

COLLEGE CAMPUS COMMUNITIES find themselves in uncharted territory as they face the challenges posed by COVID-19. Students are adjusting to new ways of learning, living, and staying safe on campus, even as many of them are undergoing important developmental changes that make exploration, risk taking, and peer relationships more salient.

Campus leaders who are determining how to encourage compliance with COVID-19 protective behaviors would benefit from taking these developmental processes into account. Combining insights from developmental science with strategies from behavioral science and risk communication, the Societal Experts Action Network (SEAN) of the National Academies developed guidance on encouraging behavior change among students. This guidance is summarized here.

Understanding Adolescent Development

These five key tenets of adolescent development could help university leaders develop and implement COVID-19 behavior change strategies that are relevant to students:

- Many adolescents and young adults are socially driven, with a strong desire for reward and acceptance.
- Identity, agency, and autonomy are centrally important during the college years.
- College students are primed for exploration, and risk taking is a normative part of their development.
- Prosocial inclinations are strong among college-age students.
- College students can enhance the creation and implementation of policies that affect them.

Habit-Promoting Strategies for College Students

Habit-promoting strategies can be used to overcome barriers to behavior change and encourage behaviors protective against the spread of COVID-19 on college campuses. The five strategies below have been adapted for college campuses from a previous SEAN rapid expert consultation.

- 1. Make the behavior easy to start and repeat.** College leaders could establish campus environments that encourage desirable behaviors, such as by making testing sites easily accessible, making testing a seamless process, distributing free masks, and installing sanitizing stations throughout the campus. Students could be encouraged to hang their mask on their dorm room door or clip it to their ID card or backpack.
- 2. Make the Behavior Rewarding to Repeat.** Strategies for making protective behaviors rewarding are especially salient for adolescents and young adults because their motivational systems are reward focused. Examples include turning masks into status symbols and introducing a competitive or collaborative element to wearing or designing masks (e.g., supporting student-led collaboration or competition among dorms, disciplinary departments, or athletic team).
- 3. Tie the Behavior to an Existing Habit.** People are more likely to repeat a behavior when they stack it onto an existing habit (a behavior they perform automatically). For example, students could be encouraged to tie mask wearing to phone use, by leaving their mask near

their phone, or receiving text or pop-up phone reminders or apps related to COVID-19 protective behaviors.

- 4. Alert People to Behaviors that Conflict with Existing Habits, and Provide Alternative Behaviors.** Because college students are inclined to exercise agency and autonomy, telling them only what they cannot do may lead to pandemic fatigue and associated risky behaviors. Instead, it would help to highlight safe ways for college students to interact and socialize. Examples include giving students the agency, authority, responsibility, and guidance to establish and maintain the health of their own “social pods,” or supporting club, team, or student leaders in planning and providing COVID-safe social activities.
- 5. Provide Specific Descriptions of Desired Behaviors.** When individuals understand specifically what is expected of them, they are more likely to adopt the desired behavior. Colleges could invite students to design, draw, paint, or build objects connected to campus life that depict 6- to 12-foot distances.

Communication Strategies for College Students

College leaders can use risk communication strategies to encourage COVID-19 protective behaviors among students. The risk communication strategies below are adapted to include insights from developmental science.

- 1. Use Clear, Consistent, and Transparent Messaging, with Attention to Mode of Transmission.** Clear messaging is important, and messages from different units on campus and city administrators should be accurate, consistent in content and tone, and transparent regarding procedures and data. Social media platforms are an essential source of messaging and information for college students, and they can be leveraged to convey clear, consistent, and transparent messages from authoritative sources.
- 2. Avoid Undue Attention to the Frequency of Socially Undesirable Behaviors, Instead Emphasizing Responsibility.** Telling college students about the risks or prevalence of an undesirable behavior may actually make them more likely to engage in that behavior. It could be more effective to appeal to college students’ developing sense of responsibility to do their part in slowing the spread of COVID-19.
- 3. Foster Efficacy and Avoid Fatalism, with Attention to Student Agency.** As adolescents and young adults are developing their sense of agency, they can be supported in making positive choices and effecting change by adopting protective measures.
- 4. Appeal to the Collective Good of One’s Community, Focusing on Prosocial Behavior and Activism.** Adolescents and young adults are primed for prosocial behavior and activism. Students could be encouraged to make COVID-19 mitigation a campus-wide cause, especially if their activism is tied to their identity as responsible and mature people who are representing the college-age population.
- 5. Use Trusted Messengers, Amplified by Social Media and Other Influencers.** In addition to trusting their families, friends, and experts, younger college students in particular engage with external influencers on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Twitch, Instagram, SnapChat, and other social media. Social media influencers can amplify messages from trusted experts about protective behaviors to students.

- 6. Tailor the Framing of the Message to the Audience, with Attention to the Risk-Reward Calculus.** For college students who prize the ability to socialize with peers and perceive the risks of COVID-19 as low, socializing will seem worth the risk. Framing messages about COVID-19 in terms of health risks or death is unlikely to be effective with college students because death rates in their age group are relatively low. More effective framing might focus on how being infected with the disease will affect other people, such as peers or family members who are immunocompromised or otherwise at risk; who is most likely to suffer; how activities may be curtailed if infection rates increase; or how students' grades may be impacted if they become ill.
- 7. Link Prevention Behaviors to Identities, with Attention to Campus Affiliations.** Because college is an important time for students to develop and explore their sense of identity, appealing to them as members of their college campus, dorm, major, fraternity, sorority, club, or team may be especially effective in establishing social norms. Examples include behavioral pledges and social media campaigns designed to reinforce social norms, and the use of such slogans as "Bruins keeping each other safe" and "Tigers support Tigers."
- 8. Highlight Social Disapproval of a Target Audience Member's Failure to Comply When It Occurs, without Overemphasizing Risk.** While campuses need students to regard behaviors that can spread COVID-19 as socially unacceptable, they also should be cautious about the emphasis they place on risk. Some college students perceive risk-taking activities as inherently fun and exciting, so highlighting the risk of going to bars or parties could motivate them to take those risks. Instead, colleges and universities can focus on emphasizing messages that enforce positive social norms.
- 9. Highlight the Growing Prevalence of Behavior Change, Using Positive Messaging.** For college students, positive messaging can be more effective than a focus on negative behaviors or outcomes. Examples include such messages as "More than X% of students on our campus say they wear masks every day" or "Our state is #1 in the country in terms of mask wearing." Frequent reminders of lower infection and transmission rates and how outbreaks have been minimized have anecdotally been successful.
- 10. Avoid Repeating Misinformation, Even to Debunk It.** Efforts to debunk misinformation can have the unintended effect of reinforcing false beliefs. Instead of calling attention to misinformation, repeating the truths about COVID and protective measures is more likely to be effective. Universities could provide information to help students, staff, and parents communicate COVID safety information effectively to people who may not recognize the importance of preventing its spread.

This guidance was developed by SEAN with support from the National Science Foundation. To read the full guidance and learn more about the Societal Experts Action Network, visit nationalacademies.org/SEAN.