

Smoking and Tobacco Action Research Team

Summarization and Presentation of Findings
To the Committee on College Life

April 10, 2013

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MEMORANDUM

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Emily Lansdale, Class of 2014 Representative
Alex Voynow, Class of 2015 Representative
Joshua Temprow, Class of 2016 Representative
RE: Smoking and Tobacco Action Research Team (START) Findings & Recommendations
DTE: April 10, 2013

Executive Summary

Chartered in December 2012, the Smoking and Tobacco Action Research Team was created as a joint committee of students and administrators for the distinct purpose of gathering quantitative and qualitative data on student opinion regarding smoking practices and policies and the potential transition to a smoke and tobacco free campus. Our intention was to compile this research in order to make a recommendation to the Committee on College Life regarding such a proposal. We employed three methodologies to gather said data, including independent research, town hall meetings, and an all-campus survey. In our findings, we identify three points of discussion that should be addressed both before and after the vote on the proposal: overall favorability, practicality and enforcement, and education. Last, we generate a list of recommendations that seek to incorporate the concerns of all involved parties in order to best respect the student body as a whole.

Introduction & Background

Given concerns about the lack of student involvement in the shared governance system, the VSA Council passed a resolution in late fall 2012 which called for the creation of a task force which

would seek to elicit student input on the matter of a move towards a smoke and tobacco free campus. Following that resolution, the Smoking and Tobacco Action Research Team (referred to as the “Committee”) was chartered with the following mission statement: “The Committee shall examine the current policies of smoking and tobacco on campus, examine current smoking and tobacco culture, and disseminate all currently available information on the aforementioned issues to the Vassar community. The Committee shall engage community voices and gather qualitative and quantitative data about community feedback and ideas. Finally, the Committee shall widely disseminate the results of our research and advocate for our conclusions to the Committee on College Life to inform their consideration of the resolution.” This memorandum constitutes the Committee’s findings and recommendations.

The Committee’s Membership was as follows:

Devin Griffin ‘13, Terrace Apartments President

Sasha Brown ‘13, VSA Member at Large

Daniel Shaw ‘14, Class of 2014 President

Alison Ehrlich ‘15, Class of 2015 President

Maximilien Moran ‘16, Class of 2016 President

Teresa Quinn, Assistant Dean of the College for Campus Activities

Terrance Hanlon, House Advisor for Cushing and Noyes Houses and Assistant Director for Residential Wellness Programs

The Committee was chaired by Devin Griffin and met in full or in part at his discretion between December 2012 and April 2013. The chair also provided regular reports to the VSA Council and Student Life Committee.

Methodology

In order to meet its mission statement, the Committee employed three different techniques in order to gather qualitative and quantitative data on student opinion re: transitioning to a smoke and tobacco free campus. The following provides a description of those techniques:

- A. *Research*: Before beginning the process of student outreach, the Committee felt it best to familiarize ourselves with three basic areas of knowledge: Vassar’s current smoking policies and practices, the negative health effects of smoking, and the nationwide trend towards colleges and universities transitioning towards smoke and tobacco free campuses. We contacted Safety and Security as well as Campus Patrol to formulate a better image of the first issue. For the second, we contacted the American Cancer Society to request official information on second- and third-hand smoke. Third, we did independent research on the actions of peer institutions, as well as examining information provided to us by the Dean of the College. In addition, we familiarized ourselves with the current proposal sitting before CCL in order to best respond to the concerns of students.
- B. *Town Hall Meetings*: Given the distinct nature of our purpose, the Committee felt that direct outreach to the student body was the most logical avenue to take in gathering data.

Thus, we organized three town hall meetings in Cushing, Main, and Jewett Houses over the course of a week. We presented the issue at hand, a potential transition to a smoke and tobacco free campus, and allowed students to voice their opinions on the matter. We additionally sought to guide the discussion in such a way as to validate all opinions and to provide information when people had questions. Though this issue was clearly very personal for some of those present, a constructive dialogue was developed and maintained during the town halls.

- C. *All-Campus Survey*: Using the feedback we received from the town hall meetings, the Committee proceeded to craft a 19-question survey in order to measure more quantitatively how students felt about this issue. We included knowledge-based queries about Vassar's smoking policies and the negative health effects of tobacco use, as well as questions regarding how effective transitioning to a smoke and tobacco free campus might be. We asked students directly whether or not they were in favor of this transition, and also how often they themselves might smoke. Last, we asked questions regarding gender, race, ethnicity, national background, Vassar housing, and class year in order to see if any distinct and relevant correlations appeared. We ended up having 940 respondents.

Findings

Although the intent of the Committee might seem rather narrow, our findings include much more than simply whether or not students think Vassar should transition to a smoke and tobacco free campus. The multiplicity of personal, social, and legal factors renders this issue anything but simple. We therefore have findings that fall under three (3) different categories: overall favorability, practicality and enforcement, and education.

A. Overall Favorability

During our town hall meetings, student response was overwhelmingly negative when presented with this issue. There were definitely a few outspoken proponents for a smoke free transition who felt that their own health was threatened. Many people felt disrespected by smokers who did not abide by the current policies of smoking both outdoors and at least fifty feet away from buildings.

However, more voices spoke to the contrary. Some of the most prominent issues include:

- Unnecessary and unreasonable personal restriction. Freshmen and sophomores who came to this school as smokers and did not foresee this transition during their matriculation most often expressed this sentiment.
- Social divisions. Antagonisms between smokers and non-smokers already exist here and could easily be exacerbated once smokers no longer have any legitimacy to smoke on campus.
- "Smoker colonies." People feared that smokers would begin concentrating themselves in dorms near the edges of campus, further antagonizing the

smoker/non-smoker divide amongst those dorm residents, especially with indoors smoking.

- International students and cultural inclusivity. Many Vassar students come from countries and backgrounds where smoking is less restricted and more common among young people; preventing these students from smoking could be an unnecessary alienating experience.
- Safety. Smokers would be forced to go off campus, sometimes at unreasonable and unsafe hours, in order to smoke.
- Students expressed frustration at what they considered a drastic move, a transition to a completely smoke and tobacco free campus, without consideration of alternative such as smoking pavilions and stricter enforcement of current rules.

Despite the largely imbalanced points of view at the town halls, the all-campus survey provided different results when it came to overall favorability. When asked “I am [strongly in favor/in favor/not in favor/strongly not in favor] of a multi-step transition eventually resulting in a smoke and tobacco free campus,” 55% (515/931) of respondents marked that they were not in favor. Support for the transition is therefore in the minority, though it clearly remains a split issue amongst the student body.

B. Practicality and Enforcement

While the survey responses indicate that students are split when it comes to support of the transition, sentiments about practicality tell a very different story. Though 37% of respondents find the current smoking policies inadequate to address concerns about smoking and health, only 57% indicated that a smoke free campus will reduce negative health effects and 42% thought that it was the “best way” to reduce them. Additionally, an overwhelming 89% of students feel that it would be difficult to enforce. These results indicate that fewer students than the number who support the transition believe it can be effective in its purpose.

Our findings show that a large majority of students do not think that this policy could be easily put in place and enforced. As referenced in the previous section, there is a lot of concern for indoor smoking, an already overly common issue in the dorms. Many students during the town halls suggested intermediary steps towards creating a healthier campus, including enforcement of the “fifty foot rule” by placing ashbins semi-permanently away from the buildings. Many people, both in support of and against the proposed transition, suggested more inclusive campus-wide discussions to deal with issues of social division and dissatisfaction. Though many other suggestions were thrown out, the point is that many students feel that there are more effective ways to deal with the problems of smoking on campus than ruling it out completely.

Last, we thought that the demographics questions about smoking merited some attention. While only 13% of students identify as smoking once or more per week, 33.4% admit to having smoked in the past twelve months. While smokers, even infrequent smokers, clearly

represent a small minority of the school, the fact that one third of survey respondents identify with having had at least one cigarette in the past year indicates that there is some personal stake for more than just that small number of people whose lives are directly impacted.

C. Education

The Committee was urged to include knowledge-based queries in order to determine how informed the survey takers were in regard to the negative health effects of tobacco use. Not wanting to create too large or confusing of a survey, we settled on one knowledge-based question and two opinion-based questions on the subject. Our results show that although 72% of people answered the question “Second hand smoke contains more carcinogens than first hand smoke” incorrectly, only 8% of respondents did not feel generally informed about the health effects of smoking. In no way do we intend to use this one question, to determine how well informed students are. If presented with other, perhaps more clearly articulated questions, students might have performed differently; unfortunately, the Committee did not find itself prepared enough to craft such an in-depth survey on how well people know the harmful facts about smoking. Additionally, however, only 44% of respondents also identified themselves as familiar with the effects of third hand smoke.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, the Smoking and Tobacco Action Research Team has attempted to address the concerns of the student body in a way that respects the division of support for and against the transition to a smoke and tobacco free campus. It is our hope that these recommendations will be considered by the Committee on College Life in its voting on this issue as well as by any other offices or programs which might become involved hereafter. Considering the nature of the town hall meetings and the majority, however slight, of students against a transition, we must recommend against it. However, given the division of opinion and the multiplicity of factors that weigh on this decision, we more strongly emphasize the following recommendations:

- Increased student outreach. Only 55% of respondents felt as if they had been given “opportunities to engage with administrators and/or student representatives” about this issue. That signifies a certain disregard and lack of transparency upon both sides of the shared governance system. Regardless of the outcome of this vote, the Committee recommends that efforts be made to engage more closely with the student body over issues of smoking and health.
- Smoking Policy Reform. Students on both sides of the issue feel that the current policies are inadequate to deal with the needs of smokers and non-smokers alike. Additionally, most feel as if this transition would be difficult to enforce and many feel as if it will be overall ineffective. How Safety and Security handle smoking violations needs to be addressed if a peaceful campus climate is to be maintained, either as a tobacco free space or not.

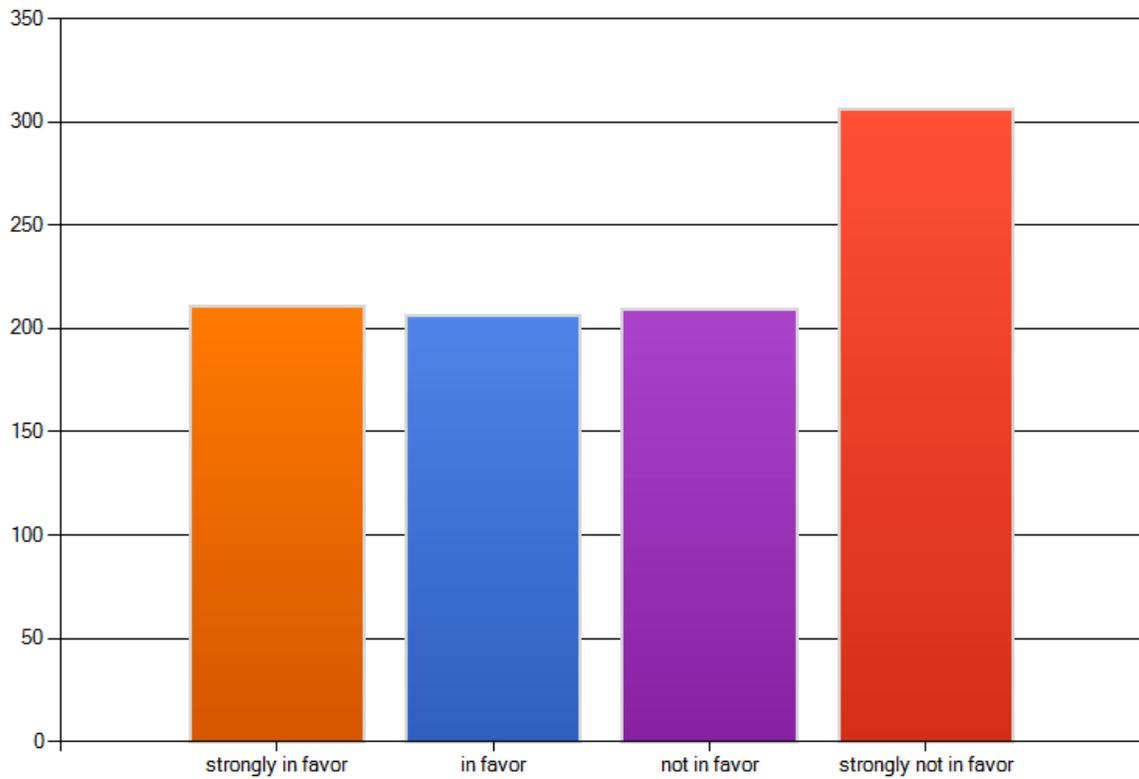
- Consideration of Alternatives. Some of what the Committee has determined may not be news to the members of the CCL, but perhaps some of the issues raised have not been as carefully brought into the spotlight as they were during our research. Before voting on the issue, we would ask the CCL to consider exactly what alternative avenues towards a smoke and tobacco free campus might be. One of the most frequent complaints regarding the practicality of this proposal was that intermediary steps either do not seem to exist or have not been clearly articulated throughout the process.
- Respect. While smoking is a personal choice, there are a number of factors such as social or cultural background, mental health, sociality, and addiction that can play into why a person may utilize tobacco products. Given the low percentage of students who actually smoke, there is even a large number of non-smokers who respect not only the rights of these students, but also their needs. The Committee understands that an implementation committee would be created to address the needs of all students should the proposal pass, but we urge that the concerns expressed in the Findings above be reiterated and carefully considered at every step of the process.

Conclusion

The Smoking and Tobacco Action Research Team has worked within a relatively small amount of time to bring forth as impartial a report as possible reflecting the opinions and concerns of the student body. We would like to reiterate at this point that the issue is strongly split and that it is difficult to express the views of 940 people, let alone 2500, when opinions differ so greatly. In conclusion, however, we would also like to point out that research on an issue such as this can hardly escape bias in its entirety. Many students felt that particular questions on the survey were biased strongly in favor of the proposal, leading us to leave out some data in our final analysis.

Therefore, we do not end this memorandum with a strong conviction for or against the proposal for transitioning to a smoke and tobacco free campus. What we can end this with, however, is the firm articulation that more needs to be done in regard to engaging with students, educating them, and giving them respect and agency in the decision-making processes that govern their lives. We urge the Committee on College Life and all other relevant offices and programs at Vassar College to find ways to address these concerns and make the decisions that will best address the needs of the students.

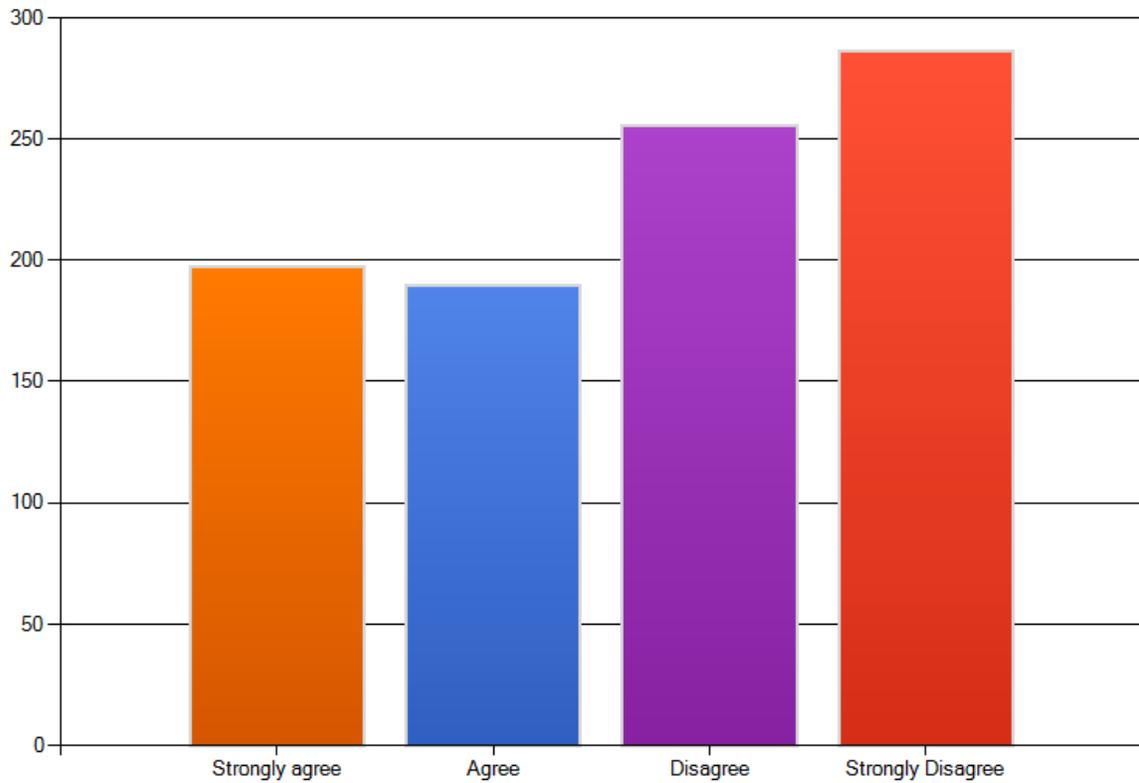
"I am _____ of a multi-step transition eventually resulting in a smoke and tobacco free campus."



Answer Choices	Responses	
strongly in favor	22.56%	210
in favor	22.13%	206
not in favor	22.45%	209
strongly not in favor	32.87%	306
Total		931

Figure 1: Overall Favorability According to an All-Campus Survey

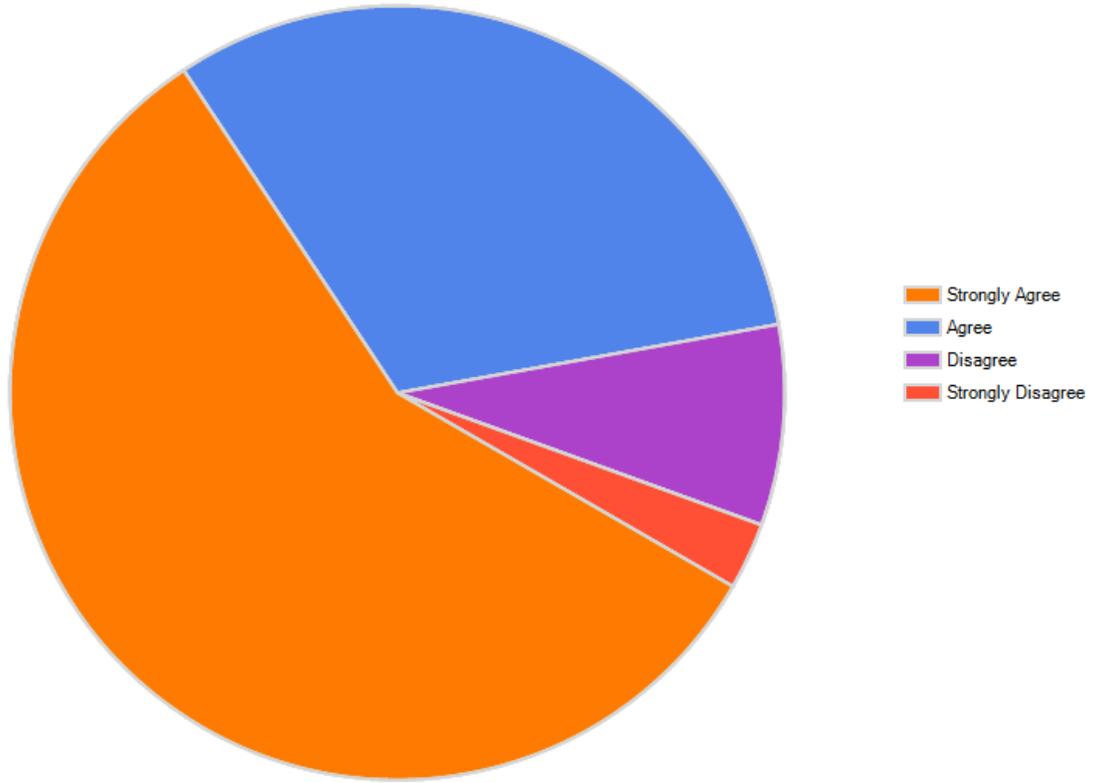
"I feel that moving to a smoke and tobacco free campus is the best way to reduce the health effects of smoking and tobacco on campus."



Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly agree	21.25%	197
Agree	20.39%	189
Disagree	27.51%	255
Strongly Disagree	30.85%	286
Total		927

Figure 2: Practicality of a Transition

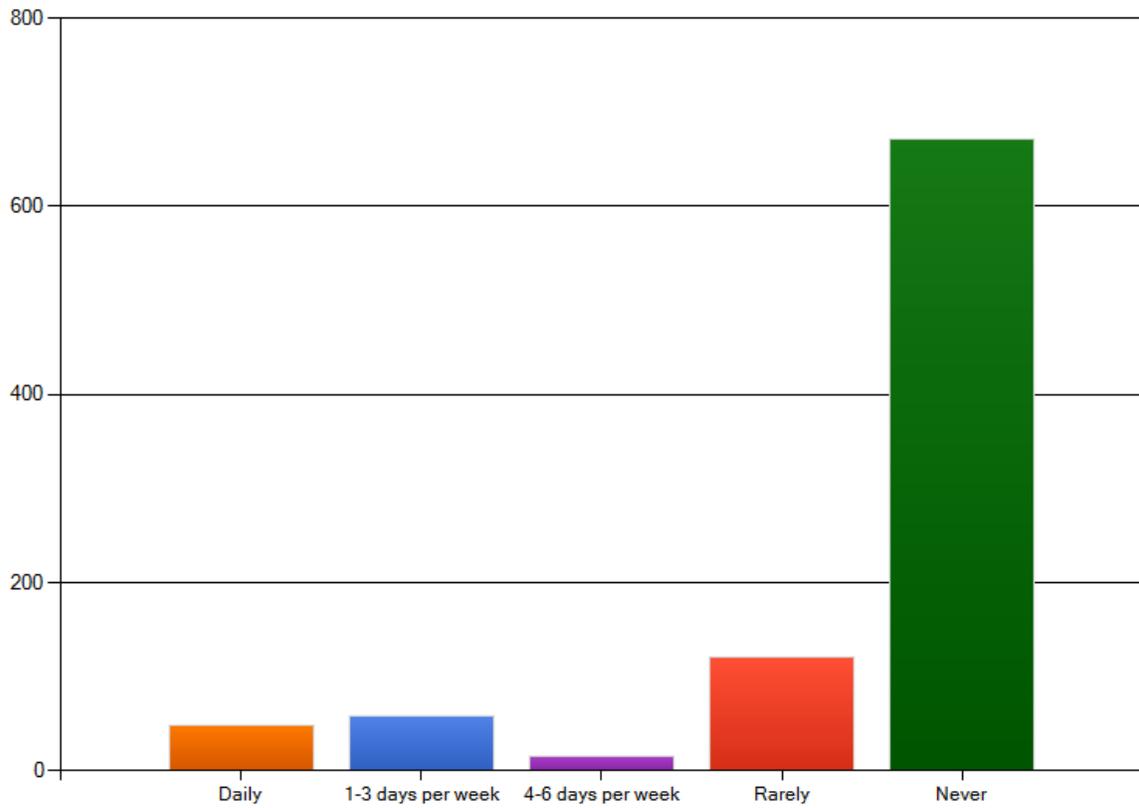
"If Vassar was to have a smoke and tobacco free campus, this would be difficult to enforce."



Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly Agree	57.36%	534
Agree	31.47%	293
Disagree	8.38%	78
Strongly Disagree	2.79%	26
Total		931

Figure 3: Practicality of Enforcement

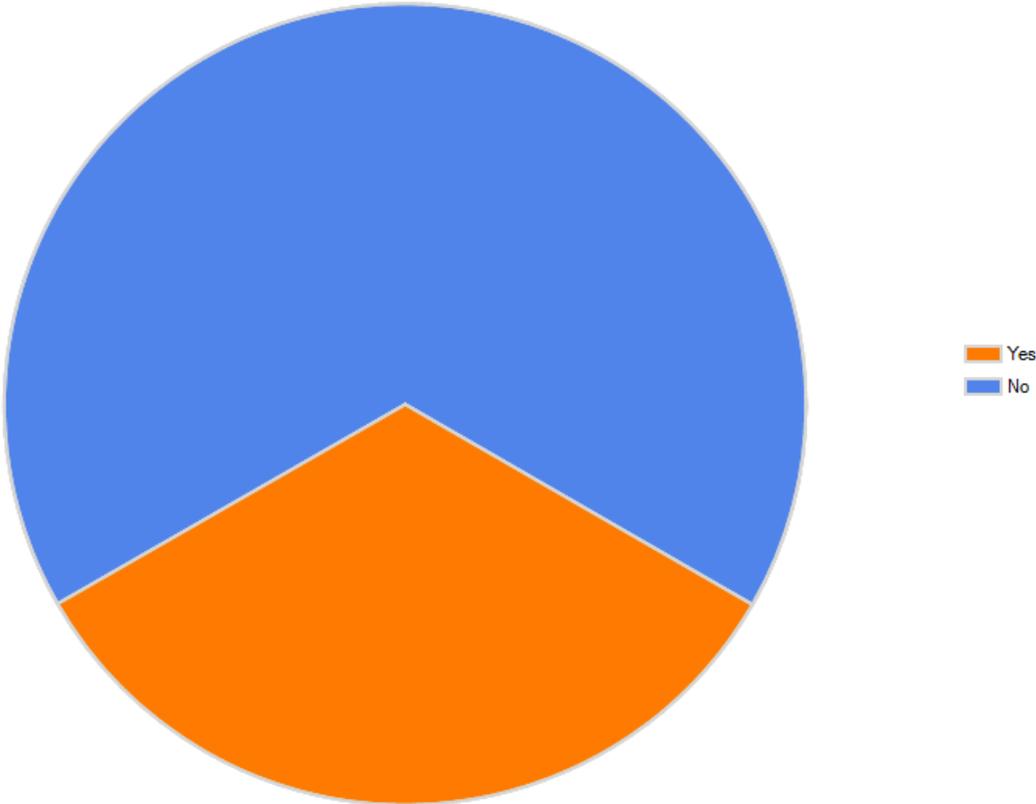
How often have you smoked cigarettes in the past 30 days?



Answer Choices	Responses
Daily	5.25% 48
1-3 days per week	6.35% 58
4-6 days per week	1.64% 15
Rarely	13.24% 121
Never	73.52% 672
Total	914

Figure 4: Smoking Demographics

Have you smoked a cigarette in the past 12 months?



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	33.37%	306
No	66.63%	611
Total		917

Figure 5: Smoking Demographics B