**RA Cannabis Information Guide**

What’s the Need?

Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States and daily use among incoming college students is on the rise (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2019; Monitoring the Future, 2018). A growing body of research shows that students who use cannabis tend to get lower grades and are more likely to drop out than students who do not use. We also know that cannabis use can exacerbate mental health concerns, including anxiety and sleep difficulties (NIDA, 2019).

How You Can Help with Cannabis Messaging:

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| **Unhelpful Messages/Approaches** | **Why?** | **Helpful Messages/Approaches** |
| “Everyone smokes weed at NAU.” | Reinforcing the misperception that “everyone smokes weed” is very unhelpful. Social norms have a significant influence on individual behavior, so it is important to present data on actual trends. Additionally, statements that normalize substance use can be isolating for students on our campus who are in recovery.  | Most NAU students don’t use cannabis. 58% of NAU students have *never used*. 22% of those who have used cannabis, haven’t used within the past 30 days. |
| “Cannabis is safer than alcohol.” | Although the risks of using cannabis differ from those of alcohol, this phrase often becomes an excuse for excessive and dangerous cannabis use.  | Cannabis is not without risk. Like all substances, there is the possibility for abuse and dependence. Some other risks includes: legal consequences, cognitive impacts on attention, focus and memory, academic consequences, negative effects on mental health. |
| Programs that inadvertently normalize cannabis use (e.g. “Don’t be a Pothead” program with flower pot painting). | While programs like this may seem funny and harmless, they contribute to the social normalization of cannabis use and the misperceptions about prevalence of use outlined above. | Evidence-based approaches should be used to create programming. Use up-to-date, factual information from reliable sources.  |

The Basics:

* All publicly funded universities, like NAU, are required to be safe and drug free learning environments. This means that the storage and use of illicit drugs, including all forms of cannabis, is prohibited on campus. This applies to everyone, even those with medical cards.
	+ If a student receives a marijuana charge, they could become ineligible for federal student aid grants and loans.
* While some people report using cannabis to manage their anxiety, research tells us that cannabis can sometimes make anxiety worse. Additionally, it’s not a good idea to self-medicate – seek the help of a medical professional who can work with you to create an appropriate and safe treatment plan (NIDA, 2019).
* Some people also report using cannabis to help them sleep. While the sedative effects of cannabis may help people fall asleep, it doesn’t help in terms of sleep quality. Cannabis interferes with the body’s natural sleep cycle causing REM sleep deprivation. This can lead to daytime sleepiness, anxiety, and irritability the next day (NIDA, 2019).
* Cannabis use can slow reaction time and impair coordination, making it unsafe to drive after use. It’s best to wait 5-6 hours (or at least twice that amount of time if edibles were used) before getting behind the wheel (NIDA, 2019).
* Regular cannabis use can negatively impact academic success – it has been shown to make it harder for students to learn, pay attention and remember things. These side effects can last up to 3 – 4 weeks after discontinuing use (NIDA, 2019).
* Brain development isn’t complete until our mid-20s. Using cannabis while your brain is still growing can result in permanent functional and structural changes in your brain. Memory, learning, and intelligence can all be negatively impacted (National Academy of Sciences, 2019).
* It is possible to become addicted to cannabis. A person’s risk for addiction increases with the frequency of their use. A family history of addiction to any substance also increases risk (NIDA, 2019).
* It is possible to overdose on cannabis. While this looks different than an opioid or alcohol overdose (poisoning), it can be dangerous and very unpleasant. There are increasing reports of people who use cannabis (often in these cases edibles or concentrates) seeking treatment in emergency rooms for extreme anxiety, paranoia, hallucinations, and even extreme psychotic reactions (NIDA for Teens, 2019).
* A few more things to remember:
	+ The research on cannabis is still emerging. There is a lot that we don’t know about cannabis. It can be helpful to acknowledge this in your messaging and programming around cannabis.
	+ There is quite a lot of misinformation floating around about cannabis – especially in regard to its unfounded health claims. When gathering information for programming around marijuana, start with the sources provided below. If you need more information than is provided on those webpages, be sure to look for web sources ending with .org, .net, .edu, .gov. It’s also a good idea to be aware of the date (is it recent/relevant?), author (what are their credentials?), sources (credible websites and articles will always cite their sources).

Putting it Into Practice:

* Create AOD bulletin boards at times during the academic year when students are more likely to be using substances in a higher-risk way:
	+ First 6 weeks of the fall semester
	+ Around homecoming/Halloween (National Collegiate Alcohol Awareness Week is typically a week or 2 before NAU’s homecoming)
	+ Leading up to Spring Break
* Create a “Fact or Fiction” bulletin board using the information above or from the websites listed in the next section. Avoid using a lot of marijuana leafs or other marijuana images. Make sure to list the sources used somewhere on the board.
* Set up laptops and have people complete ScreenU Marijuana (find it here: [nau.edu/screenu](https://nau.edu/campus-health-services/alcohol-and-other-drug-programs/)), a free, confidential, online screening tool that assesses risk and provides resources for students thinking about making a change around their use.
* Host a sober social event. Simply hosting events that are an alternative to using substances is an effective approach to drug prevention. Take your residents to the climbing wall at Campus Rec, go to a movie at Prochnow or check out one of the many Live Free sober socials hosted by the Collegiate Recovery Program.

Reliable Sources:

* National Institute on Drug Abuse – Marijuana: <https://www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/marijuana>
* National Institute on Drug Abuse – Marijuana Facts for Teens booklet: <https://d14rmgtrwzf5a.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/marijuana_teens.pdf>
* Washington State Department of Health – You Can Campaign: <https://www.youcanwa.org/>
* University of Washington Alcohol & Drug Abuse Institute – Factsheets About Marijuana: <http://learnaboutmarijuanawa.org/factsheets.htm>