

A Systematic Analysis of College Substance Use Policies

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Abstract. College substance use policies provide guidelines for student behavior and influence campus culture. Although they are the primary environmental strategy to address campus substance use, policies have not been systematically compared and studied. We constructed a systematic review method to examine the accessibility, comprehensiveness, enforcement procedures, and clarity of college substance use policies. We developed an objective evaluation scheme for each of these 4 dimensions and then applied it to documented substance use policies from a sample of colleges and universities ($N = 24$). Policies were found to vary considerably but tended to specify compliance with local laws and emphasize student health and well-being. The next stage of campus policy review should examine actual implementation, evaluate potential differentiating factors among institutions, and assess the influence of policy on campus climate and student outcomes.

Key Words: alcohol, college students, drug, health policy, tobacco

Recent media, policy, and research attention has been directed at substance use by college students, particularly with respect to the use of alcohol.^{1,2} Toomey and Wagenaar³ attribute this focus to increased institutional and public awareness of negative consequences of student substance use. In addition, the publicity of alcohol-related tragedies occurring on campuses has added to the urgency in finding the best strategies to reduce negative outcomes.

Campus substance use policies are a principle institutional mechanism to address substance use and may be

designed to protect students, the neighboring community, and the institution itself. Despite the potential for influence, college policies and their effectiveness on student substance use and related problems have not been well examined.³ Policies are developed and then documented, perhaps within an iterative process. There is a consideration of local laws (eg, legal age for drinking alcohol), an informal comparison of each institution's own policy in relation to those of other institutions, and a construction of a policy document that best fits with each institution's own campus culture, values, and common sense.⁴

Although there are no outcome studies that examine policies' effects on targeted behaviors and climate issues, there is widespread expert and leadership consensus that policies have the potential to reduce underage, unsafe use and abuse of alcohol. Most attention has focused specifically on alcohol, rather than on other mood-altering or addictive substances such as tobacco and other drugs.³

College substance use policy is both the documented and emblematic stance the institution takes on student alcohol and other drug use. It can therefore be a potent mechanism to regulate or influence college student substance use.⁵ Inasmuch as policies may not be enforced or wholly abided by in practice, formal documentation at least provides a prospective student or parent with any particular college or university's position on alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use. Further, the policy outlines expectations and consequences for the undergraduate institution and its campus community. This information presumably influences prospective student and parent choices about academic institutions beyond social climate reputation. The availability of policies certainly might serve as stimulus for a conversation between parent and student in advance of college attendance.⁶ In essence, substance policies also reveal the nature of the overall institutional philosophy, such as the

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relationship between the institution and the student and the view of the student as responsible adult, as adolescent, as neither, or as located in the vast margin in between. Finally, campus policies on alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs convey messages about personal responsibility, both to oneself and to others. Like other acquisitions during this developmental phase, students will internalize these standards and carry them into life beyond college.⁷

Substance use policies therefore hold important implications. At best, they should be easily accessible, explicit, and detailed. Without student and parental access, clear language, and finely delineated information, institutional values, expectations, and consequences are either not considered or left to subjective interpretation. Within ambiguous expectations, students develop a fund of normative peer information about substances and, perhaps until a sentinel event occurs, remain ignorant of negative consequences associated with substance use. Of course, in reality, even the finest policy on paper is weakened if it is inconspicuous.

Although certain guidelines may be offered to undergraduate institutions, in reality, there is considerable variability in any given college's substance use policy.^{8,9} In spite of the centrality of college substance use policies, little is known about the range of policies adopted by undergraduate institutions. To date, based upon MEDLINE and PsychInfo searches of the literature (search terms: college substance policy, alcohol and drug policy) no systematic review of college substance use policies, or of their variability, has been documented.

We therefore sought to address the following questions:

1. Can college substance use policies be objectively examined using prespecified criteria?
2. Are the policies *accessible*, *comprehensive*, and *clear* to an outside observer, such as a prospective student or parent? Are there delineated *enforcement procedures* or sanctions for violations of the policy?
3. Based upon the findings in questions 1 and 2, can guidance for future policy development and research be suggested?

In this pursuit, we conducted a systematic review of selected college policy documents. We analyzed alcohol, tobacco, and other drug policies using a template of preselected criteria, including dimensions of *accessibility*, *comprehensiveness*, *enforcement procedures*, and *clarity*.

METHOD

We constructed a detailed rating scheme to systematically review each institution's policy, thus providing an objective and consistent assessment of certain key dimensions. We selected 24 colleges' or universities' substance abuse policies for examination. We then rated each school's policy using the rating scheme.

Development of Review Criteria

We developed the review criteria based upon a literature review, interviews with college administrators, and inter-

views with college substance use research experts. We identified the following key dimensions as the basis for the review criteria: (1) *accessibility*, (2) *comprehensiveness*, (3) *enforcement procedures*, and (4) *clarity*.

Policy Review Scheme and Rating Scales

Accessibility

Accessibility is the availability of a policy to the public via a Web-based search. This scale was formatted on a 0 to 5 range, with the anchor points: 0 (no information available at all); 1 (difficult to find on a Web site, even with extensive Web site search, or information provided in policies related only to non-undergraduate populations); 2 (obscure on Web site or confusing as to location, Web site search provides only partial information, or necessary information was in several different places); 3 (available through considerable Web site search); 4 (easily available either by direct link but in hard to open PDF files, or through simple Web site search); and 5 (easily available, either through direct link on school Web site or through the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism/National Institutes of Health [NIAAA/NIH] Web site).¹

Comprehensiveness

Comprehensiveness is the scope of explicit details and information about substances and procedures concerning them. In Table 1, the set of 21 criteria in this scale are listed and defined. We based the scoring on the total number of the criteria specifically listed (eg, that social events procedures were delineated, that the college does not allow tobacco at college events). Scores are as follows: 0 (0 to 2 measures listed), 1 (3 to 6 measures listed), 2 (7 to 10 measures listed), 3 (11 to 14 measures listed), 4 (15 to 18 measures listed), 5 (19 to 21 measures listed).

Enforcement procedures

Enforcement procedures include disciplinary actions and sanctions. This scale considers information about the potential consequences of substance policy violations, commonly termed "sanctions."

The types of sanctions are listed in Table 2. The rating for the specification of the enforcement procedures is on a 6-point scale: 0 (no information provided); 1 (policy states that the person would be referred to dean or that they would be punished without delineation of specific sanctions of any sort); 2 (policy actually lists some type of punishment); 3 (2 or 3 disciplinary actions listed); 4 (4 or more sanctions listed); and 5 (good guidelines for disciplinary action, all available sanctions listed).

Clarity

Clarity is the clearness of a policy to a reader. The final scale used to rate each policy was clarity. We organized this on a 6-point scale: 0 (no information provided or uncovered at all); 1 (very confusing); 2 (slightly confusing); 3 (moderately understandable); 4 (easy to understand); and 5 (exceptionally easy to understand).

TABLE 1. Comprehensiveness Items

Item	Definition
1. Social events procedures	Social events procedures (registration, rules) are clearly delineated.
Event registration required	Social events must be registered with the college beforehand.
Checking IDs	Drivers' licenses or school IDs are checked at parties before drinks may be served.
Sober monitors required	A sober person is responsible for the health and safety of party attendees.
Trained servers	Persons serving alcohol must be trained by a program appointed by the college.
Food and nonalcoholic beverages required	Food and non-alcoholic beverages must be offered in equal amounts to those of alcoholic beverages.
No. of attendees determining a party	The number of persons by which an official party is defined
Party advertising	Restrictions on the advertising of parties
2. Smoke-free dorms	The campus has smoke-free dorms.
3. Substance-free dorms	The campus has substance-free dorms.
4. Kegs allowed	Kegs are allowed on campus, noted yes or no.
Kegs registered	Kegs have to be registered at campus parties.
5. Drinking games allowed	Drinking games have been prohibited by the policy, noted yes or no.
6. Types of alcohol permitted	Certain types of alcohol are identified as permissible by the policy.
7. Alcohol at college events	Alcohol may be present at college events, noted yes or no.
8. Tobacco at college events	Tobacco products may be present at college events, noted yes or no.
9. Conform to state law	Policy directly states that it follows the state laws.
10. Alcohol advertising	Advertising from commercial alcohol distributors is allowed.
11. Industry sponsorship	Institution accepts money from commercial alcohol distributors.

TABLE 2. Enforcement Procedure Items

Item	Definition
1. Fine	A monetary penalty
2. Service	Community service as a part of the sanction
3. Evaluation/counseling	Treatment and screening by a health professional
4. Parental notification	Contacting the student's parents to inform them of their child's policy violations
5. Probation	A period of watch in which the student is at risk for greater sanctions if policies are violated
6. Suspension	A temporary separation from the institution
7. Dismissal	Permanent separation from the institution

Selection of Colleges/Universities

Once these criteria were established and the rating scale developed, we sought to collect policies from select schools. We selected 24 schools for review.* We did not select institutions to make specific comparisons (eg, public vs private) or on matched variables, but rather were selected for an anticipated range size, funding, academic reputation, Greek membership, setting (urban vs rural), and region.

Procedure

We downloaded, printed, and reviewed the selected schools' substance use policies using the aforementioned criteria. Two separate reviewers processed each institution's policy. The reviewers were female undergraduate students with an interest in college life, substance use, and policy studies. Each reviewer independently evaluated the policies and then rated them using the scoring system. The reviewers

then met to discuss their independent ratings. In cases of rating disagreement, they averaged the ratings and used the average score in subsequent analysis. Of a possible 96 items, the 2 raters agreed on 83 items, an inter-rater reliability of 86.4%. The median kappa coefficient was 0.82. These are acceptable levels of inter-rater reliability estimates.

Each college policy was accessed using the Internet. Two approaches were used. First, we accessed the portal link www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov¹ and downloaded the policies available from that site. This site is sponsored by the NIAAA. Fifteen (62.5%) of the schools' policies were accessible from this site. For the second approach, we opened each college's home page and then navigated to their alcohol and other drugs policy.

RESULTS

Sample Description

We selected a total of 24 school policies for review. As seen in Table 3, 18 (75%) were public and 6 (25%) were private institutions. We arranged enrollment into 4 discrete categories as follows: less than 2,000 undergraduates (16.67%); 2,000 to 5,000 (29.17%); 5,000 to 10,000 (33%); and more than 10,000 (20.83%). Schools are located in 1 of 5 geographic regions within the United States: 11 (45.83%) in the Northeast, 7 (29.17%) in the Mid-Atlantic, 2 (8.33%) in the Midwest, 2 (8.33%) in the South, and 2 (8.33%) in the West.

General Features of Campus Environments and Policy Approaches

Table 4 depicts the list of campus characteristics and general features to the policies. All of the colleges and universities studied maintained an alcohol policy as well as a drug policy. Fifteen (62.5%) of the schools had a tobacco policy. Only 8 (33%) of the schools, however, combined all 3 into 1 policy. One (4.17%) campus is substance free, and 2

TABLE 3. Characteristics of Colleges and Universities (N = 24)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Type of school		
Public	18	75.00
Private	6	25.00
Undergraduate enrollment		
< 2,000	4	16.67
2,000–5,000	7	29.17
5,000–10,000	8	33.33
> 10,000	5	20.83
Region		
Northeast	11	45.83
Mid-Atlantic	7	29.17
Midwest	2	8.33
South	2	8.33
West	2	8.33

TABLE 4. Campus Environments and General Features of Policies (N = 24)

Feature	<i>n</i>	%
Integrated policy: alcohol, tobacco, and drugs	8	33.33
Alcohol policy	24	100.00
Tobacco policy	15	62.50
Drug policy	24	100.00
Substance-free campus	1	4.17
Smoke-free campus	2	8.33
Campus security force	9	37.50
Revision in last two years	9	37.50
Percentage of Greek-affiliation:		
non-Greek campuses	4	16.67
Greek-affiliation is not recognized	4	16.67
< 15%	6	25.00
15%–30%	6	25.00
> 30%	4	16.67
Greek-affiliated residences present	15	62.50

(8.33%) campuses are smoke free. A campus security force is used on 9 (37.5%) college campuses. Nine (37.5%) colleges and universities revised their alcohol policy within the last 2 years. Greek-affiliated organizations were prevalent in the institutional environments. Only 4 (16.67%) colleges and universities have non-Greek-affiliated organizations; another 4 (16.67%) campuses have Greek-affiliated organizations, but these organizations are not officially recognized by the college administration or national Greek organizations. Six (25%) of the campuses have less than 15% Greek membership, 6 (25%) have Greek membership between 15% and 30%, and 4 (16.67%) have membership greater than 30%. Fifteen (62.5% of the total and 75% of Greek campuses) have Greek-affiliated residences in which their members live.

Policy Review and Analyses

Accessibility

Table 5 presents the frequencies of ratings on the accessibility dimension. Accessibility yielded a wide range of ratings, and the mean score was 3.42, with a standard deviation of 1.35 and a median of 3, revealing slight positive skewness. The typical school had a substance abuse policy accessible with effort on the part of the reviewers. None of the policies received a 0. One (4.17%) policy was given a 1. Seven (29.17%) policies received a 2. Five (20.83%) schools scored 3. Three (12.5%) schools received a 4. A score of 5 was the rating for the remaining 8 (33.33%) schools.

Comprehensiveness

Table 6 portrays the scores on the comprehensiveness dimension. Eighteen (75%) of the policies studied contained an outline for social events procedure. Twenty (83.33%) required parties with alcohol present to be registered with

TABLE 5. Frequency of Ratings on the Accessibility of Information Dimension (N = 24)

Accessibility score	Definition	n	%
0	No information available	0	0.00
1	Difficult to find on Web site or information is limited	1	4.17
2	Obscure on Web site or confusing location; partial information available	7	29.17
3	Accessible with effort	5	20.83
4	Easily available with direct link, but difficult to open	3	12.50
5	Easily available with direct link	8	33.33

TABLE 6. Scores on Comprehensiveness of Policy Dimension (N = 24)

Feature	n	%	Yes	
			n	%
Social events procedures	18	75.00		
Event registration required	20	83.33		
Checking IDs	16	66.67		
Sober monitors required	11	45.83		
Trained servers	12	50.00		
Food and nonalcoholic beverages required	19	79.17		
No. of attendees determining a party	5	20.83		
Party advertising	13	54.17		
Smoke-free dorms	17	70.83		
Substance-free dorms	13	54.17		
Kegs permitted (yes/no)	11	45.83	7	29.17
Kegs registered			7	100.00
Drinking games permitted (yes/no)	12	50.00	1	4.17
Restrictions on types of alcohol	13	54.17		
Alcohol at college-sponsored events (yes/no)	15	62.50	13	54.17
Tailgating permitted			3	23.08
Tobacco not allowed at college-sponsored events	4	16.67		
Conformance with state law	24	100.00		
Enforcement procedures defined	13	54.17		
Alcohol advertising	2	8.33		
Industry sponsorship	4	16.67		

the college. Sixteen (66.67%) colleges insist on the checking of IDs, either driver's license or school ID, before alcohol can be served. Eleven (45.83%) schools require the group hosting the party to have at least 1 sober monitor attending. Half of the schools require those who serve alcohol at parties to be trained through the college. Nineteen (79.19%) colleges require food and nonalcoholic beverages to be offered at parties where alcohol is available. Five (20.83%) schools define the number of attendees required for an official party. Fifteen (54.17%) mention restrictions in the advertising of the alcohol availability at parties. Seventeen (70.83%) offer smoke-free housing to students, and 13 (54.17%) schools offer substance-free housing. Eleven (45.83%) of the colleges and universities say whether kegs are allowed on campus, and 7 (29.17%) of these schools permit kegs. All 7 (29.17%) schools that permit kegs also

require that the kegs must be registered at parties. Out of 12 (50%) schools that mention drinking games in their policies, 11 (45.83%) prohibit them. Restrictions on types of alcohol are related in 13 (54.17%) of the policies. Thirteen (54.17%) out of 15 (62.5%) mention restrictions or guidelines about drinking at college-sponsored events, specifically when the alcohol is provided by the college. Three (23.08%) out of the 15 schools that allow drinking at college-sponsored events permit tailgating. Four (16.67%) of the policies say that tobacco is not permitted at college-sponsored functions. All 24 college alcohol policies claim they conform to state law, and 13 (54.17%) define enforcement procedures of alcohol on campus. Two (8.33%) colleges cite the restrictions of alcohol advertising by an outside distributor. Four (16.67%) denote the limitations of the giving of money from an outside distributor to act as a sponsor.

Table 7 depicts the ratings on the comprehensiveness dimension. The comprehensiveness scale resulted in a mean of 2.42, a standard deviation of 0.97, and a median of 2, revealing a slight negative skewness. One school only listed 0 to 2 measures in its policy. Two (8.33%) schools listed 3 to 6 measures in their policies, and 10 (41.67%) schools listed 7 to 10 measures in their policies. Eleven to 14 measures were listed in 8 (33.33%) schools' policies, and 3 (12.5%) schools listed 15 to 18 comprehensive measures in their substance policies. None of the schools had 19 to 21 possible measures in their policies.

Enforcement procedures

With respect to sanctions (see Table 8), 10 (41.67%) schools issue fines to the student. Four (16.67%) colleges and universities offer or require community service for reprimand. Seven (29.17%) offer or require counseling and/or evaluation of the student, and 4 (16.67%) will notify a student's parent(s) or guardian(s). If misuse and abuse of alcohol continues or is severe enough, colleges outline in their policies that students can be put on probation (7; 29.17%), suspended (13; 54.17%), or dismissed (11; 45.83%).

Enforcement procedures listed in the policies ranged from a vague penalty or penalties to consequences listed and the policy specifically outlining when and if the student would be issued each consequence. The mean score for enforcement procedures is 2.5, with a standard deviation 1.01, and the median is 2.5. No skewness occurs in these scores, revealing even distribution of the scores, and therefore, the extreme scores do not affect the results. Table 9 depicts the frequency of ratings on this dimension. Only 2 (8.33%) institutions did not list any sanctions. Five (20.83%) schools stated that a student would be referred to a dean or stated that the student would be punished but listed no specific sanctions. Five schools achieved intermediate scores, denoting the amount of disciplinary actions that are listed in the policy. Two colleges received the highest score for having specific guidelines for disciplinary action that they would take against a violating student for the first time and for repeated actions of abusing alcohol.

Clarity

On the index of clarity, institutions scored a mean of 3.29, with a standard deviation of .99, and a median of 3, with a slight positive skewness. Table 10 depicts the clarity dimension by frequency of scores. All policies contained some information, so none of the schools earned a score of 0 for clarity. Only 1 (4.17%) policy was rated 1 (very confusing). Four (16.67%) policies were rated 2 (slightly confusing). Eight (33.33%) policies were rated 3 (moderately understandable). Nine schools (37.5%) scored 4 (easy to understand). Only 2 (8.33%) schools earned the highest score, 5 (exceptionally easy to understand).

Summary Ratings on All 4 Dimensions

Results for the ratings of accessibility, comprehensiveness, enforcement procedures, and clarity of policy are pre-

TABLE 7. Ratings on Comprehensiveness of Policy Dimension

Score	Measures listed	<i>n</i>	%
0	0–2	1	4.17
1	3–6	2	8.33
2	7–10	10	41.67
3	11–14	8	33.33
4	15–18	3	12.50
5	19–21	0	0.00

TABLE 8. Frequency of Sanctions for Policy Violations

Sanction	<i>n</i>	%
Fine	10	41.67
Community service	4	16.67
Evaluation/counseling	7	29.17
Parental notification	4	16.67
Probation (academic)	7	29.17
Suspension	13	54.17
Dismissal	11	45.83

TABLE 9. Frequency of Enforcement Procedures

Rating	Definition	<i>n</i>	%
0	No sanctions listed	2	8.33
1	Reference to a dean (punished without delineation of specific sanctions)	5	20.83
2	Policy lists specific sanction	5	20.83
3	2 or 3 disciplinary actions listed	5	20.83
4	4 or more sanctions listed	5	20.83
5	Specific guidelines for disciplinary action	2	8.33

sented in Table 11, which lists the measures of central tendency on all 4 dimensions.

COMMENT

Policy is vital to the potential management and understanding of a college student's experience in relation to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. This systematic review provides us with comparative information and has implications for future policy development. Overall, we found that policies were accessible and could be reviewed using the prespecified and systematic format we developed. The categories of accessibility, comprehensiveness, enforcement procedures, and clarity were useful heuristics. This objective policy review methodology could be used to (1) compare the policies of different institutions, (2) evaluate each

TABLE 10. Index of Clarity

Score	Definition	<i>n</i>	%
0	No information provided	0	0.00
1	Very confusing	1	4.17
2	Slightly confusing	4	16.67
3	Moderately understandable	8	33.33
4	Easy to understand	9	37.50
5	Exceptionally easy to understand	2	8.33

TABLE 11. Ratings on All 4 Dimensions

Dimension	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>
Accessibility	3.42	1.35	3
Comprehensiveness	2.42	0.97	2
Enforcement procedures	2.5	1.47	2.5
Clarity	3.29	0.99	3

institution's policy relative to objective criteria, and (3) measure change in an institution's substance use policy over time. Although there were many consistencies, a range of variation in policies and their components was also found. All the college policies in this study directly stated that they were fundamentally in compliance with state and local laws. Therefore, the institution is, arguably, neither a safe haven nor above the law. However, findings about underage drinking from student self-report surveys document variability in enforcement of state laws.² All of the schools implied, through their policy language, a focus on health and safety versus authoritarian control. This may reflect an increasing concern about the students' well-being in the context of developing more severe substance use problems. It also may reflect a realistic expectation of college students' substance use within the context of developmental trajectories.⁷ Hence, the policies are usually structured along a model of harm reduction and strive to keep people healthy and safe, rather than trying to control individuals' actions within the scope of the law when they do not harm the individuals themselves or others. Anecdotal reports from students suggest that this type of policy is realistic, encourages open student communication with faculty and administrators, improves access to professional help when needed, and promotes responsible substance use beyond graduation.

The limitations of this study derive from the lack of previous research done on college and university substance abuse policies and the lack of information provided by the schools themselves. A limited theoretical base of policy development makes policy review challenging. We created an objective method for classifying and scoring the policies, and this must be cast as a preliminary effort to identify cer-

tain key dimensions or underlying principles of alcohol policies. We hope that further efforts will build on this with improved theoretical and scientific bases.

It should be noted that some policies were hard to locate, which, given their potential for influence, is regrettable and easily remedied. Other policies were fragmented into alcohol and drug sections and were not all located on 1 page within that school's Web site or were simply obscure. Some schools also, for example, had the enforcement procedures (mostly for Greek organizations) separated from the rest of the policy. Other policies lacked detail, and whether there was a more comprehensive policy in a student handbook was unclear. To be of use, policies should be accessible, and the various constituencies of a campus community should be openly informed about expectations, sanctions, and the culture of substance use.

The results of this study suggest several directions for further research. A primary question is how policies are translated into practice. What if a school has a detailed substance use policy but rarely enforces it? One could also dismantle subcategories of a policy and examine the effects on the overall policy. For instance, Greek affiliation may be hypothesized as an important variable in the availability of alcohol and the location of parties. In our analyses, it seemed to have very little to do with the comprehensiveness of policies or with the type of sanctions provided. In fact, while college administrations might believe this category to have a large impact on the policies, the only notable difference we found was that those schools with Greek-affiliated social organizations tended to have a dedicated place on their school Web site for procedures related specifically to fraternity and sorority social event procedures. An important factor to consider could be the population size of the college or university. Larger universities tended to set explicit rules and outline disciplinary sanctions, whereas smaller universities and colleges noted, more ambiguously, that students would be "referred to a dean." What are the implications of different approaches? Policies may differ based upon the notion of personal and institutional discretion. More discretion implies greater responsibility conferred to the student to behave within the bounds of his or her personally ascertained code of conduct, versus the specification of these codes by the institution, combined with detailed lists of consequences. Further, do the staffs of smaller schools have more resources and time to relate to students individually? Likewise, how will these policies change over time? Because most substance abuse policies can be found online, one school can simply cut and paste the policy of another without considering the implications of the wording, rules, and institutional legacy imbued within another college's substance policies. Although expedient, this "face value" approach obviously misses the educational and developmental opportunities available during the college experience. The opportunities for students to reflect upon their own values as well as upon their attitudes toward student life and psychosocial development are important not to neglect.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of Jim Larimore, Joseph Cassidy, and Deborah Carney of Dartmouth College; William DeJong of Boston University; and Clarissa Garcia of the American Cancer Society.

NOTE

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