

# 1

## Marijuana Use Prevention

### Alcohol and Marijuana: Similarities and Differences

#### Background

Many of the risk and protective factors for alcohol use in college are also associated with marijuana use. Similarly, many of the strategies used to prevent or reduce alcohol use in this population may also be effective for marijuana prevention (e.g. motivational interviewing). However, there are important differences to consider when developing prevention strategies for the two substances.

While this document will describe some of the general or commonly-identified differences between marijuana and alcohol, data from your community—through focus groups, questionnaires, and screening practices—will be most useful in developing prevention strategies.

*This document is part of a series designed to support Minnesota's Partnership For Success grantees working on marijuana use prevention on college campuses. More resources from this series can be found in the Toolbox at [SUMN.org](http://SUMN.org)*

---

#### How do the factors involved in substance use differ?

To develop appropriate prevention strategies, it's useful to understand students' motivations and expectations. In general, many of the risk and protective factors are indicated for both marijuana and alcohol use in college students, although patterns may differ between communities and schools. Most differences involve access (which is affected by legal status of the substance), and perceptions and expectancies of substance use.

#### Similarities and Differences: Risk Factors

- **Perceptions.** Perceived peer use, availability and positive community norms are strong predictors for substance use.<sup>1</sup> Because recreational marijuana use is illegal in Minnesota, college students are less likely to have easy access to marijuana. Further, advertising and the presence of legal drinking establishments are likely to create more positive community norms around alcohol than exist for marijuana, although peer communities also have strong effects on college students. While students often overestimate their peers' substance use, students may be more likely to overestimate marijuana usage even more than they overestimate alcohol usage on campus,<sup>2</sup> leading to the perception of more positive community norms around marijuana use than actually exist, especially in more insular campus communities.<sup>3</sup>

# 1

## Alcohol and Marijuana: Differences and Similarities, *continued*

*Differing expectancies reflect the specific qualities of the substances. Strategies may address these expectancies.*

- **Motivations and expectancies.** For both alcohol and marijuana, positive expectancies increase the likelihood of use, while negative expectancies decrease the likelihood. However, once use is initiated, negative expectancies decrease.<sup>4</sup>

The following positive (+) and negative (-) expectancies are taken from validated expectancy questionnaires for alcohol and marijuana,<sup>5,6,7</sup> which emphasize different aspects of substance use, reflecting specific qualities of the substances. Although both substances may produce pleasant feelings, the feelings they elicit are qualitatively different. Similarly, although both drugs are classified as depressants, the range of negative effects differs. For instance, students are more likely to report over-eating (“the munchies”) after cannabis use than after alcohol use. Strategies may specifically address these expectancies. Further, many of the primary motives students give for using marijuana (such as insomnia) may, in fact, be treating withdrawal symptoms of the drug itself.

### **MARIJUANA:**

- + Helps with ADD/concentration
- + Slows thinking and actions
- + Increases creativity
- + Helps escape reality
- + Provides sensory enhancement
- + Is natural, safer than alcohol
- Increases hunger or cravings
- Adversely affects comprehension, concentration, and memory
- Leads to feeling “out of touch”
- Leads to loss of motivation

### **ALCOHOL:**

- + Tastes pleasant
- + Leads to feelings of power or assertiveness
- + Helps to celebrate occasions with family or friends
- + Facilitates dating/sex
- + Decreases anxiety/nervousness
- Increases argumentative, aggressive, or violent behavior
- Leads to physical effects like “the shakes”

- **Access.** Because alcohol is legal for individuals who are 21+, it’s much more easily accessible than marijuana. However, there are also more opportunities for regulation in the community. Access to alcohol can be controlled at sales outlets, through server training, compliance checks, and campus social host ordinances. Local access issues are much more difficult for marijuana. While underage college students may have close friends and peers that are of legal drinking age, use of marijuana is not legal in Minnesota, at any age, unless a student has a medical exemption. On a practical level, this means that there aren’t retail outlets, as there are for alcohol. (See *Minnesota’s Legal Landscape* document.)

# 1

## Alcohol and Marijuana: Differences and Similarities, *continued*

### *Similarities and differences: Consequences*

- **Legal consequences:** Despite its legal status, some campus policies outline consequences for marijuana use that are less onerous than those for alcohol. On the other hand, students convicted of drug offenses may lose eligibility for federal student aid. Consequences must be addressed at all levels: campus, municipal, and federal.
- **Academic consequences:** College students who use marijuana are more likely to experience discontinued enrollment or drop out altogether. With minimal use, about 25% of students stop classes; with chronic or heavy use, about 41% discontinue enrollment.<sup>8</sup>

# 1

## Alcohol and Marijuana: Differences and Similarities, *continued*

### Citations

1. Harris Abadi, M., Shamblen, S. R., Thompson, K., Collins, D. A., & Johnson, K. (2011). Influence of risk and protective factors on substance use outcomes across developmental periods: A comparison of youth and young adults. *Substance use & misuse, 46*(13), 1604-1612.
2. Gold, G. J., & Nguyen, A. T. (2009). Comparing entering freshmen's perceptions of campus marijuana and alcohol use to reported use. *Journal of drug education, 39*(2), 133-148.
3. Lewis, T. F. (2007). Perceptions of risk and sex-specific social norms in explaining alcohol consumption among college students: Implications for campus interventions. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(3), 297-310.
4. Kristjansson, S. D., Agrawal, A., Lynskey, M. T., & Chassin, L. A. (2012). Marijuana expectancies and relationships with adolescent and adult marijuana use. *Drug and alcohol dependence, 126*(1), 102-110.
5. McMahon, J., & Jones, B. T. (1993). The negative alcohol expectancy questionnaire. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in Substance Abuse, 12*, 17.
6. Brown, S. A., Christiansen, B. A., & Goldman, M. S. (1987). The Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire: An instrument for the assessment of adolescent and adult alcohol expectancies. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, 48*(05), 483.
7. Aarons, G. A., Brown, S. A., Stice, E., & Coe, M. T. (2001). Psychometric evaluation of the marijuana and stimulant effect expectancy questionnaires for adolescents. *Addictive Behaviors, 26*(2), 219-236.
8. Arria, A. M., Caldeira, K. M., Bugbee, B. A., Vincent, B. K. B., & O'Grady, K. E. (2013). The academic opportunity costs of substance use during college. *College Park, MD: Center on Young Adult Health and Development*. Available at [www.cls.umd.edu/docs/AcadOppCosts.pdf](http://www.cls.umd.edu/docs/AcadOppCosts.pdf)