Very often, the mention of drug and/or alcohol use among youths prompts thoughts of substance experimentation or, perhaps, school-based approaches to hinder the development of this behavior. Youth use of drugs and/or alcohol is a complex issue, and while it does include experimentation, it also involves dependence, problematic use, regular use, and abuse. This article looks at substance use among the young (pre-college age, specifically middle- and high-school age) and offers suggestions for addressing this troubling issue.

For decades, we have implemented a wide variety of strategies and approaches to curb substance use by youths, but during this same time period, drug and alcohol use patterns, while they have changed somewhat, have remained relatively consistent. This disconnect between efforts and results should raise a whole series of questions about whether these strategies are appropriate, sufficient, consistent, reinforcing, or extensive enough, and it should also raise questions about focus, emphasis, and what is heard by youths. The methods for addressing issues of substance abuse among pre-college-age children apparently have often missed the point of what is really important to them at this time in their lives. While specific approaches to the problem may have varied by location, by age, and even by sub-groups—e.g., sports, service, student government, college-bound, social standing—they have not considered contributors to this behavior in an all-encompassing way. The emphasis of this article is to shift the focus from the way we have tried to address youth substance use to an approach that is more comprehensive, more inclusive, more developmental, and, ultimately, more helpful for a wide range of policymakers and program planners. The article looks at current drug and alcohol use patterns among youths, makes specific recommendations, and offers potential directions for the future.

Examine some specific statistics will help illustrate these findings. The statistics are based on monthly use patterns to give a more accurate picture of what youths are doing on a fairly regular basis.

Currently, nearly one in four high-school seniors report having used an illicit drug, including marijuana, within the previous month; however, if marijuana is excluded, the rate is one in 10 seniors. The monthly illicit drug-use rate, excluding marijuana, then is currently 10 percent, with a high of 22 percent in 1981 and a low of 6 percent in 1992. Monthly use of marijuana/hashish is 22 percent, ranging from 37 percent in 1978 to 12 percent in 1992.
The most prevalent substance consumed by youths, however, is alcohol. What does the alcohol-use pattern show? First, alcohol use by high-school seniors, still looking at the previous 30 days, has maintained a level of at least 50 percent for each year during the past 25 years, rising to a high of 72 percent. Second, approximately 30 percent of students reported being drunk during the previous month, representing nearly one in three high-school seniors. In other words, the proportion of those who reported drinking alcohol who also reported getting drunk is about two in three seniors, or 65 percent, which has remained relatively constant over the past five years. Third, three in 10 high-school seniors, or 30 percent, reported having five or more drinks on at least one occasion during the past two weeks.

While it helps to have the perspective provided with the long-term, 25-year patterns of drug/alcohol use, what is more helpful to policymakers and program planners is to learn what has been happening among youths during recent years. While subtle shifts occur from year to year, this overall, five-year picture provides a fairly consistent view of recent substance-use patterns. The numbers in Figure 1 illustrate national use patterns for 2000, the most recent year for which figures are available, and the range and overall mean percentage ratings for the past five years.

These figures suggest that some subtle shifts occurred in drug and alcohol use over the latter half of the 1990s. Current use of alcohol and marijuana is steady, though it is at its lowest point. Uses of other specific substances appear to be at the higher end of their respective ranges, pointing to the need to carefully monitor these patterns. All in all, however, changes in recent years are not dramatic or substantive.

When compared to high-school seniors, tenth- and eighth-grade students engage in similar drug-use patterns, although at a lower level. First, the patterns of use of various substances hold constant; alcohol use is the highest, followed by marijuana, and then by other illicit drugs. Second, increases and decreases in patterns of use over time follow that of high-school seniors. Third, although eighth graders do use drugs and alcohol at lower levels than others, they still have a level of use that is of greater concern. To find that 8 percent of eighth graders and 24 percent of tenth graders report having been drunk—and 22 percent and 41 percent, respectively, report having used alcohol—within the previous 30 days is troublesome at best.

Another area of concern is the proportion of youths who have used substances within their lifetime. A 1991 study of eighth-grade students found 10 percent reporting they had used marijuana by that point in their lives; that rate is now 20 percent. The use of inhalants has ranged from 18-22 percent; cocaine has grown from 2 percent to nearly 5 percent; and amphetamines range from 10-13 percent. Seventy percent of eighth graders reported in 1991 that they had consumed alcohol by that point in their lives; that figure is now 52 percent. The figure for those having been drunk at some point in their lives has not changed significantly—from 27 percent in 1991 to 25 percent currently.

Related to actual drug/alcohol use are negative consequences, including teen pregnancy, school dropout, teenage suicide, and violent crime. In 12- to 17-year-olds, nearly one-third suffer from extreme levels of psychological distress, and serious behavioral problems occur in 39 percent. According to 2000 data, 21 percent of 15- to 20-year-old drivers who were killed in crashes were intoxicated with a blood alcohol content (BAC) of at least 0.1 percent. Drivers under age 21 who have been drinking are involved in fatal crashes at a rate approximately twice that of drivers over age 21.

Two themes emerge from these negative consequences. First, the consequences greatly concern families and loved ones of those personally involved, causing heartache and grief. Second, these consequences were, for the most part, preventable. These facts serve as the basis for the following specific strategies to address drug/alcohol use among pre-college-age youths.

**Foundations for helpful approaches**

Typical approaches to address drug and alcohol abuse have been conducted by institutions, organizations, and agencies with their own missions, values, resources, and constraints. These approaches have moved through eras and phases of popularity, changing emphasis as information, attitudes, resistance skills, and alternative activities change. While each of these approaches may have some value in addressing drug and alcohol use, a more comprehensive approach addresses the issue from multiple perspectives and offers more potential for effectively dealing with the issue.

Due to different learning styles, settings, and the value of reinforcement from a wide range of communicators, it is important that a number of components be included when addressing social issues. It is essential that the approaches include policies, awareness education, skills training, and support services. A model for this multi-aspect approach was developed over a decade ago with the Drug-Free Schools and Communities project, which included development of a grid encompassing strategies and agencies to illustrate the many ways in which different approaches could be accomplished.

Taking a proactive approach is also widely valued. The U. S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention highlights a series of risk and protective factors, including individual, society/environment, family, community, school, and peer-associated. Rather than wait until a problem emerges, it is important to try to prevent its emergence. All to often many organizations, schools, and agencies react rather than engage in a prevention focus. The typical approach emphasizes health, safety, legal, and related considerations but from a fairly negative and reactionary perspective. These approaches would benefit from a complementary approach that tries to avoid, minimize, or prevent the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol. The emphasis then would be upon meaningful prevention at a much earlier time in an individual’s life.

**Focus on underlying issues**

Institutional and community support is integral to the success of any approach.
to prevent drug and alcohol abuse among youths, but the emphasis of those approaches should be reshifted to a proactive, goal-directed, and health-oriented process. This process is designed to promote health through understanding and living the seven life-health principles (see sidebar). For those individuals who learn and live these principles, it is presumed that they will be less likely to become harmfully involved with drugs or alcohol. The goal of this approach is to help individuals live their lives more fully and in more healthful manners, making them more productive and direction oriented, and directing them toward a future that means something.\(^7\)

Will those who live these principles not use or abuse drugs or alcohol? Only time can provide the answers. The life-health principles are not a panacea; nor are they the only way of addressing substance abuse. However, they do seem reasonable as a logical next step.

**Application of a holistic life-health approach**

How can these life-health principles be applied? The idea is to emphasize each of them throughout an organization’s or agency’s efforts but not at the cost of replacing all existing policies, procedures, curricula, resources, and other approaches. Just as with the risk and protective factors, the life-health principles provide a framework within which efforts can be included; they enhance existing efforts to address the underlying needs of young people.

Currently, George Mason University is working on a U.S. Department of Education-funded project designed to affect a long-term shift in the campus environment surrounding high-risk drinking, heavy drinking, and related problems. The primary focus of the project is on first-year college students, but attention is also directed at students before their arrival on campus. Two major theoretical constructs underlie this project. The first one emphasizes and attempts to incorporate the seven life-health principles, and the second one addresses misperceptions held by students as a result of social-norms marketing approaches.

Overall, schools can engage in a range of strategies—incorporating the seven life-health principles as well as other messages and themes—to change the environment regarding substance abuse issues. Continuous, consistent, and ongoing attention to these themes helps shift the nature of what is important to youths. Reinforcing these principles, through modeling behavior and addressing accomplishments, attempts to promote a different environment for young people, one that will ultimately reduce drug and alcohol abuse.

**Recommendations for policymakers and program managers**

Clearly, new action is critical if different outcomes are desired since the use of current strategies will continue to have results already being obtained. For new and different results to occur, new and different strategies must be implemented.

If policymakers incorporate the 10 recommendations that follow, new results could be obtained in the ongoing problem of pre-college-age youths using drugs and alcohol. The recommendations incorporate, to a large extent, a different process of engaging youth and the key individuals in their lives. All too often, current strategies emphasize what we do to and for youth rather than specific ways of engaging, involving, and empowering them.

1. Provide accurate and complete information about drugs and alcohol and about the context of these substances in society. Following this recommendation would correct the misperceptions young people may hold about others’ use of drugs and alcohol—e.g., that...
Guiding principles of holistic life health

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Human beings are basically good, and, despite setbacks, our history is on a path of progress and promise.

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Values are at the core of self and community and are essential to any meaningful change.

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An ethic of balanced self-care is fundamental to flourishing as a human being in the world community.

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Learning how to be involved in working relationships is an essential developmental task for young adults.

≈

Creating a culture of community through rituals, symbols, traditions, and heroes ensures quality educational experiences.

≈

The connection of the biological, natural being to the larger planetary system is essential and ensures the health of the planet and our well being, including our ultimate spiritual survival.

≈

Service is indispensable in engaging people in authentic and meaningful learning experiences and in creating positive social change.

From Challenge 2000 Conference. These principles serve as the foundation for Charting Your Course.
(6) **Have schools involved in an active way.** Incorporate meaningful discussion—not just looking at substance abuse, but also covering the underlying life-health themes—in health classes. Information and insights are also appropriate for inclusion in a range of courses—for example, social studies, government, English, civics, and psychology. Policymakers should encourage this approach by providing incentives for it, requiring it, and making special resources available for it.

(7) **Address issues underlying substance abuse in a comprehensive, meaningful way.** Substance abuse can be viewed as symptomatic of other issues facing an individual, whether physical (craving, self-medication), emotional (distress, celebration), social (peer pressure, lack of social skills, anxiety-reducing), or cognitive (increased attention, enhanced performance). An individual may use or abuse drugs and/or alcohol in an effort to accomplish something else; the problem, however, is that negative consequences often result. An appropriate and vitally important approach for addressing substance abuse is to examine underlying issues.

(8) **Engage the schools and the community in a range of co-curricular activities.** Schools can offer a wide range of co-curricular strategies, including, for example, SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) chapters, assemblies, support services, and even indirect strategies. This approach should be comprehensive, with an emphasis on shared responsibilities. Communities also need to be engaged in addressing this issue. Community agencies and organizations such as the faith community, non-government-service organizations, neighborhood groups, and businesses should be involved.

(9) **Hold people accountable.** Individuals, organizations, and agencies must be held accountable. Addressing substance abuse is not just one individual's or one organization's job—it must be a shared responsibility. It is important to have an overall plan to address the problem and to engage groups and organizations to address substance abuse issues. When tasks are assigned, whether or not those assigned the tasks volunteered their efforts, accountabili-

In summary, it is important to address substance abuse issues with youths by using a different model. While current approaches have attempted to address youth needs from a variety of perspectives, the results are simply not sufficient. Further, the results currently achieved do not meet the standards appropriate for our nation, state, or localities. While we should continue these current efforts, what is called for is innovation, rethinking, and new paradigms to address the underlying needs of young people. This is not to suggest that new approaches can totally eliminate an age-old problem with substance abuse. It does suggest that we can do much better and provide a different set of experiences for our youths. It does suggest—and points toward—a different type of approach, one in which different futures can be conceptualized, organized, and achieved.