

PREVENTION WITH PURPOSE:

Considering Culture Throughout the Strategic Prevention Framework

Many colleges and universities across the United States have begun to critically examine issues of race, power, and privilege on their campuses as a direct result of the nationwide racial injustice demonstrations of 2020. Both necessary and uncomfortable, this work requires historically white institutions of higher education—and their staff, students, and professors—to confront the reality that schools have not always been panaceas of learning for all students. To put it bluntly, colleges and universities have long upheld racist systems of oppression, even as they have provided educational opportunities for millions.

The way forward requires a deep examination of the experiences of students from different cultures, races, ethnicities, and gender identities, followed by specific actions to ensure their voices and needs are centered on campus.

On-campus drug use prevention efforts should be examined through this lens as well. It is no longer enough for colleges and universities to design prevention programs that are tailored to the needs of the dominant populations on campus. Increasingly, they need to consider culture—including race, religion, and gender identity—in their programming.

Considering culture is important because the culture and environment within which a student grew up has an impact on their drug use. In the United States, structural racism, sexism, and discrimination have contributed to worse health and behavioral outcomes for people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community for generations. For some students from these communities, drug use may also be rooted in historical trauma or everyday instances of racism and discrimination, often called microaggressions, that students in dominant cultures simply do not experience.

However, on-campus drug use prevention programs have not typically considered the experiences of students from nonmajority groups. Nor have they considered social determinants of health that may put these students at greater risk for drug use.

Research tells us that comprehensive, collaborative, data-driven prevention initiatives can effectively reduce and prevent drug misuse among college students. But if these efforts do not explicitly account for the experiences of diverse racial, ethnic, and gender populations on campus, then they may only reach the dominant population. Healthy schools need drug use prevention programs and interventions that reach all populations and that do not take a one-size-fits-all view of prevention.

[*Prevention with Purpose: A Strategic Planning Guide for Preventing Drug Misuse Among College Students*](#) provides campus professionals with step-by-step guidance for planning, implementing, and evaluating effective prevention efforts. The success of those efforts partly depends on practitioners' cultural competence, cultural humility, and their knowledge of drug use patterns among different populations on campus.

While data on drug use among college students disaggregated by race and other cultural factors are rare, studies have indicated differences in usage patterns among different campus populations.



Definition: Culture

The languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge, and collective identities and memories that make a person's social environment meaningful. Culture is often considered in terms of race, but it can also be defined by characteristics such as age, gender, religion, income level, education, sexual orientation, geography, and profession.

Microaggressions Can Lead to Drug Use

Microaggressions are subtle and often unintentional comments or actions that stem from unconscious prejudices or biases about a specific culture or population group. Individual microaggressions may be easy to ignore. Over time, however, a student who is continually experiencing microaggressions is likely to feel unwelcomed and uncomfortable on campus.

Many students of color experience daily microaggressions on college campuses. Research has shown that experiencing [microaggressions can increase the odds of regular marijuana use](#) as well as other drug use.

For example:

- » A [2010 study](#) found that African American students were less likely than white students to participate in high-risk drinking behaviors.
- » A [2021 study](#) found that white youth (36.3%) and Black/African American youth (35.4%) aged 18–25 use marijuana at roughly the same rates.
- » [Studies suggest](#) that male students are more likely to engage in nonmedical use of prescription opioid medication than female students.
- » Members of fraternities and sororities are [more likely to binge drink, use drugs, and use marijuana than nonmembers](#).

Incorporating Culture into a Systematic Planning Process

The Strategic Prevention Framework

Culture affects all aspects of a student’s higher education experience, including their use of drugs. Understanding and considering the experiences of students from varying cultural groups is therefore the foundation for effective prevention programming that addresses the specific needs of different populations on campus.

Campus leaders can use the resource *Prevention with Purpose* to guide their strategic planning process. *Prevention with Purpose* introduces the [Strategic Prevention Framework](#)—the “how to” for developing a data-driven, collaborative strategic plan. The SPF can help planners systematically measure the scope of drug use issues on campus; build relationships across sectors; and plan, implement, and evaluate their prevention efforts.



The following sections briefly describe how to build considerations of cultural factors into each step of the SPF to create campus prevention programs that meet the diverse experiences and needs of your population.

SPF Step 1: Assessment

Because each college campus is unique, defining the specific challenges on your campus is the first step in preventing drug use. An assessment can provide data to help you plan, implement, and evaluate your comprehensive prevention efforts.

However, assessment questions may carry with them assumptions and biases about drug use, limiting the utility of the data you receive. Worse, poorly designed surveys may perpetuate the cycle of historical racism, oppression, and discrimination against some populations, leading to negative health outcomes.

When developing an assessment, consider your own perspectives, experiences, and biases. For example:

- » How have your own experiences with drugs and alcohol shaped your thinking on prevention?
- » What preconceptions do you have about drug misuse among traditionally marginalized groups on campus?
- » How much do you know about students' religious practices at school?



Likewise, it is essential to design a survey that is culturally inclusive and keeps in mind students who belong to traditionally marginalized groups and cultures. To do this, campus prevention specialists should work directly with members of those communities, as indicated below. Campus prevention staff should also be proactive and learn about different groups' experiences, challenges, and possible concerns about drug use prevention activities.

To design assessments with traditionally marginalized populations in mind, campus prevention staff can:

- » **Involve people from the marginalized communities in every part of prevention efforts, beginning with assessment.** Consider the phrase “nothing about us without us.” This phrase was popularized by disability activists in the 1990s who wanted to ensure their voices were included in health policy decisions that affected their community. When planning drug use prevention programs, policies, and practices for a specific group of students, prevention professionals should follow the same advice. It’s necessary to involve members of the racial, ethnic, religious, or gender minority as active participants, decision-makers, and cocreators in the planning process. This promotes buy-in and can help your program achieve results.
- » **Do some research on how racism and systemic inequities have affected health outcomes among students from racial, religious, and sexual minorities on your campus.** Remember that young people from these marginalized groups have often suffered negative health outcomes due to policies and realities beyond their control. Identifying some of the systemic issues causing these negative health outcomes can help you frame your assessment questions so they get at the root cause of drug use, rather than just the drug use itself.
- » **Make sure any assessment is culturally inclusive.** Involve members of different cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender groups in your assessment process. They should inform decisions about methodology, tools, measures, and survey questions. Work with members of different communities on campus to ensure the assessment uses inclusive language, and the questions do not stigmatize specific groups of students. If your college or university has an Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, consider including them in the review process. The greater the involvement of traditionally marginalized student populations on campus, the greater

the likelihood the assessment strategies you use will address use patterns and risk and protective factors in culturally appropriate ways.

- » **Locate student drug use data for your campus and ensure they are disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual identity.** These data will help you identify any differences in drug use patterns, and/or the factors influencing drug use among different cultural groups.
- » **Try to identify what you do not know about students' drug use on campus.** Where do data gaps exist? What would you like to know about the usage patterns of different cultural groups on campus? And what steps can you take to fill these gaps?
- » **Once the results of the assessment are known, share your findings with members of the different cultural groups on campus, such as the Black Student Union, religious groups, and the LGBTQ+ alliance.** These presentations can open lines of communication between campus prevention professionals and the students they support, and they may also prompt a deeper dive into some of the unique prevention issues with which each group contends.



For details and tools on the assessment step of the SPF, refer to Chapter 3 of [*Prevention with Purpose*](#).

SPF Step 2: Building Capacity

Even the most well-thought-out prevention program will not work if a community is not ready to address the issue of drug use among students. For this reason, capacity building is essential to the success of your prevention efforts and a key step of the SPF as it helps establish the resources and readiness needed for programmatic success.

To build the resources and readiness required to implement meaningful, effective drug use prevention programs, campus prevention professionals can:

- » **Work with the administration, key campus leaders, and representatives of different populations on campus to generate buy-in.** You've done considerable work to design an assessment that includes diverse voices on your campus. By working with those same groups to get the word out, you can make sure it is reaching its intended audience—thus delivering the information you need to guide prevention.
- » **Practice cultural competence.** Prevention staff must recognize, respect, and value the differences in health practices, beliefs, and needs of the communities they are working with. This is very important during the building capacity step, when planners are working with multiple groups to move the prevention plan forward.

Definition: Culture Humility

One way to work toward cultural competence is to practice cultural humility, or the active practice of dismantling the biases and beliefs that we, as individuals, bring to our work with students and student groups on our campuses. Practicing cultural humility also means taking a close look at the historical biases and belief systems that operate on our campuses and working to dismantle those systems as well. Cultural humility refers to a process of both personal and institutional self-reflection and self-exploration to ensure we are learning from others rather than assuming or ascribing beliefs or values to individuals or groups.

Remember that one facet of becoming culturally competent is practicing cultural humility—the ongoing practice of self-reflection and self-exploration.

» **Assess your own team’s knowledge about racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in drug use.**

How much expertise are you bringing? How much experience do you have in designing programs for diverse communities? Is your team reflective of the campus population and groups you are working to reach? How will you address those gaps in skills and knowledge?

» **Assess the readiness of different cultural groups and populations to engage in prevention efforts.**

Different groups may be at different stages of readiness for prevention activities—so it is vital to check in with each of them. Are they aware of drug misuse among their students? How likely are they to participate in prevention efforts? Do they view drug use as a problem that needs to be addressed? What type of education, outreach, and collaboration is needed for them to support the prevention efforts?

» **Engage partners in conversations about how prevention work can improve health outcomes within specific campus populations, as well as across the entire campus.** For example, campus data may reveal that LGBTQ+ students binge drink at a higher rate than the general campus population—and that this elevated rate is also associated with higher incidences of sexual assault. Sharing this data with members of the LGBTQ+ community may prompt discussions about the issues of binge drinking and sexual assault, and could pave the way for community buy-in for an alcohol misuse prevention program. This data can also be shared with the health and wellness staff on campus who help to address and reduce sexual assaults.



For details and tools on the capacity step of the SPF, refer to Chapter 4 of [*Prevention with Purpose*](#).

SPF Step 3: Planning

By now, you have laid a lot of the groundwork for success: you have engaged representatives from different cultural groups on campus to conduct a needs assessment, identify resources, and foster community readiness for prevention efforts. You are now ready to design a comprehensive approach to drug use prevention that includes programs, practices, and policies to address the identified needs of your campus’s diverse student body.



The planning step involves four key tasks:

1. Prioritize risk and protective factors
2. Select appropriate interventions to address priority factors
3. Determine how many interventions you can realistically implement
4. Build a strategic plan (or logic model) and share with your stakeholders

The challenge on college campuses is each population has its own unique set of needs, risks, and protective factors. Designing prevention programs, policies, and practices for the entire campus will not reach everyone equally; likewise, aligning prevention programs to the needs of only one group could have a minimal effect on the broader community.

Therefore, a campus dedicated to addressing drug use will have multiple prevention approaches, each aligned to a different population. Campus prevention staff should do the following:

- » **Base your prevention efforts on quantitative and qualitative data.** Imagine you conduct a campus survey that finds students who are the first in their family to go to college use illicit drugs at higher rates than the general population. As part of the assessment step, you also meet with many members of this cohort to hear how the stress of being the first to go to college drives them to drug use. In this case, an effective intervention should address two issues: the stress these students are experiencing and the drug use they may be using to cope.
- » **Examine current prevention efforts in different campus communities and cultural groups.** How effective have these programs been? What resources do they require? What opportunities are there to align new efforts with existing ones?
- » **As a result of systemic inequities in how health care has been delivered, health outcomes can be different across racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.** When selecting evidence-based prevention strategies to implement, consider their fit for the population you are seeking to reach. Are there cultural considerations as to why it will or will not work? Has the intervention ever been used successfully with that population? Has the program ever caused any harm? These considerations may help you appropriately design programs that achieve the results you are looking for.



For details and tools on the planning step of the SPF, refer to Chapter 5 of [*Prevention with Purpose*](#).

SPF Step 4: Implementation

Careful implementation of prevention programs, practices, and policies means designing with culture in mind. For instance, the same evidence-based marijuana prevention program might be implemented differently for Black students than with white students because of their different risk and protective factors, as well as the different ways that institutional racism has shaped their experiences on campus.

To ensure prevention efforts are implemented in a way that promotes health, wellness, and well-being, prevention professionals should do the following:

Cultural adaptation is the process of modifying a program to align with the beliefs and practices of a specific group. This helps to ensure prevention strategies and materials are culturally and linguistically appropriate for your audience. Preferred language, terms, and definitions should all be considered and revisited regularly.

- » **Build upon your existing connections with representatives of different cultural groups on campus to raise awareness of, and buy-in for, your selected programs.** As trusted liaisons, these representatives can help you reach your target population while also establishing goodwill. These representatives and partners should be involved in the delivery and roll out of the prevention programs, policies, and practices.
- » **Consider the need for specific cultural adaptations.** You can work with your community, cultural, and campus representatives to enhance the intervention materials to better address their ideas and preferences.
- » **Look for program adaptations that can increase buy-in without compromising program fidelity.** When implementing evidence-based prevention programs, it is important to follow the content as closely as possible. However, there are ways to adapt the program to better align with the culture and needs of the population you are trying to reach. For example, campus prevention professionals could work with a trusted community or faith leader to deliver the intervention, thereby increasing interest and buy-in.
- » **Monitor how your prevention efforts are being implemented.** Are they being implemented correctly? Who is participating? Who isn't? If students from a specific cultural group are not engaged, think about steps you can take to enhance program delivery.

Throughout the process, you have relied on representatives of cultural groups and communities on campus to help you shape everything from assessments to program development. Now as you work together to put the program into practice, it's essential to communicate your efforts, successes, and struggles to the focus population as well. They can provide more information about what's working and how the intervention is being perceived. They may also provide insights into what is not working—and what further adjustments need to be made to get more community buy-in.



For details and tools on the implementation step of the SPF, refer to Chapter 6 of [*Prevention with Purpose*](#).

SPF Step 5: Evaluation

Evaluation is a key part of improving program effectiveness over the long term. As with all other steps in the SPF, cultural considerations are essential to the development of your evaluation plan and dissemination of your findings.

When conducting an evaluation, campus prevention staff should:

- » **Choose an evaluation tool that is culturally appropriate for the intended audience.** Pay attention to language and vocabulary. Work with representatives of campus community groups to ensure the evaluation is using inclusive, person-first language.
- » **Involve members of the populations that your intervention is trying to reach in the evaluation itself.** Doing so demonstrates respect for those populations, increases the credibility of the prevention program, and can help ensure the cultural appropriateness of the evaluation itself. Remember: These representatives and stakeholders are your partners in prevention.
- » **Conduct focus groups and interviews with members of key populations to glean additional insights about how your prevention efforts are being received.** These interviews often deliver essential information that might not be uncovered in a standard evaluation survey.

- » **Evaluate program adaptations.** Did you make changes to a program to boost its cultural relevance? If so, use the evaluation to figure out whether those adaptations worked as intended. That information can inform future iterations of the program.
- » **Share findings with individual populations and groups that your prevention effort was trying to reach.** Presentations could occur virtually over Zoom, in a face-to-face meeting, or via a findings document distributed to members of a specific community. The important thing is to deliver evaluation findings directly to the populations who were involved in the program. Presenting these findings can also open the door to further conversations about how drug use can be addressed in certain situations or within certain communities. For example, if you implemented a program designed to reduce illegal stimulant use among Black students, sharing and debriefing the results of that program at a Black Student Union forum may lead to discussions about the issue itself, as well as community member-led initiatives to continue to address the issue.
- » **Finally, share findings with the whole campus community directly.** This is an important part of building ongoing support for your prevention efforts with all sectors of the campus community. Ask the community: What surprises you about these findings? What changes have you seen with respect to drug use? What more work needs to be done?



For details and tools on the evaluation step of the SPF, refer to Chapter 7 of [Prevention with Purpose](#).

Take Action!

By completing the actions outlined in this publication, you can ensure your strategic plan to prevent drug misuse addresses the needs of the different cultures and communities on your campus, helping your students thrive and succeed.



For Additional Guidance

For additional guidance on the SPF, we encourage you to review [Prevention with Purpose: A Strategic Planning Guide for Preventing Drug Misuse Among College Students](#).

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Copies of this Publication Are Available Online

Copies of this publication are available online at www.campusdrugprevention.gov, DEA's website for professionals working to prevent drug misuse among college students.

**Drug Enforcement Administration
Office of Public Affairs
Community Outreach and Prevention Support Section**

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January 2023