

Substance Use, Sense of Belonging, and Retention

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of public and private colleges and universities in the state. The campuses in PIP work to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, cannabis, other drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health concerns have on student health and well-being. This brief includes data from the 23 4-year institutions in the coalition (N=5,634); 2-year campuses participate in a separate version of the survey, and their data is not included in this brief. This brief will discuss the intersection of substance use, sense of belonging, and retention.

Retention and Belonging Overview

Around 1 in 4 (25% of) Missouri college students report that they had thought of transferring from their current institution in the past 12 months, and almost one-fifth (18%) of students had thought about discontinuing their college/university education in the past 12 months. Students are asked to report the reasons that have contributed to their thoughts of transferring or discontinuing education (shown in Table 1) multiple of which relate to belonging including lack of friends/loneliness/homesickness (37%), and 'I don't feel as if I belong on campus' (23%).

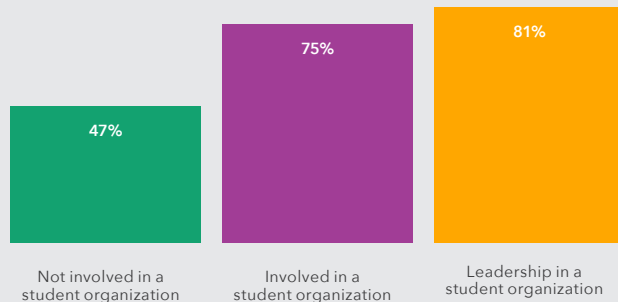
Overall, MACHB data support that involvement in student groups and organizations is positively correlated with high sense of belonging. Only 47% of students who are not involved in a student organization say that they agree or strongly agree that they have a sense of belonging on campus, compared to 75% of

students who are in a student organization. Fostering leadership opportunities also appears to impact sense of belonging as 81% of students with current leadership in a student organization report a high sense of belonging to campus (shown in Chart 1).

Table 1: What reasons have contributed to you considering leaving your current college/university? (Check all that apply)

My mental health concerns	47%
Don't have enough money to pay for school	45%
Lack of friends, loneliness, homesickness	37%
Difficulties keeping up with academic expectations	29%
Don't feel as if I belong on campus	23%
Other (open text)	17%
My major/area of interest is not offered	8.7%

Chart 1: Sense of Belonging to Campus
(agree + strongly agree)



Substance Use and Belonging

Substance use rates do vary among students based on their sense of belonging. Students with a high sense of belonging were more likely to report that they had engaged in binge drinking (consuming 4 or more drinks for women or 5 or more drinks for men in a 2-hour period at least once in the past 2 weeks) than students with low sense of belonging (22% vs 19%). This could be attributed to the social role that alcohol typically plays during college and that students with a

high sense of belonging are more likely to be involved in student organizations whose cultures and traditions may include alcohol consumption. Conversely, students with a low sense of belonging reported higher rates of past year prescription drug misuse, cannabis use, and tobacco/nicotine use than students with a high sense of belonging as shown in Chart 2.

Substance Use and Retention

Students who have thought of transferring or discontinuing their education are also more likely to have reported past year use of substances other than alcohol. Binge drinking rates are similar among students who did versus did not think of transferring or discontinuing their education, but past year prescription drug misuse, cannabis use, and tobacco/nicotine use are higher among students who had thought of transferring or discontinuing their education as shown in Chart 3.

Summary

Retention concerns (thinking of transferring or discontinuing higher education altogether) appear to be associated with higher rates of substance use, particularly cannabis use, tobacco/nicotine use, and prescription drug misuse. It should be noted that this association is correlational, not necessarily causal, meaning that students could either be misusing substances and it is impacting their sense of belonging and ability to succeed and stay in school, or they may be lacking a sense of belonging and thinking of transferring or discontinuing their

Chart 2: Substance Use by Sense of Belonging

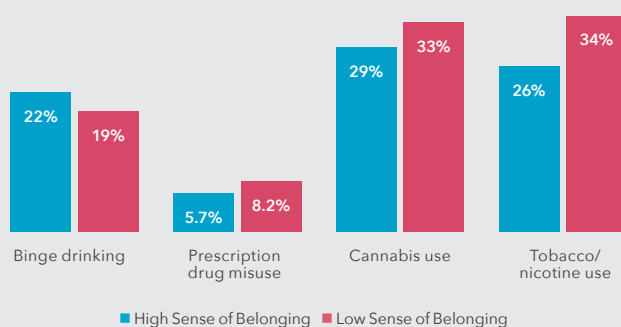
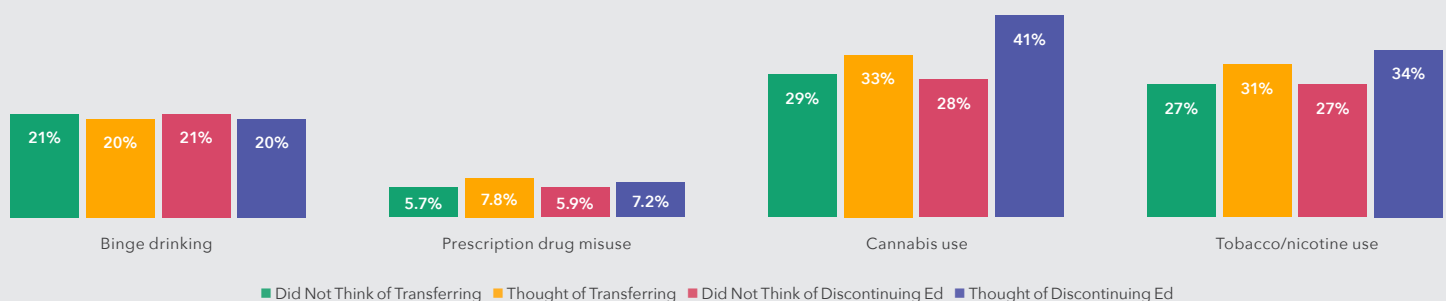


Chart 3: Substance Use by Thoughts of Transferring/Discontinuing'



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education and are misusing substances as a result (e.g., to cope or to if they 'have nothing better to do'). Regardless, campuses should recognize that students who are thinking of transferring or discontinuing their education are at higher risk for substance misuse. Additionally, campuses should aim to increase sense of belonging and involvement as protective factors for substance misuse.

Resources

Engage is a multilevel violence prevention program that frames bystander behavior within the context of community connection and sense of belonging, encouraging students to contribute to a culture of care to build safer campus communities. The program

works to reduce harms related to substance use, interpersonal violence, acts of bias and discrimination, and mental well-being and suicide. Engage is available to any institution of higher education in Missouri and includes strategies including individual education with the online introductory training, peer level bystander intervention and community engagement facilitated discussions, and community violence prevention initiatives. More information can be found at our [Engage program website](#).

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*Question is select all that apply