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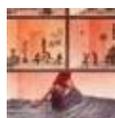
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In halls of academia, medical marijuana an unwelcome guest

Colleges, mindful of federal rules, draw ire by keeping stiff bans

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 17, 2014



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Thomas Burke Jr., a 25-year-old US combat veteran and Yale University grad student, has a physician's permission to use medical marijuana in Connecticut to treat PTSD symptoms.

Although medical marijuana has been legal in Massachusetts for nearly two years, many local colleges are putting out the message to students as the fall semester nears: You still can't use it on campus, even if a doctor says it's medicinal.

College administrators have reaffirmed policies banning the drug in all forms, and that includes for students who have a doctor's recommendation. They say their hands are tied by federal regulations, which still classify marijuana as an illegal drug, and they worry that allowing cannabis use of any kind could lead to the loss of federal funding, including student financial aid.

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“I’m scared I’m either going to go under-medicated and suffer physical consequences if I can’t use my medicine enough, or I’m going to face consequences from the school if I get caught,” said Max, an incoming Boston University freshman, who asked that his last name not be published for fear of being singled out by the college. He says he has certification from a Massachusetts doctor to use marijuana to treat gastrointestinal issues that cause significant weight loss and stomach pain.

Students caught using marijuana on campuses can face punishment ranging from a warning to expulsion.

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But other medical marijuana patients and advocates say colleges are being overly cautious. Forbidding the use of a state-recognized, doctor-authorized medicine is unfair, unethical, and a detriment to students, faculty, and others who use the drug to treat ailments, they say.

“We would like to see schools recognize, as many states and millions and millions of individuals and doctors have done, that marijuana is in fact valid medicine for the patients that are using it, and treating it differently than other medications is harmful to students and faculty who have chosen to use medical marijuana,” said Betty Aldworth, director of Students for Sensible Drug Policy, a national student network pushing for an overhaul of drug laws.

The issue has gained attention locally as more formal patient certifications are set to become available in Massachusetts and as dispensaries are expected to open across the state within several months.



Some schools — including Boston University, Tufts University, and Amherst, Curry, Emerson, Hampshire, and Wheelock colleges — that ban medical marijuana on campus try to help students with certifications to find alternatives. One way is to allow the students to opt out of on-campus housing contracts and requirements so they can pursue treatment off-campus.

BU dean of students Kenneth Elmore said “a few” students with medical marijuana certifications have approached campus officials since the state voted to legalize medical use in Nov. 2012, asking whether the documentation allows them to use the drug on campus without repercussions. It does not, Elmore said. Those students are referred to campus health officials to privately discuss alternatives.

“We’d work with the student on that sort of thing,” he said.

But, Elmore added: “We don’t make a distinction between medical and recreational marijuana. We simply don’t allow marijuana on our campus. Federally, it is illegal, and smoking causes disruptions on campus.”

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Advocates point out that medical marijuana can be consumed in other ways, including by vaporizing the drug, eating cannabis-infused foods and drinks, or even taking a pill containing marijuana’s active ingredient, THC.

The ban on cannabis use — medical or otherwise — also appears to be widespread at campuses across the other 22 states and Washington, D.C., where local laws permit patients with doctor-issued certifications to use the drug for treatment.

Thomas C. Burke Jr., 25, a student at Yale Divinity School who said he has a doctor’s certification to use the drug in Connecticut, says he has largely avoided problems by being discrete or by only using marijuana off campus.

Burke said his certification is to use the drug in Connecticut, where it became legal in 2012, to treat symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder he has suffered since serving in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I try to make it as little of a distraction as possible and be as accommodating as I can to others,” said Burke, who supplements his use with cognitive therapy.

Still, colleges’ rules on medical marijuana cause uneasiness.

“For most veterans with PTSD, which is an anxiety disorder, the anxiety of having to worry about being penalized or seen as a criminal keeps them from medicating,” said Burke.

“We are not just doing drugs during the day, we are medicating ourselves, which allows us to be productive members of society.”



STEVEN G. SMITH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Thomas C. Burke Jr. said that he has avoided problems using medical marijuana by being discrete or by only using it off campus. Many colleges remind students the drug is banned.

While numerous Massachusetts colleges have affirmed their bans in student and employee conduct policies, some campuses — including Eastern Nazarene and Mount Holyoke colleges — say they are weighing whether to revise their policies.

“It is unclear what impact, if any, a change in policy would have on federal funding,” said Jeffrey Kirksey, vice president for student development and retention at Eastern Nazarene, in Quincy.

That lack of clarity stems, in part, from mixed messages from federal officials.

The Justice Department said in a [memorandum](#) last year that it focuses enforcement on the most serious marijuana-related violations, and it is “not an efficient use of federal resources to focus enforcement efforts on seriously ill individuals, or on their individual caregivers.”

However, in 2011, the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy and the Education Department wrote a [letter](#) warning campuses that deviating from federal rules could put their federal funding at risk.

“The administration’s stance hasn’t changed since then,” drug control policy office spokeswoman Cameron Hardesty told the Globe last week.

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Advocates, however, say it is unrealistic to believe the US government would cut off funding to colleges over the issue.

“I understand not wanting to risk millions of dollars in federal funding, but no college has ever lost federal funding for changing their drug or alcohol policies,” said Connor McKay, a 22-year-old Northeastern University senior and president of the campus chapter of Students for Sensible Drug Policy. “Colleges could and should at least accommodate students who need to use it.”

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Globe correspondent Katherine Landergan contributed to this report. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](#).



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