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# **NARCAN ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES**

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# ABSTRACT

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The opioid crisis in the United States has become an urgent public health concern, with escalating addiction rates and fatal overdoses attributed to a range of opioids, including synthetic drugs like fentanyl. From 1991 to 2021, over **650,000** individuals have died from opioid overdoses, highlighting the crisis's severity and societal impact, which amounts to an **annual cost of \$78.5 billion**. College campuses are particularly vulnerable, with opioid overdoses now the **leading cause of death** among young adults aged 18–45. Despite stigma, recent governmental initiatives have prompted universities to equip themselves with **naloxone**, a life-saving medication. Government intervention is crucial in addressing this crisis, requiring collaborative efforts to provide resources, such as counseling and naloxone, and implement preventive measures. A nuanced approach, combining **state and university-led initiatives**, is recommended to effectively combat the crisis and protect vulnerable populations.



# PROBLEM DEFINITION

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The opioid crisis has plagued the nation for since the **early 1990s** and the problem has only continued to grow. The opioid crisis is defined by both addictions and deaths as a result of the use of both **illegal and legal** substances. It has historically referenced opioid use including **heroins and prescription painkillers**, but in recent years synthetic drugs such as fentanyl have become increasingly prevalent (The Opioid Epidemic in the United States, 2024). From 1991 to 2021, 650,000 people died from an overdose of any opioid, including both legal and illegal drugs (Understanding the Opioid Overdose Epidemic | Opioids | Cdc, 2023). The number of people who died from an overdose in 2021 is six times that of 1999, and it remains the leading cause of injury-related death in the United States. The opioid crisis spans outside of just those who suffer from addiction; its impacts have been seen across society; resulting in increased mortality, neonatal abstinence syndrome, and increased healthcare costs. Overall, the costs to society amount to **78.5 billion annually** (Hall et al., 2020).

More specifically, overdoses and opioid addiction on college campuses have grown significantly, with **1 in 3 college students** saying they know someone who has overdosed (Respond to Student Opioid Overdoses, 2021). Opioid overdoses are currently the leading cause of death for ages 18–45. A national survey from 2018 found that **1 in 4 college students** meet the criteria for substance abuse and rates of addiction are higher on college campuses than they are in the general public (Opioid/Drug Addiction on College Campuses | Acpa, 2020). Oftentimes there is so much **stigma** around discussion of drug usage on college campuses that the issue gets swept under the rug. The common narrative around OUD (Opioid Use Disorder) is that it is a choice people make, not a medical condition that needs to be treated. Colleges tend to steer away from publicizing conversations about opioid use out of **fear** that it might look like their campus has an opioid problem. But as the issue is becoming significantly more prevalent the government has stepped in to issue national statements.

In October of 2023, the **White House Office of National Drug Control and the US Department of Education** released a joint letter calling upon educators and schools to carry **Naloxone** (Musa & CNN, 2023). Naloxone or commonly known as Narcan, is a medication that is used to mitigate the effects of an **opioid overdose**. It is administered via a nasal spray with a similar mechanism to FloNase, which allows for this to be an easy and safe way to combat deaths related to opioid overdoses (Lifesaving Naloxone, 2023). Some undergraduate universities have started to carry Naloxone in response to this message. A senior at Sacramento State said, “Prevention education is the key in this epidemic, we all need to work together as a community and to normalize Narcan, so people are not afraid to administer it.”

# POLICY CONTEXT

The United States has been using policy and government to try to mitigate the opioid crisis. In response to the public health crisis, legislative measures such as the **Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (CARA)** which was signed into law by President Barack in 2021 and the **SUPPORT Act**. Appearing on both state and federal levels these acts aim to expand access to addiction treatment, enhance prescription drug monitoring programs, and bolster law enforcement efforts. Additionally, initiatives like **Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs)**, **Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)** programs, and harm reduction strategies including naloxone distribution have been implemented to address the crisis.

In 2015, The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Narcan nasal spray as a **prescription drug**. While this drug was first only made available to first-responders and health officials, Narcan became more readily accessible when the FDA approved the drug to be sold **over-the-counter** in 2023 (Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, 2024). Currently, Narcan is sold at most pharmacies and can be purchased without a prescription.

The nasal spray costs approximately \$45 for two doses. In making Narcan prescription free the hope is to decrease some of the stigma around asking for a Narcan prescription.

Within the last decade, universities have begun to implement Narcan on-campus and equip students with proper **educational training**. A large part of this shift was the **Campus Opioid Safety Act** in California which took effect on January 1, 2023. This act requires that campus health centers at most public colleges and universities offer Narcan to students for free (Khan, 2024). California governor Gavin Newsom has invested over \$1 billion dollars to help crack down on the opioid epidemic.

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# ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT

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Currently, drug overdoses are the **leading cause of accidental death** in the United States (Judd et al., n.d.). As the number of opioid abuse and opioid related deaths across the nation and on college campuses continues to grow each year, the government is facing a public health crisis. From 1993 to 2005 there was a **343% increased** use of heroin on college campuses (Judd et al., n.d.). While the opioid crisis doesn't have one root cause, a significant amount of research points to the **overprescription of opioids** from healthcare providers (Judd et al., n.d.). This is largely due to the way that the United States views healthcare as more of a reactive approach and less of a preventative measure. To effectively combat the opioid crisis, a **multifaceted approach** is necessary. Collaborative efforts between **government agencies, universities, healthcare providers, and community organizations** are essential. These partnerships can facilitate the establishment of comprehensive support services tailored to the unique needs of **college students**. Universities can help to facilitate the establishment of various support services, including counseling, addiction treatment programs, and naloxone distribution to respond to overdose emergencies. By prioritizing **proactive measures** and resource allocation, government efforts can foster safer and more supportive environments for students, combating the opioid crisis and protecting the next generation of our country.



# POLICY ALTERNATIVES

*The following recommendations offer alternative pathways policymakers can take to mitigate the challenge of rising opioid deaths on college campuses.*

## **01**

### **Federally-Issued Grants and Subsidies**

The federal government may provide subsidies and grants to states in effort to help fund and supply Narcan. This approach would allow universities and colleges to receive funding to supply Narcan on campus if proper training and implementation are done. However, it is somewhat unclear what the implications of this approach would be. While a state may choose to accept funding, individual campuses may decline to supply the drug, being unable or unwilling to accept the terms of conditions. This approach would offer an opportunity for universities who are limited in funding to supply Narcan yet may duly result in an uneven landscape of distribution.

## **02**

### **State Guidance and Regulation**

The second approach would take away decision-making power from the hands of the federal government and put it into those of the states. Under this approach, states may require that public universities and community colleges provide educational and preventative information about opioid overdoses to all students and subsequently distribute overdose reversal medication like Narcan. This approach is like California's state law, SB367 Campus Opioid Safety Act, which was officiated in early January of 2023. While this approach may eliminate the risk of uneven distribution throughout the states themselves, it could create inconsistencies across states.

## **03**

### **University Initiatives and Guidance**

The last approach dials down federal and state decision-making by allowing individual universities to act. Since universities often dictate their own affairs, colleges may take it upon themselves to form committees, host events and administer educational programs to raise awareness about opioid overdoses and prevention measures such as Narcan. This approach would allow universities to align regulatory language with pre-existing standards and practices. Nevertheless, this approach is limited in the sense that it does not offer universities additional funding or resources. However, university committees may provide recommendations on where to access Narcan, as most pharmacies sell doses OTC.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATION

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Given the respective advantages and disadvantages of the addressed policy alternatives, it is recommended that policymakers adopt a **two-pronged approach**, combining **state and university-based efforts**. Through this approach, state governments would provide universities with **educational and preventative resources** regarding opioid overdoses while **supplying overdose reversal medications** such as Narcan on-campus. To ensure that these resources are distributed effectively and safely, it is recommended that universities take additional measures such as forming **committees** or **hosting events**.

*Collectively, this approach would establish a strong link between state governments and university administrations, ensuring that students not only have access to a resource like Narcan but can use it safely and responsibly.*





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