

Using the Photovoice Method to Advocate for Change to a Campus Smoking Policy

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Abstract:

Objective: The authors used the photovoice method as a strategy for empowering students to advocate for change of a campus smoking policy. **Participants:** Participants included 49 college students and 160 photo-exhibit attendees during spring 2011. **Methods:** Students were trained in the use of the photovoice method and a public exhibit was used to educate the campus community and advocate for change. **Results:** The photovoice initiative resulted in an effective platform for students to successfully advocate for the relocation of ashtrays that were in violation of the policy and for the elicitation of future advocacy targets. **Conclusions:** The photovoice project provided a platform for students to have their views heard by campus community members and policymakers. The project served as a useful tool for grassroots student advocacy. Those interested in addressing campus health policy issues may want to consider conducting a photovoice project similar to the one described in this article.

Keywords: advocacy | campus | photovoice | policy | smoking

Article:

According to the National College Health Assessment, nearly 15% of college students in the United States are current smokers, and 4% are current smokeless tobacco users.¹ The use of tobacco by college students is a public health concern, as exposure to firsthand and secondhand smoke is associated with various cancers, cardiovascular disease, respiratory problems, and reproductive health issues.^{2,3} Moreover, smokeless tobacco use is associated with oral cancer, oral lesions, gum disease, and tooth decay.⁴

In order to reduce student use of tobacco and its subsequent health problems, the American College Health Association (ACHA) recommends that college administrators prohibit all forms of tobacco use on campus, both indoors and outdoors.⁵ Although several colleges have implemented such a policy, most colleges do not comply with every aspect of the ACHA's

recommendation.⁶ For instance, rather than completely banning smoking outdoors, many colleges only prohibit smoking near building entrances.⁶

Previous research studies indicate that college students are in favor of campus tobacco policies⁷⁻⁹; however, research suggests that major barriers of student-led efforts to advocate for policy change include low student investment in making change, a lack of interest from campus administrators, and a shortage of resources that could guide students through effective advocacy efforts.¹⁰ The project described in this article attempted to overcome these barriers by using “photovoice” as a tool for students^{11, 12} to advocate for change to their campus tobacco policy.

Photovoice is a method of conducting community-based participatory research with people that have little influence within their own community.^{13, 14} In this method, participants use cameras to photograph their community's needs. Then, the participants use the photos as talking points to educate fellow community members and policymakers about the issues addressed in the photos.^{13, 14} The goals of the photovoice method are to empower participants, allow participants' voices to be heard within the community, and to enable participants to inform and affect policy change.^{13, 14} The purposes of the project described in this article are to apply the photovoice method to discover student views regarding their campus' smoking policy and to empower students to influence a change to the policy.

METHODS: THE PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

Participants

The participants of the photovoice project included 49 undergraduate college students enrolled in a Public Health Education course titled “Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs,” offered during the Spring semester of 2011. The project was approved by the internal review board at the university in which the project was conducted.

Setting

The photovoice project was implemented at a large, 4-year, public university located in the Southeast region of the United States. The university's smoking policy states that smoking is prohibited in all campus buildings and is also prohibited outdoors within 25 feet of any building. In addition, the policy states that ash urns will be located in positions outside the 25-foot perimeter of buildings. The policy does not prohibit smokeless tobacco use, nor does it state how the smoking policy is enforced.

Training

Students were trained regarding the photovoice method during 6 1-hour class sessions. The topics covered in the training included tobacco's influence on health, the impact of policy on tobacco use, the ACHA's recommendations regarding campus tobacco policies, an overview of

the photovoice method, basic photography techniques, and the ethics of photovoice (eg, consent, photo-release forms, privacy laws).¹⁵ Students were directed to take photos that would answer the following open-ended questions: What are your concerns regarding our campus smoking policy? How do you think our smoking policy could be improved? Students who did not own a camera were provided with a disposal camera. Students were given 2 weeks to complete their photos.

Photo Discussion

During 2 1-hour class sessions, the students critically discussed the meaning behind their photos in small groups by using the mnemonic “SHOWeD,” which stands for: What do you See here? What is really Happening? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this problem or strength exist? What can we Do about it?¹⁶ The students were then told to create a written caption for each of their photos based upon the SHOWeD mnemonic. The students were informed that the captions would be attached to their photos and be read by attendees during the project's public exhibit. Next, the students were instructed to analyze the class' photos by creating categorical themes based upon photo content. Students then voted which photos from each theme would best represent the class' voice as a whole at the project's exhibit.

Exhibit

Invitations to the project's exhibit were sent via e-mail to key administrators, faculty, and staff who were determined to be stakeholders regarding the campus smoking policy (eg, vice chancellors, key faculty committee chairs, Grounds Crew Supervisor, Staff Senate Chair). The university's student body was invited to attend the exhibit through word-of-mouth, posters, and e-mails to targeted student groups. The exhibit was held for 4 hours in the university's student union building. The students chose a total of 30 photos to be presented. During the exhibit, students stood beside their photos and engaged the attendees with conversation. Students advocated for a campus-wide ban on all forms of tobacco use. In case a comprehensive tobacco policy was not achievable, students advocated that the current policy include stricter enforcement language and that the policy be more stringently observed and enforced, such as ensuring ashtrays be placed in locations according to the policy.



FIGURE 1 Student photo of a grotesque ashtray. “It’s a shame that people who visit our campus walk out of the parking deck the first thing they notice is not our beautiful landscape, but a melted cigarette receptacle. How can you expect to attract perspective [*sic*] students with this around?”

RESULTS: PROJECT OUTCOMES

Student Viewpoint

The students discovered 4 overarching themes from the content of their photos: Aesthetic Concerns, Policy Violations, Legal Secondhand Smoke, and Smokeless Tobacco Use. In terms of Aesthetic Concerns, students took photos of how tobacco products degrade the aesthetic beauty of the campus (Figure 1). For instance, students captured images of littered cigarette butts, unsightly ashtrays, and scorched bench tops that smokers have used to extinguish their cigarettes. In the Policy Violations theme, students took photos of violations to the campus smoking policy, such as ashtrays located within 25 feet of buildings and also of faculty, staff, and students who were smoking near building entrances (Figure 2). Photos placed in the Legal Secondhand Smoke theme consisted of those smoking near common walkways where others could be exposed to secondhand smoke, even though the smokers were obeying policy by smoking more than 25 feet away from buildings (Figure 3). Finally, the Smokeless Tobacco Use theme contained photos of smokeless tobacco users carrying “spit bottles” (Figure 4) and of used smokeless tobacco that had been spat onto bathroom sinks, toilets, and water fountains.



FIGURE 2 Student photo of a policy violation. “This picture was taken in front of the student union. The smoker is casually relaxing at a table that is provided for people to enjoy their lunch outside. A cloud of smoke was surrounding the student. Ironically, a sign stating ‘Please no smoking on patio’ was less than 5 feet away. This student is only one of many who partake [*sic*] in the same behavior.”



FIGURE 3 Student photo of “legal” secondhand smoke. “Although this student may be 25 feet away from the building, anyone coming down this walkway has to walk through his smoke. As a student who has never smoked, it’s not a pleasant walk around campus when I’m always breathing in secondhand smoke.”



FIGURE 4 Student photo of a “spit bottle” being filled-up. “It is not uncommon to see a student who uses dip spit into an empty can or bottle. This is a photo of my friend who uses dip inside of his on-campus apartment. At times this can be disgusting to see and if it is in a can it may be mistaken for a drink or spilled.”

Informing Policy

A total of 160 community members attended the photo exhibit, including 7 faculty, 18 staff, 124 students, and 11 campus visitors. Photovoice participants informed key campus policymakers about the concerns addressed in the photos, which resulted in 2 major outcomes. First, after viewing photos and speaking with students, the university's Grounds Crew Supervisor relocated the ashtrays that were in violation to the policy to 25 feet away from buildings. In addition, the Grounds Crew Supervisor disposed of the ashtrays shown in student photos that were unsightly. Second, during the exhibit, leaders of the university's Staff Senate spoke with the coordinator of the photovoice project and gave advice for “next steps” in advocating for policy change. The Staff Senate members stated that the students should draft a version of an ideal policy and seek endorsement of the policy from key groups on campus, such as the Staff Senate, Faculty Senate, and the major student-led campus organizations (eg, fraternities, sororities, honor societies). The endorsements could then be used for advocating to the university's Chancellor for the new policy to be adopted.

Student Empowerment

The authors did not measure student empowerment; however, there was anecdotal evidence of empowerment during a class discussion that was held after the photo exhibit. During the class discussion, students mentioned feeling that their voices had been heard by the campus

community, including administrators. For instance, one student discussed the proud moment when he realized that he was having a conversation with the campus' Vice Chancellor for Business Affairs about the issue of legal secondhand smoke. In another instance, the student who captured the photo of the unsightly ashtray (Figure 1) discussed noticing the ashtray was removed from campus the day after the photo exhibit. The student was thrilled to see that his own photo and advocacy efforts had made an immediate difference.

COMMENT

The photovoice project was successful in motivating students to address health policy on a college campus. The student photovoice participants perceived that the 25-foot policy is insufficient, resulting in destruction of campus attractiveness through unkempt ashtrays and littered cigarette butts. This supports previous studies that suggest faculty, staff, and student smokers may not obey outdoor smoking policies that merely prohibit smoking a certain distance away from campus buildings.^{7, 17} Students also viewed secondhand smoke and smokeless tobacco use to be a health risk to students that should be addressed in the campus smoking policy. This finding reflects the ACHA's recommendation that universities should completely prohibit all forms of tobacco use in order to reduce tobacco use and its related health problems.⁵

Limitations

The photovoice project had 2 major limitations. First, because the project was conducted at 1 university, our experience may not apply to other universities. Specifically, the concerns that students had about the campus smoking policy may not be similar to the views of students at other universities with similar or varying tobacco policies. Also, the reactions of exhibit attendees in the photovoice project may not reflect how attendees at universities would react to a comparable photovoice exhibit. Second, the photovoice project is limited in that it did not measure impact at the individual level. For instance, it is unknown if the photovoice project inspired individuals to consider quitting smoking or even for smokers to be mindful of their cigarette litter.

Conclusions

The photovoice project provided a platform for students to feel empowered and to have their views heard by campus community members and policymakers. Although the photovoice project did not result in a tobacco-free campus, it did produce change. For instance, as a result of the photo exhibit, ashtrays were relocated to outside the buildings' 25-foot perimeter and unattractive ashtrays were completely removed from campus. Moreover, the coordinator of the photovoice project was given critical information by stakeholders regarding how to continue with advocacy efforts for policy change.

Overall, the photovoice project served as a useful tool for guiding effective advocacy efforts. Students who are interested in advocating for a change in their campus tobacco policy may want to consider conducting a photovoice project similar to the one described in this article.

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