

Why are Colleges Banning ‘Any Product that Looks like a Cigarette’

In this age of campus speech codes and safe spaces, are we really surprised that some university administrators act as moralistic tyrants over their student fiefdoms? The movement for a tobacco-free campus is no different. University officials around the United States are waging a war on the evil smoking “culture.”

Consider the anti-tobacco policy of the State University of New York (SUNY) Board of Trustees – the body that oversees the New York system of state universities. Assuming that it is good policy to ban tobacco on college campuses, why is SUNY also trying to ban electronic cigarette use, considering they contain no tobacco whatsoever? Alas, the Trustees join a host of anti-smoking crusaders aiming to ban a relatively safe practice on embarrassingly misinformed and over-stretched policy grounds.

Electronic cigarette users inhale vapor infused with nicotine and other flavorings instead of burning tobacco and inhaling cigarette smoke. Among tobacco control experts, vaping is universally considered better for public health than smoking.

“Over the last decade, there have been hundreds of scientific studies [on electronic cigarettes] performed by the world’s foremost experts on tobacco control showing little to no risk of long-term harm, clearly demonstrating no risk of cancer or any other serious harms when used as designed,” [notes](#) Director Aaron Frazier of the Utah Smoke-Free Association. In August of last year, Public Health England noted that [e-cigarettes](#) are 95 percent safer than their combustible counterparts.

Yet, to SUNY administrators, because the FDA has not approved

electronic cigarettes as a “cessation device,” they will be included in the smoking ban – the great weight of scientific evidence be damned. Rather than banning tobacco products as a health policy, SUNY seeks to create a “[culture change](#)” regarding tobacco – that apparently includes banning “any product that looks like a cigarette or is used to inhale, smoke, chew tobacco.”

Moreover, SUNY is not alone in this “culture” war. Americans for Non-Smokers Rights [brags](#) that, as of April 2016, 823 universities “prohibit the use of e-cigarettes anywhere on campus.”

A ban on specific products where there is empirical evidence of harm is health policy; a “culture change” against the *concept* of inhaling any stimulant is moralistic crusading. At SUNY-Binghamton, students will be [encouraged](#) to lodge complaints against those who fail to comply with the policy – an Orwellian means to achieve a tobacco-free culture. One can see the headlines now: “student faces campus charges over continued use of prop cigar in campus play.”

Perhaps SUNY is simply confused about what e-cigarettes are – some of its [guidance](#) on the policy notes that “there is a lot of misinformation that must be overcome.” One bit of that misinformation is the claim on SUNY’s [FAQ](#) that “e-cigarettes contain tobacco.” E-cigarettes do not contain tobacco leaves – that is obvious to anyone who has seen even a picture of the product. If the SUNY board is going to lead a charge against tobacco products, they better know what they’re talking about first.

Of course, the rabbit hole of illogic does not end there. To justify their policy, including banning e-cigarettes, the SUNY Trustees cite one [statistic](#) claiming that “the rate of smoking in the 18-24 age group is 14.9% which is [more than] twice the 7.3% rate found among New York High School students.”

First, this number should shock absolutely no one. At age 18, it becomes *legal* to purchase tobacco products in New York. They might as well say, “Cigarette use increases when it becomes legal.” Second, that statistic has nothing to do with *cigarette* use. Increases in smoking from high school to college do not measure increases in vaping, just as increases in apples eaten doesn’t mean an increase in the number of oranges consumed. The empirical basis for banning smoking because of youth use and health costs dissipates entirely when discussing vaping.

Stripped of all its puffery, the SUNY tobacco-free policy is little more than fact-free paternalism run riot. These administrators are using health policy to shroud its anti-vaping crusade – its “culture” war on people who do things that look like or are similar to smoking. Bans on vaping are part of a moralistic campaign are running amok over the United States, reaching hundreds of public campuses and infringing on individuals’ rights of choice.

Even if you agree that banning smoking is good policy, banning vaping products on campus only makes sense through a moralistic, not scientific, lens.

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