

Living Policies Tool

The Membership Meeting

The following is a script for the membership meeting that you can read aloud or use to guide the discussion with the group. Be sure to adjust the script so that it's comfortable for you and appropriate for your group. This meeting has a three-part agenda:

1. Briefly review and discuss Laws and Consequences related to alcohol use, including why knowing them matters to your organization.
2. Introduce Our Living Policies to the group and gather feedback from members.
3. Help members understand how to “live” the standards.

Purpose of the Meeting

As you all know, we're participating in the FailSafe program to make our organization less vulnerable to negative consequences when we use alcohol. You've seen our group's results from the Member Alcohol Profile, and we've talked about the things related to drinking that make us vulnerable as individuals and as a group. We want to make sure that everyone is as safe as possible and that our drinking doesn't threaten the livelihood of our organization.

We also need to make sure that everyone understands our organization's standards related to alcohol use. These are the rules we expect each of you to follow as long as you're a part of this organization.

Today we need to do three things: have a short conversation about the laws and policies related to drinking that we all fall under here at our school, introduce some specific standards—we're calling them Living Policies—for us to follow as a group, and talk about how we can “live” these standards to reduce the risks we face when using alcohol.

Laws and Consequences

Let's start by talking about the laws each one of us and our organization has to follow. No one likes listening to a bunch of rules, so we're not going to spend a lot of time on this. You all know the big stuff about the legal drinking age, being drunk in public, drinking and driving, and physical and sexual assault. Our leader team has put together a list of these laws for our campus and the penalties you could face if you're caught doing any of these things.

(Distribute the completed “Laws and Consequences” sheet to each of your members.)

As you look at this page, a few things may surprise you. For example, a lot of new students don't know that an older group member can get in legal trouble for giving alcohol to or buying alcohol for someone under 21. This means that every time you ask an older member of our group to get you alcohol, you're increasing that person's risk of being cited for violating state law. You also may not know about the laws here for being drunk in public. (Briefly describe the laws for your area related to public intoxication and protective custody.)

There are two reasons we're talking about this. First, you need to know that these laws are enforced. Just because you're in college doesn't mean that campus police or the local police will give you a free pass if you break these laws. Getting a citation for any of these issues can cost you a lot of money, go on your record, and affect you in many ways now and later in life.

Second, I want to make sure everyone understands that if you make the choice to break one of these laws during an event or activity that's hosted by our organization, you put our entire organization at risk for judicial sanctions from the school (*and from our national organization, if appropriate*). A lot of colleges and universities are holding student organizations responsible when members break laws as part of the organization's formal or informal activities. You need to know that the choices you make affect more than just you; they could affect our entire group.

One last thing to keep in mind is that our school has stepped up its enforcement of these laws. So even if you never had to worry about legal problems from drinking before, you—and our organization—may have a greater risk here than you would at home or when you were in high school.

Any questions about any of this? Anything anyone wants to say about this?

(Note that this discussion can be brief. But if some members make light of the laws and consequences ["Give me a break. No one cares if I drink when I'm 20." "I've been drinking for five years and never had a problem; you think I'm going to get caught now?"], it's important that you get support from your leader team by having them share stories of when these laws were enforced and the impact on individuals and/or student organizations. Don't get caught in a discussion of how to avoid enforcement or "what if" scenarios. Just tell the group that the point is to recognize that these laws exist, and that your group's focus is preventing your organization from enabling or encouraging members or guests to violate these laws.)

Our Living Policies

The other issue we need to talk about today is our organization's standards related to using alcohol. Our leader team has come up with a list of things we think everyone will agree we don't want to see when we party as a group.

The FailSafe program calls these "Living Policies." Living Policies are our own set of standards related to alcohol use that we expect every member to "live" every day. Having these clear standards will help us reduce our risk of experiencing the really negative consequences that can occur when we drink. Some consequences, things like assaults and medical rescues, can cause enormous problems for us as an organization.

Let me be clear: we're not cutting out alcohol from our events and activities. But we have to get rid of the extreme stuff that can get us in trouble or put us at risk. Everything on this list is stuff that we don't need to do to have a great time. And a lot of these things happen when people aren't being smart about using alcohol.

(Distribute the completed "Our Living Policies" sheet to each of your members. Read aloud each policy and say a little about what it means.)

We'd like to spend about 10 minutes getting your feedback on these policies before the leader team finalizes them. So what do people think? Is there anything here that you think shouldn't be on the list?

(Let group members share their thoughts. It's OK for people to disagree. Remember that you don't have to defend the policies, but you can ask anyone who objects to a policy to explain why they think it shouldn't be a standard, and how the behavior doesn't put the organization at risk. You can always direct the conversation back to the group as a whole by asking, "What do others think about that?")

Thanks for sharing your feedback. We'll try to include these thoughts as we finalize the Living Policies. I also want to ask if people feel there's anything missing from the list of Living Policies. Is there anything we should add as an expectation for our members to follow?

(Give group members time to think of other potential standards. Take notes on members' suggestions without commenting or asking them to justify a suggestion. You may need to help members think through a particular problem they've experienced and turn it into a standard that is in the same style as the others. Remember to regularly direct the conversation back to the group by asking, "What do others think about that?")

Living Our Standards

The last thing we need to talk about is how we will live these standards. Having standards on paper won't do us any good if we don't follow them.

If we agree that living by these standards is important to all of us, then we expect everyone to follow them. That means we'll hold one another accountable when we violate a standard. Can we agree together that we'll hold each other accountable to live these standards?

(Get a verbal agreement from everyone in the room.)

Great. At our next meeting, we'll share how some of us manage our risks with alcohol. That will give all of us some ideas about how to have a good time when drinking while avoiding the problems. We really can have a good time without taking things to the extreme.

(If members of your leader team want to share their reflections on the issues the group has discussed, have them do so now. You can then wrap up the meeting or move on to other business.)