



Our Path to Tobacco-free

Prior to 2009, Oregon Coast Community College (OCCC) was housed in rented facilities, where we had little control over the premises. Passage of a bond measure to fund a move to permanent facilities gave the community college the opportunity to exert greater control over operational decisions, which we exercised by adopting a tobacco-free policy. OCCC was the first community college in the state to adopt such a policy.

Now, the students, faculty and staff of the college take great pride in their new facilities, and in the clear message sent by the adoption of the tobacco-free policy.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NEWPORT NEWS-TIMES

“Our local voters have made significant investment in these new facilities and we want to make sure that we create and maintain a clean and healthy environment that the community can be proud of.”

*Barbara Jenkins-Gibson, Board Chair
Oregon Coast Community College*

Our Rationale

First and foremost, the decision to go tobacco-free was motivated by the cost issue. The litter caused by smoking and the environmental damage done to our buildings by the use of tobacco were important considerations, especially as we planned our move into three new, permanent buildings. We figured it was a perfect opportunity to make a clean break and to start fresh with the new policy rather than bring old habits along with us.

But, it was also motivated by concern about the health of our students, staff and faculty. It's impossible to ignore the overwhelming evidence about the adverse health effects of exposure to secondhand smoke. If we wanted to model and foster healthy lifestyles, it seemed like a huge disconnect to allow tobacco use on campus.

Preparation

Over the course of about six months, we had an extended campus conversation about the policy. We involved students, faculty, staff and the public. The board was genuinely interested in what people had to say, so we reached out to the community and invited input. As a result, the policy went through several iterations.

Some students, staff and faculty felt the policy was limiting their personal choices, so we worked with the local public health department and others on a campaign to create awareness around the health effects of exposure to secondhand smoke. It wasn't all that elaborate; with a small community college like ours, word gets around pretty fast.

Challenges

As with any small community college, we don't have as much capacity to enforce compliance as larger institutions might. So, we have to rely on people to follow the policy without someone always looking over their shoulders. Our biggest decision was whether to create a dedicated smoking area or not, which some of our students and faculty asked for. Ultimately, we decided against it because we didn't want to condone tobacco use anywhere on the campus. We don't fine or cite people for smoking, but we do provide verbal reminders and peer enforcement, when necessary. Enforcement doesn't need to be perfect in the beginning. It's a process and we found it soon became self-enforced on campus.

Advice

In considering whether to go tobacco-free, look for the right opportunity to make it happen. For us, the timing was convenient since we were moving to new facilities.

Once you've decided to move forward, you need a plan. And you need to be respectful and polite to all of the constituencies that are involved, including those who use tobacco.

Finally, you can't let it slide. Cigarette butts are like graffiti. If you leave them alone, they seem to multiply. So, we're very aggressive about picking them up, and we provide ashtrays and buckets outside our gates for smokers to use before coming back on campus.

The Outcome

The process took a bit longer than we had expected, but it was worth it. There have been no complaints from neighbors about tobacco use outside of campus. No dropouts. No major compliance issues, although we stay vigilant.

But, most importantly, our students, faculty and staff are grateful that they aren't being subjected to secondhand smoke on campus.

And the voters of our community—who supported the bond measure that made our new campus possible—can be proud of the clean and healthy environment at our college campuses in Lincoln City, Newport and Waldport.