

English 110 (C03 UAS) with Almeda Glenn Miller, Selkirk College, BC
Shane Giofu
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Improving the Effectiveness of the Scent Free Policy at Selkirk College

Why is there a visible gap between the stated goals of Selkirk College's scent free policy and the reality of trying to navigate the halls of the college while struggling with environmental sensitivities? The research presented in this essay will show that the current methods of encouraging adherence to and enforcing scent free policy should be added to and better utilized.

While it is unlikely that Selkirk administration will approve all of these suggestions, acceptance of even some of these ideas (along with better enforcement of current policy) would constitute a noticeable improvement in the air quality on campus. While this obviously benefits people with environmental sensitivities in particular, the reality is that everyone on campus benefits from cleaner, more safely breathable air. The cost of complacency just happens to be more obvious in people more severely and immediately impacted by poor air quality.

"Approximately 3% of Canadians have been diagnosed with environmental sensitivities and up to one- third of the population may experience discomfort due to factors in their environment" (Sears, 2007, p. 48). "The term 'environmental sensitivities' describes a variety of reactions to chemicals, electromagnetic radiation and other environmental factors at exposure levels commonly tolerated by many people" (Sears, 2007, p. 3). Scent free policies are implemented largely in part to protect people with environmental sensitivities from the fragrances used in scented products.

Fragrance can be defined as "materials added to give a product a scent or mask the odor of other substances in a product. Materials used may be synthetic, natural, or both. A scented product is one which contains fragrance" (Bridges, 2003, p. 3). The various types of distress that

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can be brought about by fragrance have a negative impact on the education experience of those who suffer in its presence. Trying to find a safe place to study on campus where the air is relatively clean can quickly turn into a seemingly endless pattern of relocation. It can also have a large impact on class attendance, as people with environmental sensitivities are often forced to leave if too many irritants (or even just too much of a single irritant) happen to be present.

Selkirk College has a human rights policy as well as a scent free policy. Thanks largely in part to smoking grievances, sensitivity is recognized as a disability by the Canadian Human Rights Commission (Wilkie and Baker, 2007, pp. 18-19). As such, it should be a given that Selkirk's own human rights policy should include it as a disability if it does not already. It is clear based on the fact that Selkirk *has* a scent free policy that at least some consideration has been given to the extent of the negative impact scents can have. The question is how much consideration?

The first article of purpose listed in Selkirk's scent free policy reads as follows: "eliminate the use of perfume, body powder, cologne/aftershave, scented air fresheners, scented candles and potpourri from the workplace" (Selkirk 6020, 2015, p. 1). The article clearly states it is the intent of Selkirk College to rid the campus of as many sources of fragrance as possible. Based on my own experiences and observations day in and day out at the college, the stated purpose of the scent free policy is not being fulfilled in spite of a human rights obligation to do so within reason. The awareness and enforcement of scent free policy either need to increase, or the wording of the policy needs to be softened. The focus here will be solutions that either increase

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the enforcement of scent free policy, the voluntary adherence to scent free policy or both.

Solutions that improve air quality by environmental design will also be briefly explained.

After speaking with David Feldman (Chairperson for University Arts and Sciences) in regards to the policy, there already appears to be some agreement on changes that could potentially benefit everyone on campus. While the policy in question is admittedly well written, it means nothing without a willingness to convince people adhere to it. As such, Mr. Feldman has suggested that adherence to scent free policy should be added to the articles of responsibility in the student code of conduct. This improvement provides crystal clarity in terms of what consequences can be expected when students do not follow the policy and makes perfect sense. The guidelines and disciplinary consequences built into the policy for employees were already clear; the proposed policy enhancement would extend that clarity to the student body as well.

It has also been suggested that more emphasis could be put on scent free policy during orientation. Another excellent suggestion which adds some needed formality to the procedure section of the policy (Selkirk 6020, 2015, p. 2) and sets the tone for the rest of the school year (D. Feldman, meeting, Selkirk College, November 6, 2015).

While it is certainly good to see administration making suggestions of their own, what has been discussed so far is just a start in terms of having an environment that ensures the health and safety of all students. There are other initiatives which would improve the likelihood of a more copasetic campus life for those who suffer from environmental sensitivities (as well as anyone on campus who breathes air by proxy) that should also be discussed, or at the least brought to the attention of the administration.

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Expanded Awareness

The current prevailing approach to spreading awareness about scent free policy is to remind students and staff about the distress fragrance can cause others to experience. While this is a factor that can never be overlooked, in terms of encouraging voluntary adherence to policy, an approach that makes the user aware of the harm they are doing to themselves would increase the effectiveness of the current approach.

The research done in the process of compiling this essay strongly suggests that most users of scented products know little about how safe or unsafe the fragrances in their scented products are. I have chosen to single out perfumes and colognes for awareness because “after tobacco smoke, perfumes are one of the most noticeable air contaminants in public places and the workplace, and they are reported to cause difficulties for most people with environmental sensitivities... The ingredients may include any of approximately 4,000 plant or animal extracts or synthetic chemicals, with maybe 100 ingredients in a given fragrance. Fragrances now contain more synthetic chemicals, and are stronger and more persistent. Some ingredients are respiratory irritants, asthma triggers and neurological toxins. Some are listed as potentially causing cancer and birth defects” (Sears, 2007, p. 36). In short, many of these products contain dangerous substances that are not properly regulated. Some estimates range as high as eighty four percent of all substances used in fragrance being minimally tested or not tested at all (Robinson, 2015). A laboratory test of seventeen different designer fragrances found an average of fourteen secret chemicals, ten known sensitizers and four known hormone disruptors per product (Sarantis, Naidenko and Gray, 2010, p. 3). For those who are unfamiliar with sensitizers, exposure to them

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increases the odds of developing allergies later in life. They often also act as triggers for asthma, migraines, contact dermatitis and a host of other problems (Sarantis et al., 2010, p. 8). Given the education level of the target audience for this paper it is safe to assume that the definition for hormone disruptors is fairly clear just based on the name.

To give you an example of what kinds of chemicals are used to make designer scents, here are the nine major starting materials for synthesis of fragrance chemicals (Bridges, 2003, p. 5):

- Turpentine oil
- C2-C5 petrochemicals
- Benzene
- Phenol
- Toluene
- Xylenes
- Cresols
- Naphthalene
- Cyclopentene

Long term exposure (a year or more) to benzene can harm bone marrow, lead to anemia and cause excessive bleeding (“Benzene”, 2015). Toluene has an equally disturbing list of problems associated with it. Length constraints on this essay will not permit proper coverage of all nine of the ingredients; as a result the relevant administrators are encouraged to research the remaining ingredients on their own. The litany of problems associated with these products on both a personal and environmental level will *floor* you.

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While it is difficult to fathom people willingly slathering themselves in these substances, it gets even harder to comprehend why someone would want to wear chemically scented products when you also take into consideration how they interact with each other. “Many of the materials in fragrance are air, heat, and light sensitive. Once in the air they may break down. At times the breakdown products are more harmful than the parent compound” (Bridges, 2003, p. 9).

This creation of new compounds is also a factor in why reliable testing for environmental sensitivities is difficult to come by. Many of the compounds produced in mid-air by the spontaneous mixing of chemicals cannot be recreated for the purposes of study with an assured level of accuracy.

If it were common knowledge around campus that users of these products were not only causing distress to others but also spraying themselves with a litany of potential medical problems in the future, usage of colognes and perfumes around campus would noticeably decrease. As such, Selkirk College should be looking for viable methods of disseminating a valuable source of information for encouraging voluntary adherence. This should include discussion among the administrators responsible for curriculum as to whether or not relevant material on the subject can be added to relevant courses. “Environmental sciences are increasingly popular in university education, with courses offered through many departments such as geography, engineering or sciences; some of these courses link to health sciences” (Sears, 2007, p. 15).

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Increased Enforcement

If a policy looks good on paper but has no one who is willing to enforce it, that policy becomes worthless. That is the fate scent free policy at Selkirk College has thus far suffered. A well written guideline with no champion(s) to take up its cause. While I am very pleased to see administration taking steps towards giving the guidelines in question more authority, that still means nothing without people on the ground that are willing to enforce it. It is hard for many to take a policy seriously when it appears to come with zero consequences.

Enforcing this policy must seem like a daunting task to the administration. One walk through either the library or the pit on any given day makes it clear how much work needs to be done...all the same, if even one or two people are made an example of, word will likely spread quickly that the school is serious about the policy. That obviously won't stop everyone, but at the least it will deter those who rationally consider the benefits and the risks.

Enforcement needs to start from the top down. It is hard to expect students to take this policy seriously when even a few of the staff do not give the impression of doing so. Aside from the willing wearing of scent on the part of a few staff, it is also a standing joke that Selkirk has a scent free policy which doesn't extend (to my knowledge at the time of writing this essay) to the chemical sprayer in the staff washroom. Such an obvious and easily fixable breach of policy really sets a poor tone in terms of expecting students to adhere to a policy that staff (both by choice and by proxy) does not.

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The school has an obligation to ensure people with environmental sensitivities receive equal access to the services the school offers. That access is impeded in a number of ways based on the difficulty certain scents can pose. Articles one, three, four and eighteen regarding the rights of the student laid out in section 3A of the student code of conduct are all potentially infringed upon by the afore mentioned impedance (Selkirk 3400, 2015?, pp. 2-3). As for the chemical sprayer in the staff washroom this is in clear violation of both the scent free policy itself and the principle that leadership starts from the top down.

Environmental Design

Environmental design relies on neither adherence to nor enforcement of scent free policy. Rather, it relies on making the most use of available methods to curtail the cumulative effects of scents. Environmental design includes suggestions that focus on things like using the ventilation system to more routinely circulate fresh air into the mix and extra ventilation for hot spots such as the pit and the library. Environmental design includes initiatives such as the one undertaken at the University of Calgary that has seen all carpet removed from the campus and replaced with materials that do not trap scent or “off gas” scents of their own (Sears, 2007, p. 33). It also includes using less toxic material whenever possible, including using friendlier materials when renovating and janitorial supplies of a less toxic nature. “In recent history, Canadians have been exposed to a rapidly expanding number of new synthetic chemicals, with over 23,000 not assessed for health effects” (Sears, 2007, p. 23). Not all of these are found in perfumes, cologne

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and personal care products. It is worth the effort to try and eliminate other potential sources as well.

Advocacy

It is important to note that Selkirk College is only as alone in improving the scope and effectiveness of scent free policy as they choose to be. The single best resource on campus in terms of improving policy are those who are afflicted with environmental sensitivities. They comprise the first line of effective advocacy in terms of policies that meet their needs. There are also a number of advocacy groups such as Citizens for a Safe Learning Environment (CASLE for short) that are working with school boards and individual institutions all over Canada to turn scent free zones into a viable reality as opposed to the exercise in futility they often appear to be. Working with such a group would speed up the process of reaching a point where the policy has the maximum effect as well as making it easier to keep the costs associated with improving scent free policy as minimal as possible. Such an arrangement has wide reaching effects. To the people who suffer from environmental sensitivities and know who their advocates are it increases the perception of the situation being handled with a semblance of seriousness. For those who don't know who their advocates are, having the school work with them still increases the odds of effective policy.

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Better Alternatives

While the initiatives I have laid out will greatly improve the likelihood of students with environmental sensitivities feeling safe and healthy in the Selkirk environment, some will still suffer in a manner so severe that no form of in-person accommodation will be enough to solve the problem. Such people require as many options as possible that do not require physical contact with trouble zones in the school. Alternatives such as increased awareness of and expanded access to online options are one way to ensure that Selkirk does not lose out on tuition because of imbalanced access to services. Speaking from personal experience, just knowing there is an online librarian available through the Selkirk website to help with issues outside of the library (which is the worst area in the school for scents) would alleviate much of the frustration students with sensitivities feel in the process of attempting to access the help they need.

Taking into account that “a single, isolated low-level exposure (e.g. perfume on someone several seats away in the theatre or bus, that is not obviously harming the wearer) may cause significant symptoms such as headache, confusion, breathing difficulties or loss of balance in a person with environmental sensitivities” (Sears, 2007, p. 18) it only makes sense (no pun intended) to treat this issue with the respect it deserves.

As I understand it, a review of scent free policy was scheduled for September of this year. If this review has already taken place as per schedule, I encourage Selkirk administration to review it again armed with the information and (more importantly) the sources contained in this paper. There is simply too much worthy material on this subject to cover in so few words. It is in the best interest of anyone at Selkirk interested in effective policy to continue to study this topic,

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from a moral, legal and even financial perspective. The number of people with sensitivities is gradually increasing and eventually a time may come when enrollment genuinely suffers as a result of the unsafe environment the school currently provides. Being a leader and adapting well in advance to the changing landscape of student life is the single best way for Selkirk College to ensure a thriving future.


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 Policies and Procedures		Number 6020	Title Scent-Safe Campus Policy		
		Replaces	New		
		Effective	September 21, 2011	Next review :	September 21, 2015
Executive Responsibility	Administrative Responsibility	Recommended by Policy Review Committee		September 21, 2011	
Director of Human Resources	Director of Human Resources	Recommended/Approved by Education Council		N/A	
		Approved by President		October 3, 2011	

1. PURPOSE

To ensure the health and well-being of employees and students at Selkirk College by preventing exposure to scented products that can cause environmental/chemical sensitivities. The goals of this policy are to:

- (1) eliminate the use of perfume, body powder, cologne/aftershave, scented air fresheners, scented candles and potpourri from the workplace;
- (2) eliminate the use of heavily scented personal hygiene products such as hair products, body spray, lotions/creams and deodorant.

2. SCOPE / LIMITS

This policy applies to all employees, students and visitors of Selkirk College campuses and centres. There may be times where scented products or products that contain an odour may need to be used such as classroom processes, procedures, experiments or regular maintenance work. In such situations, those potentially affected will be informed and accommodated as much as possible.

3. PRINCIPLES

Exposure to scented products can adversely affect a person's health. In sufficient concentrations scented products may trigger responses to those with allergies or chemical sensitivities. Allergic and asthmatic people, as well as those with other conditions, report that exposure to scented products, even in the smallest amounts, can trigger response. Reported symptoms range from headaches, migraines and confusion to anxiety, upper respiratory issues and skin irritation.

The severity of symptoms can vary. Some may only experience mild irritation while others can be incapacitated.

4. DEFINITIONS

Personal Products

Hygiene: Products include, but are not limited to, powders, cosmetics, perfumes, colognes, after-shave and scented shaving creams, deodorant, shampoo/conditioners, hair spray, body sprays, lotions and creams.

Non-Hygiene: Products include, but are not limited to, aromatherapy products, scented candles, potpourri and scented ornaments.

5. PROCEDURE

Senior Management will:

- support managers, employees, and the Joint Health & Safety Committee in implementing a scent-safe workplace and campus/centre.
- ensure compliance with maintaining a scent-safe environment.

Managers/Deans/Chairs/Supervisors will:

- be aware that the Scent-Safe policy is in place and will encourage their employees to be in compliance with the policy.
- inform visitors of this policy before they visit the campus/centre.

Employees/Instructors will:

- inform students of this Policy at the beginning of each semester and for new students/guest speakers joining the classroom.
- do not use or bring scented products to Selkirk campuses/centres.
- participate in scent safety awareness and education sessions.
- report any unsafe conditions or acts to their Manager/Chair.

Communications and Development will:

- ensure that materials and other resources required to maintain a scent-safe environment are readily available (e.g. posted signs, promotional materials, presentations, etc.)

Facilities/Campus Management will:

- ensure that any products used for construction, maintenance, and cleaning are scent-free, where possible.
- inform contractors and campus visitors of this Policy before they visit any Selkirk facility.
- notify appropriate personnel when work is to take place that may involve the use of scented products, that contain an odour that may affect the health of staff or students. Sufficient advance warning should be given to allow employee accommodation to take place, if necessary.

6. COMPLIANCE

Due to the potential dramatic health and safety impacts, non compliance by employees may result in verbal or written warnings. Repetitive non-compliance following a maximum of two warnings will be viewed as insubordination and may result in written reprimand.

7. OTHER RELEVANT POLICIES/RESOURCES

- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (www.ccohs.ca)
- BC Lung Association (www.bc.lung.ca)
- Canadian Health Network (www.canadian-health-network.ca)
- Guide to Less Toxic Products (www.lesstoxicguide.ca)
- Worksafe BC Policy HEA 1-9