



Now THAT'S An Externality!

My home institution of UCLA has decided to commemorate Earth Day in a clear and bold manner: [it has banned tobacco on campus](#), starting on — well, today.

The Westwood campus is the first UC to implement the ban, following a call from President Mark Yudof to go smoke-free across the 10-campus system by 2014.

“We’re very proud we’re the first,” UCLA Chancellor Gene D. Block said. The campus and its students “are setting an example.”

The Earth Day launch date was especially significant because “in order to take care of the earth, we must take care of ourselves,” Block said.

I like Chancellor Block. He’s a nice guy, and I think he cares a lot about the university and its members. But I think his assertion is just wrong here. Taking care of the Earth may mean changing some of our habits, and perhaps some of our personal consumption habits. But smoking doesn’t seem to be one of them. (If I were in a particularly cynical mood, I would say that smoking reduces life expectancy, and so reduces the opportunities for the smoker to emit carbon.). Anti-environmentalists have long accused the environmental movement of wanting to intrude into people’s personal lives, and this provides a small data point in their favor.

Besides, this really seems overly paternalistic to me, especially because UCLA is a state university. I can see banning smoking indoors, which the university did awhile ago. But I don’t see any particular externalities associated with smoking outdoors, or even chewing

tobacco (which is also banned), unless you are spitting on the sidewalk (which was also banned awhile ago). For me, there is an important distinction between the new UCLA policy and, say, the New York City ban (now enjoined) on large sodas: with the latter, if it's really important to you, get up and buy another soda. It just is not too much of a burden. But the wholesale banning of a product is.

As long as 18 year-olds can vote and serve in the military, without more evidence of externalized harm it is hard for me to justify forbidding them access to tobacco. It is certainly plausible that fewer undergraduates will smoke because of this policy, but it is not clear to me that it is the university's job to make that decision. If anything, the point of a university is to educate, not to mandate. If there was evidence that campus access to tobacco led to greater peer pressure to smoke, then I could be persuaded otherwise. But at least I haven't seen it yet.

If the university was really serious about improving the health of students, then maybe it would offer healthier food in its cafeterias — which it often doesn't. It would not make candy, other foods with processed sugar, and hydrogenated oils available all over campus — which it often does. Of course, the university doesn't make any money from tobacco, but it sure does from food service. I'm sure that has nothing to do with it. To be sure, the university like any policymaker, need not do everything consistently all at once. But this is really avoiding the big problem for the little one.

I detest smoking. In my view, the tobacco industry is something close to an ongoing criminal conspiracy. Eighteen and nineteen-year-olds are not fully capable of determining what is best for them. But the law presumes that they are, for several excellent reasons, and I see no reason to deviate from it here.