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Generation Green

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Generation green

Linfield's current students are the first to come of age in a time of legal marijuana. What does that mean for campus life?

By Eric Fetters-Walp '93

Resident assistants like Kendall Harrison '21 aren't focused on busting students who violate Linfield's alcohol and drug policy, despite what their peers might think. But sometimes they can't ignore what they see, hear or smell — including the pungent odor of marijuana being smoked inside a residence hall.

"We're not looking to get students in trouble; we're looking out for their safety," Harrison said. "But when we're out on rounds around campus, marijuana of course is more noticeable than alcohol."

And RAs are reporting an increase of marijuana-related incidents compared to alcohol-related ones these days, though there still are more alcohol incidents overall. Compared to even a couple years ago, Harrison said, students seem to be less cautious about getting caught with the drug.

The first generation of students to attend college in the era of legalized marijuana is finding the old rules about pot consumption haven't changed much on campus, including at Linfield. That's partly because state and federal laws don't align, and partly because colleges are concerned about the safety and health of their communities.

A complex legal picture

Nearly five years ago, Oregon made it legal for people 21 and older to use marijuana not just for medical reasons, but also for recreation. While our state has seen a boom in cannabis-related businesses — with dispensaries popping up in communities from the coast to the Willows — it's still illegal for most students because they're underage. And there's another big barrier: The federal Drug Enforcement Administration still classifies marijuana as a Schedule I drug, meaning

it's a controlled substance with high potential for abuse. For those reasons, marijuana use and possession isn't allowed on Linfield campuses, said Jeff Mackay '88, the university's dean of students. "Our policy is no different than before. It has not changed because the federal law hasn't changed."

Linfield's stance is similar to that of most colleges, public and private, said John Hudak, a Brookings Institution senior fellow and author of the book *Marijuana: A Short History*.

"There are a lot of challenges that schools face on this," he said. "Some of those challenges are historical, some have to do with public relations and some are legal."

Because the federal government classifies marijuana as an illegal drug, a 1989 law known as the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act requires that colleges and universities prohibit it. If they don't, schools could lose access to federally funded student loan and grant programs, research money and more.

And most college leaders have long fought to reduce underage students' use of alcohol and drugs, not just to comply with federal law, but also to increase campus health and safety. Partially changing that stance isn't appetizing to trustees and college presidents, Hudak said. It probably would not thrill a large number of parents, either.

Like alcohol, but different

Linfield's student policy guide specifies that any member of the university community who uses or possesses drugs, including "marijuana, marijuana oil, food products, etc.," is subject to disciplinary action. The policy, Mackay said, treats students who break it just like students who run afoul of the campus rules on alcohol use.

Because of the conflict between state and federal laws, he said, new students are informed about the school policy at

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orientation and again by resident assistants. "When a student decides to come to Linfield, they're technically supposed to know about it from reading the student handbook," said Harrison, the RA. "But if they don't, we also go over it when they arrive on campus."

It takes some explaining since the rules on marijuana and alcohol use differ. Because it's legal nationwide to drink at 21, students over that age are allowed to drink on campus. But the same isn't true for marijuana.

The number of students caught violating the marijuana-use policy has steadily increased in recent years, Mackay said. That falls in line with a recent Oregon State University study that found increased use of marijuana among college students is more noticeable in states where recreational use is legal.

Eleven states, including Oregon, Washington and California, currently allow recreational use. Students in states where the drug is legal were 18% more likely to have used marijuana in the past 30 days than students in other states, the OSU study found. It also found that binge drinking on campuses, a longtime problem combatted by college officials, decreased faster in states with legal marijuana.

The road ahead

For many reasons, including the funding issues at stake, Hudak predicts most colleges will maintain strict rules about marijuana, even as more states make it legal for adults. "There's reason to believe that even in the

face of broader legalization many colleges will continue to have outright bans," he said.

Even if federal law didn't effectively make pot illegal on campus, one concern is that allowing older students to use the drug would inevitably make it more accessible to under-age students. There are also questions about how it could be used on campus grounds and buildings. Consider student residences, Hudak said. Tobacco use is not allowed inside publicly accessible buildings, including dorms. Smoking is also somewhat restricted outdoors on most campuses, including Linfield's. So allowing students to smoke marijuana would conflict with smoke-free regulations.

Even so, Mackay said that he and other university leaders realize that telling students to just say "no" isn't effective. One strategy he uses is emphasizing that while it's legal for adults off campus, marijuana use isn't compatible with many students' activities and future career plans.

For example, student-athletes risk their playing status, and student leaders can lose their positions if they are caught using marijuana. Those studying for careers in nursing can expect hospitals to require random drug tests for employees. Students caught violating the marijuana policy are reminded that the long-term health effects of marijuana aren't thoroughly known.

"We want students to make their own informed decisions," Mackay said. "So the response from us really focuses on educating them."