campus who perceive that marijuana is safe has...?

Increased	54%
Decreased	1%
Stayed about the same	23%
Unsure	22%

To the best of your knowledge, how does your campus collect student level data on marijuana use?

Every year	14%
Every two years	12%
Every three years	5%
Does not collect data	16%
Other	3%
Unsure	49%

*Asked of the 237 respondents who indicated data was collected at least once every three years*

To the best of your knowledge, how effectively is this information used to inform prevention strategies?

Very effectively	13%
Somewhat effectively	42%
Not too effectively	26%
Not at all effectively	9%
Unsure	10%

Please describe how this information is used. *Open-ended; responses could be coded to multiple categories and total more than 100 percent.*

To inform programming and prevention	49%
Reported out to national organization and on campus	35%
To determine resources for counseling	21%
Not used	8%

How much emphasis would you say your campus places on preventing student marijuana use?

A great deal	5%
A fair amount	28%
Not very much	46%
None at all	9%
Unsure	10%

In terms of marijuana prevention activities on campus, which of the following best describes your plans for the next few years?

Increase prevention activities	23%
Keep prevention activities about the same	36%
Scale back on prevention activities	1%
Unsure	40%

How adequate would you say your campus's response is for students who have a problem with marijuana?

Completely adequate	12%
Somewhat adequate	46%
Somewhat inadequate	16%
Completely inadequate	5%
Unsure	20%

Does your school conduct any university-wide education or messaging campaigns for students about risks associated with marijuana use?

Yes	28%
No	50%
Unsure	22%

Does your school have an on-campus task force or working group addressing marijuana use on campus?

Yes, specific to marijuana	1%
Yes, part of a general substance abuse task force	30%
No	47%
Unsure	22%

Does your school participate in a coalition with other schools or organizations in the community addressing marijuana use?

Yes	16%
No	48%
Unsure	22%

How is your school's administration most likely to handle students in the following situations? Please check all that apply. *Multiple responses allowed; percentages total more than 100 percent.*

	Education	Counseling	Disciplinary action	Contact parent / guardian	No action	Unsure
Student brings marijuana into area or event where prohibited	47%	36%	87%	10%	2%	9%
Student hosts an on-campus party at which marijuana/paraphernalia are found	49%	37%	87%	12%	2%	11%
Student has marijuana in the residence halls	52%	38%	80%	12%	3%	15%
Student is arrested for marijuana violation off-campus	36%	27%	50%	8%	24%	19%

*The following was asked for each item where respondents indicated disciplinary action would be taken.*

Which best describes the disciplinary action for a first offense on your campus in each of the following situations?

	Expulsion	Suspension	Probation	Unsure
Student has marijuana in the residence halls	3%	9%	59%	29%
Student brings marijuana into area or event where prohibited	4%	11%	53%	32%
Student hosts an on-campus party at which marijuana/paraphernalia are found	5%	15%	51%	29%
Student is arrested for marijuana violation off-campus	4%	13%	51%	32%

Keeping in mind that your answers are confidential, how much of a barrier do you think each of following presents to successful marijuana prevention and enforcement policies on your campus?

	Major barrier	Minor barrier	Not a barrier	Unsure
Lack of resources for enforcement	31%	33%	23%	12%
Lack of coordination across campus departments	25%	33%	31%	11%
Lack of information about effective marijuana policies	21%	38%	28%	13%
Opposition from students	16%	39%	31%	14%
Lack of support from campus administration	15%	22%	51%	12%
Marijuana is legal in the area where the campus is located	13%	11%	62%	14%
Opposition from faculty members	6%	25%	51%	18%
Opposition from staff	6%	20%	58%	16%
Opposition from alumni	5%	16%	59%	20%

What other factors not mentioned above the present a barrier to successful marijuana prevention and enforcement policies on your campus? *Open ended. May add up to more than 100 percent as responses could be coded into multiple categories.*

Insufficient resources	29%
Attitudes towards marijuana	20%
Unsupportive/inconsistent/nonexistent policies	14%
Not a problem on campus / not applicable	11%
Other priorities on campus	10%
Lack of awareness / understanding of issue	6%
Other	5%
None	4%
Unsure	3%

Are students at your campus routinely assessed for a possible alcohol problem when visiting each of the following campus services?

<i>Order rotated</i>	Yes	No	Unsure
Health center wellness visits	31%	28%	41%
Health center mental health visits	38%	21%	41%
Counseling center	42%	18%	40%
Student conduct / judicial office after violating a campus policy	33%	27%	40%

Are students at your campus routinely assessed for a possible marijuana problem when visiting each of the following campus services?

<i>Order rotated</i>	Yes	No	Unsure
Health center wellness visits	22%	33%	46%
Health center mental health visits	27%	27%	46%
Counseling center	34%	24%	43%
Student conduct / judicial office after violating a campus policy	24%	31%	45%

Which of the followed approaches does your campus take to students with identified marijuana problems? *Multiple responses allowed; percentages total more than 100 percent.*

An online intervention session.	24%
A single in-person intervention session	44%
Multiple in-person intervention sessions	28%
On-campus treatment services	31%
Referral to off-campus treatment services	60%
Other	14%

*Asked of 267 respondents who indicated on or off campus referrals.*

To which of the following types of services does your school refer students with identified marijuana problems? *Multiple responses allowed; percentages total more than 100 percent.*

A specific list of off-campus physicians specializing in addiction medicine	35%
A specific list of off-campus counselors	75%
An in-patient drug treatment program	37%
A free clinic	35%
A 12-step group	36%
Collegiate recovery program	19%

How many physicians, if any, do you have on campus specializing in addiction medicine?

None	72%
1 or more	10%
Unsure	19%

How many substance use counselors do you have on campus?

None	72%
1 or more	10%
Unsure	19%

Whether you use each one or not, which of the following do you think would be a reliable source of information about marijuana use and associated health issues?

	Very reliable	Somewhat reliable	Not very reliable	Not at all reliable	Unsure
Academic journals	52%	36%	5%	2%	5%
Communications from professional associations	41%	48%	6%	1%	5%
Your own training	26%	54%	9%	4%	7%
Online medical resources (WebMD, other sites)	23%	54%	15%	3%	5%
Social media	7%	19%	41%	28%	5%
News reports (newspapers, magazines, broadcasts)	5%	46%	31%	13%	5%
Politicians	1%	8%	37%	48%	7%

How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure
<i>Order rotated</i> College campuses should implement policies and programs to effectively reduce marijuana use among college students.	43%	36%	12%	5%	5%
The administration on this campus is supportive of campus efforts to address student marijuana use.	25%	45%	10%	5%	14%
There is nothing we can do to prevent college students from using marijuana.	7%	22%	36%	32%	3%
Marijuana use on campus is a serious problem.	16%	33%	28%	16%	8%
We shouldn't worry so much about student marijuana use.	6%	18%	29%	44%	4%

How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

<i>Order rotated</i>	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure
Students who use marijuana are more academically disengaged than non-users.	32%	31%	15%	5%	16%
The earlier the age that marijuana begins, the worse the cognitive effects are.	50%	29%	3%	2%	16%
More frequent marijuana use is associated with more cognitive problems.	41%	33%	8%	3%	16%
Students who use marijuana skip more of their classes than non-users.	28%	32%	11%	4%	24%
Marijuana is much more potent than it used to be.	50%	19%	4%	1%	25%
Marijuana use can lead to legal problems for students.	56%	36%	3%	1%	4%

How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

<i>Order rotated</i>	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure
Students who use marijuana are at risk for other forms of substance use, like cocaine or prescription drugs.	26%	36%	17%	9%	12%
Students who use marijuana are much more likely to be excessive drinkers than non-users of marijuana.	12%	22%	25%	12%	28%
A substantial proportion of marijuana users do not consume alcohol excessively.	8%	27%	21%	12%	33%
Marijuana is associated with fewer academic problems than excessive drinking.	10%	31%	22%	11%	27%
Marijuana is related to an increased risk of mental health problems	25%	31%	13%	8%	22%
Marijuana is an effective way to reduce stress	7%	29%	17%	28%	19%

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Unsure
Relevant staff are empowered to intervene with students whom they think have a problem with marijuana use.	22%	41%	17%	28%	19%
Relevant staff have a good sense of how prevalent marijuana use is on campus.	17%	38%	23%	9%	13%

How interested would you be in receiving additional training about the following issues?

	Very interested	Somewhat interested	Not very interested	Not at all interested	Unsure
Possible impacts of marijuana use on student health, and well-being	46%	39%	7%	5%	4%
How to identify problematic marijuana use in students	45%	37%	8%	7%	4%
How to intervene to reduce student marijuana use on campus.	42%	35%	10%	8%	5%
Possible impacts of marijuana use on academic success	47%	38%	7%	5%	4%

The last few questions are for statistical purposes, to help us categorize your responses with those of others.

Approximately how many of each are enrolled at your campus?

*Undergraduates:*

5,000 or less	36%
5,001 to 10,000	32%
More than 10,000	32%

*Graduate students:*

500 or less	39%
501 to 2000	31%
More than 2000	30%

Do you work for a public or private college?

Public	92%
Private	8%

*Asked of public college employees:*

Do you work for a 4-year college or university or community college, or does your work cover both kinds of schools?

4 year college or university	72%
Community college	22%
Cover both types of school	6%

*Next two asked only of private and 4-year public college employees (community colleges excluded).*

Approximately what percentage of undergraduate students on your campus live in on-campus housing?

10% or less	24%
11% to 20%	21%
21% to 30%	21%
31% to 40%	13%
More than 40%	21%

Are there fraternities or sororities on your campus?

Yes	76%
No	22%
Unsure	2%

What type of training have you received regarding substance use prevention or intervention? *Open-ended; responses could be coded to multiple categories and total more than 100 percent.*

None	24%
Coursework / conferences	23%
Work orientation	23%
Minimal / Unsure	15%
Professional in field (law enforcement, counselor, nurse)	14%
Academic credential (MA, PhD)	9%
Online training	6%

### **About the Poll**

These results are based on a national online survey of college campus administrators conducted September 6 - October 3, 2017. A total of 744 administrators offered responses, and 523 completed it. Respondents were contacted via email distributed by the National Association of System Heads (NASHE) 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 Foundation in conjunction with the National Association of System Heads (NASHE).