

Case Study
Montana State University, Bozeman
Smoke-free Residence Halls

Montana State University, Bozeman–Smoke-free Residence Halls

Public university located in Bozeman, Montana

Enrollment: Approximately 12,000 students

Fraternity and Sorority Membership: Approximately 3% of students

Gender Breakdown: Male: 54%, Female: 46%

Racial Breakdown: Caucasian: 87%, Hispanic: 1%, African American: <1%, Asian American: 2%, Native Alaskan or American Indian: 2%, International: 3%, Other: <1%, Unknown: 6%

Summary:

Policy/Program Description: After a series of other smoke-free policy changes on campus during the 1990s, Montana State University, Bozeman (MSU) prohibited smoking in residence halls beginning in Fall 2001. **Background.** Smoke-free residence hall policies at MSU occurred as part of a larger “domino effect” of increasingly restrictive smoking policies on campus, including a smoking ban in the Strand Union Building (SUB) and the prohibition of campus tobacco sales. **Strategy for Action.** With the support of key campus personnel and a community advocacy group, the director of Residence Life decided to make residence halls smoke-free. The decision was based on research about the health effects of smoking and secondhand smoke and the knowledge that most of MSU’s benchmark schools had smoke-free residence halls. **Outcomes.** Students have generally complied with the policy changes. Initial protests about smokers’ rights, consistent with the libertarian sentiments of the region, have abated. Smoking rates have decreased slightly, as has damage to the interior of residence halls. **Future Plans.** MSU is now in the process of addressing complaints about smoke-clouds near building entrances. In addition, the impassioned off-campus debate about a smoke-free Bozeman continues and will likely have implications for the campus.

Background:

Increasingly restrictive policies related to indoor smoking at MSU led to the implementation of the smoke-free residence hall policy. Three major changes over the course of five or six years set the stage for the establishment of smoke-free residence halls: (1) the Strand Union Building (SUB) smoking ban in the late 1990s, (2) the prohibition of campus tobacco sales, and (3) the refusal by the campus president to allow tobacco products and promotional items to be distributed on campus during the National College Rodeo Finals, resulting in the withdrawal of the rodeo finals from Bozeman by the rodeo sponsor – Skoal).

Prohibiting smoking in the Strand Union Building (SUB). In the 1990s, a clinician from MSU's Student Health Services led efforts to make the SUB smoke-free, citing public health concerns. At that time, MSU was one of the only schools in the region that continued to allow smoking in the student union and residence halls. The head of the SUB, who may have been open to the smoke-free proposal in part due to personal connections with health services staff, enacted the policy change.

Upon hearing of the policy change, students formed a "smokers' rights club." They proposed that a room in the SUB remain a smoking lounge and agreed to provide a ventilation system to draw the smoke out. However, the installed ventilation system failed to work, blowing smoke into nonsmoking sections of the SUB. Shortly thereafter, the head of the SUB decided to prohibit smoking throughout the building.

Ban of tobacco sales on campus. About the same time that smoking was prohibited in the SUB, a proposition passed to halt sales of tobacco products in the campus bookstore, eliminating the sale of all tobacco products on campus.

Withdrawal of the National College Rodeo finals in Bozeman. For many years, MSU hosted the National College Rodeo, an annual event that attracted thousands of people to the Bozeman area. The event was sponsored by Skoal smokeless tobacco, and was not affiliated with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Skoal regularly passed out samples of smokeless tobacco and other promotional items in the MSU field house during the rodeo, which prompted growing concern amongst MSU staff and faculty about tobacco distribution to minors and the mixed message of having tobacco samples distributed on a campus that banned tobacco sales. As a result, MSU president Michael Malone declared that the campus would no longer host the Rodeo if tobacco sample distribution continued. The Rodeo withdrew, causing dissatisfaction among community members who had reaped the economic benefits of the rodeo. The rodeo has since attempted to relocate to other communities, but has been unsuccessful. Despite the community uproar, President Malone's stance marked MSU's commitment to campus tobacco policies.

Strategy for Action:

Cognizant of liability issues, as well as the smoke-free policies of other benchmark schools, the Director of Residence Life made the decision to implement the residence halls smoke-free policy. The same clinician who supported a smoke-free SUB and most campus administrations supported the Director's decision. Though the administration made the ultimate decision about the policy, students were consulted during the policy change process.

Committee Work. "Tobacco-Free Bozeman," a community initiative with a history of collaborating with MSU health proponents, lent support to the smoke-free residence hall proposal. Since 12,000 of Bozeman's 33,000 residents are college students, community policy change impacts the campus, and vice-versa.

Needs Assessment. Changes in tobacco policy in the residence halls were largely influenced by the smoke-free status of other benchmark schools. In addition, research about environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) countered popular arguments that individual choice dictated the right to smoke. Finally, research findings from the Harvard College Alcohol Study, which revealed that smoke-free residence halls reduce initiation of smoking by as much as 40%, prompted the change.

Implementing and Communicating the Policy Change. The policy change became official in summer 2001. Thus, students arriving and returning in Fall 2001 entered smoke-free residence halls. The argument that there is no safe level of tobacco use was put forward to encourage support for the policy. Cigarette butt receptacles have been installed outside of residence halls, and signs have been posted throughout campus to indicate new smoke-free areas.

Enforcement. Enforcement has been the most challenging aspect of creating a smoke-free environment at MSU. Early on, signs indicating the 25 foot smoke-free perimeter around the SUB were routinely vandalized. However, these types of violations have decreased substantially since current students are more accustomed to the smoke-free policies. The 25-foot perimeter policy now includes all campus academic buildings.

Outcomes:

Early negative student reaction to the campus tobacco policies has substantially diminished. Some observers suggested that early opposition to the policy may have been due to the prevailing libertarian culture on campus. Letters to the editor indicated concerns that MSU had failed to gather sufficient student input. Most of the students who attended MSU when the policies went into effect have graduated, and incoming students have adjusted easily to campus smoking restrictions. Now, less than 1% of residence hall violations are related to smoking, indicating student acceptance of the policy.

Overall, the smoke-free policies have had a positive impact on campus. MSU's maintenance staff has noticed a reduction in damages, such as carpet cigarette burns within the residence halls. Finally, there are indications that smoking rates among students may be slowly decreasing. According to a National College Health Association web survey conducted at MSU in 2003, 58.5% of students reported never having smoked cigarettes, compared to 56.0% in 2000. Rates of use in the past 30 days as well as daily cigarette use also decreased among students between 2000 and 2003.

Future Plans:

To encourage students to comply with perimeter policies, MSU installed cigarette butt receptacles at least 25 feet from campus buildings in March 2004. MSU also plans to continue to address the problem of students smoking too close to building entrances.

Students continue to be influenced by policies in the larger community. Tavern owners and public health advocates battle over the rights of smokers and nonsmokers. The results of the off-campus policy conflict will affect MSU students, as the campus and small Bozeman community are closely linked.

For more information on MSU's tobacco policies, contact:

Jenny Haubenreiser
Director of Health Promotion
hoss@montana.edu

This case study was written in June 2004.