

## **Making the Grade: Working on Smoke-free College Campaigns**



To get a sense of some of the issues involved in working to make a college campus smoke-free, we went to Kimberlee Homer Vagadori, Project Director of the California Youth Advocacy Network (CYAN) in Sacramento. She has worked in this area for 10 years and has written the book on the subject -- literally: *College Organizing Guide: Policy Solutions for Tobacco-Related Problems on Campus* (J854, \$17.00 from TECC). "We have it all pretty much spelled out exactly what they need to do and how they have to do it. And then, we do trainings on that. So we help the campuses basically go through that guide and come up with their strategy."

Kim makes it clear from the start that successfully introducing a new policy on a college campus is a complex undertaking. Every college is unique and must be studied in detail before a policy can even be designed. So advocates need to make a firm commitment to do a lot of groundwork before beginning the policy process. As Kim says, "Realistically, colleges are similar to any other city or county; it's its own community, and you have to understand how it operates."

Kim also points out that advocates need to understand that public colleges and universities in California follow a practice called shared governance, which requires that major decisions such as tobacco control policies must win the approval of three sets of decision makers: faculty, staff, and students -- all of which have different priorities and the power to block the policy.

"I would say probably the biggest mistake that I see is that people really underestimate the governance on college campuses," Kim warns. "They think that they can just go straight to the top and get stuff done without understanding how things work on campus, how policies are passed...so they don't do any assessment to understand the process, and that just kills their effort."

### **Data collection: doing your homework**

Once they've got an understanding of who the key players are, projects can then collect data to

demonstrate the need for a policy and the level of support among the various stakeholder groups. CYAN has developed a two-page public opinion survey to measure support for a tobacco-control policy, knowledge of the current campus policy and the dangers of secondhand smoke, availability of cessation services, and tobacco use behaviors. Students, faculty and staff are polled, but a slightly modified instrument is used with students since so many don't think of themselves as tobacco users because they don't use it daily.

"Based on that," Kim notes, "we are able to interpret the results of the surveys to say, people who have limited education on secondhand smoke don't support policies, so we need to do more education on [the effects of] secondhand smoke."



Volunteers collect tobacco litter count at CSU Long Beach

Teams also do litter collections and environmental scans to see where people smoke, where ash cans are placed, if existing policies are being enforced. Kim advises, "Without having that information, you can't even figure out what the best policy is for your campus -- if you don't have the data to show you what the problem is and what the solution should be."

Armed with data, advocates can then go to decisionmakers on campus to get them to support and adopt the policy. The data can also

be used in social norm campaigns.

Kim explains, "If we find out that only 4% of the students are smoking on campus, then we can use this to increase awareness about tobacco use on campus because most students actually think that the majority of people smoke, when actually it's a very small number."

### **Working with students**

For most activities on campus, a cadre of 10 or fewer dedicated students makes the best on-the-ground advocates for smoke-free policies. "The thing that we typically find," Kim counsels, "is that if we can somehow connect tobacco to issues that they care about...then that way we can get them to understand new issues about tobacco and smoke-free policies."

Students already passionate about the environment or

health issues like cancer quickly recognize the need for a smoke-free campus. Students or peer health educators associated with campus health studies and centers also make great advocates.

In fact, this is where Kim found the most effective student advocates she has ever worked with. "There are two of them who are successfully working on a policy, and it really just started with them getting support from their health center. Now they are on the verge of UC San Diego having a really strong policy that never would have happened without just the two of them starting it."



UCSD smoke-free campus advocates  
Shanna Dayan and Sarah Raifsnider

### **CYAN can help**

Don't re-invent the wheel. If you want to work with a campus, CYAN already has most everything you need. In addition to the guide, trainings and technical assistance, "We have contacts at most of the colleges throughout the state. So it's always good to check with us because we might already be doing work with them," Kim advises. For more information, visit [CYAN's website](#).

*Photos courtesy of istock photos and CYAN*