



“Higher” Education:

Trends and Issues in University Cannabis

Programming

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Executive Summary

Over the past few decades, the United States has seen the emergence of a new industry that presents a litany of unforeseen challenges. With nineteen states and the nation’s capital having legalized cannabis for adult use, and a total of thirty eight states having legalized cannabis for medical use, the cannabis industry is growing at an exponential rate.¹ However, as the landscape of the cannabis industry continues to become larger and evolve, so too does the academic environment that surrounds it – presenting unique issues for regulators in ancillary policy areas such as higher education. Just as with any new industry, university courses and programs have begun to appear focusing on various fields of interest and study within the cannabis industry – as well as programs centered around the policy behind regulations placed on the industry. As these programs continue to grow in number and pop up at different higher education institutions, concerns have emerged relative to uniformity and accreditation. With the industry itself in flux and best-practice regulations constantly changing, one is left to wonder how these programs are evaluated – and whether they are evaluated by those with the requisite knowledge and expertise to do so.

The Council for Federal Cannabis Regulation (CFCR) has identified a process for addressing these issues. CFCR’s recent research focuses on gathering basic data on the diversity of cannabis programs available in higher education today, in hopes of providing a benchmark as to the availability of cannabis industry education, as well as its current pitfalls and future opportunities. The data on which this paper is based was compiled through searches of university websites, contact of administrators, and an informational survey form completed by a sample of universities that offer some form of cannabis programming. All uncited figures, tables, graphs, and data-based assertions below can be attributed to CFCR’s newly compiled research database. This database will be updated, maintained, and built out to better document the surge in growth of these academic programs.

The focus of this paper is to provide a summarization of this research and identify outstanding market trends and issues. The ultimate goal of CFCR is to move toward the creation of a uniform standard of accreditation for cannabis programming in higher education, as well as to build an even more comprehensive database of program rankings by depth and quality of education. As with any emerging industry, science-based regulation is inherent to the success of the business of cannabis – but before this can be effectively accomplished, appropriate scrutiny must be placed on the institutions preparing and educating industry entrants.

¹ Dan Avery, *Marijuana Laws by State 2022: Is Cannabis Legal Where You Live?* CNET (Jul. 21, 2022 at 11:13 PM), <https://www.cnet.com/news/politics/marijuana-laws-in-every-state/#:~:text=As%20of%20July%202022%2C%2038,%2C%20Maine%2C%20Maryland%2C%20Massachusetts%2C>.

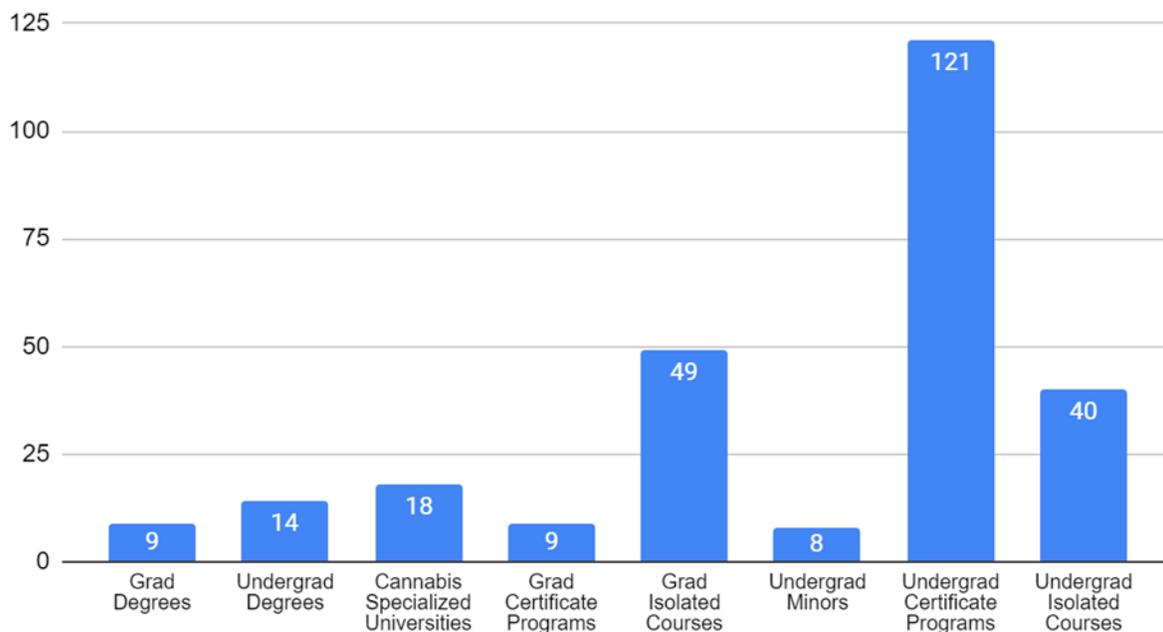
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Market Overview

According to a study completed in 2019 by the National Center for Education Statistics, there are just under four thousand accredited degree-granting postsecondary educational institutions in the United States.² While CFCR’s current database does not claim to be entirely comprehensive as to any and all cannabis programming available at these institutions, it does provide an effective overview of the market as a whole as it stands in 2022. CFCR has identified roughly 250 programs and courses at accredited universities, as well as 18 non-accredited cannabis specialized educational services.

Cannabis in Higher Education



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Within accredited universities, there are varying levels of coursework and degree recognition. CFCR has identified 9 graduate degree programs, 14 undergraduate degree programs, 49 graduate school courses, 40 undergraduate courses, and over 120 certificate programs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels.

² Josh Moody, *A Guide to the Changing Number of U.S. Universities*, US NEWS (Apr. 27, 2021), <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-many-universities-are-in-the-us-and-why-that-number-is-changing#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Department%20of%20Education,4%2C000%20degree%2Dgranting%20academic%20institutions.>

³ *Author’s Note:* All graphs and figures used in this paper are based on data we have collected from websites and the data provided by schools that responded to our survey. While our database in full contains over 200 entries for different programs and courses, there are still gaps to be filled relative to specific categories – all graphical data depicted in this paper is based ONLY on collected information. By way of example – if we have 20 entries for undergraduate degrees, and only 7 of them have responded to the survey or have website data available for number of graduates, we will only include the 7 entries that are complete for a graph on number of graduates – leaving 13 schools unrepresented in a graph for total graduates. In this way, our research is ripe to be built upon – while these graphs are a great indicator of the general big picture, we wish to be clear that we do not claim to have every bit of data for every program.

While these programs and courses all concern cannabis industry education, there is considerable variance in their focuses. Degree programs in the graduate school field are in departments of Pharmacy, Business, Health Sciences, Agriculture, and Emerging Health Professions. Degree programs at the undergraduate level are subject to an even wider range of specialization within the industry, with departments such as Integrated Studies, Chemistry, Behavioral Sciences, and Environmental Science offering cannabis degrees in their respective fields.

Within the world of isolated coursework, certificates, and minors, the level of variance in program focus only continues to increase. In addition to the aforementioned areas of expertise, certificate programs and single courses at undergraduate and graduate institutions also include Humanities, Social Sciences, Professional Education, Public Affairs, Horticulture, Communications, and more.

Each of these alternative focus areas provides a unique introduction to the world of cannabis as it intersects with different areas of professional expertise, and creates an extremely varied and segmented academic environment. Regulating cannabis programming does not stop at uniformity for “all cannabis courses” – considerable time and effort must be spent attempting to segment any new accreditation service based on profession and type of coursework. For example, even a degree accreditation program (short of isolated coursework and certificates) would require differently expertised sectors for respective professional fields. Providing an effective system of regulation for these programs requires a wide range of specialized accreditation services, each focused on the many different ways cannabis can be used and studied by the industry.

Additionally, the large number of total programs and courses offered in higher education (and their continued growth) illustrates a dire need for uniformity in the space. As the industry and educational programming behind it continues to grow and change, it will only become more important to ensure that an industry entrant with a cannabis business degree from “University X” is adequately equipped when compared to an entrant with a cannabis business degree from “University Y”. Variance in accreditation and standard-setting could potentially lead to devalued degrees and programs at certain institutions, which in turn could provide an avenue for degrees valued at a higher level to exclude entrants through higher costs in the name of quality.

Accessibility

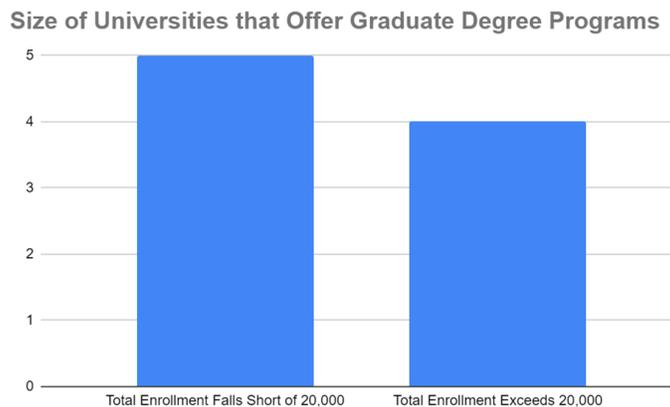
As the total number of programs at varying levels of higher education continues to grow, education in one of the many different facets of cannabis and its industry is becoming more and more accessible to the public. As of the time of this paper, CFRCR’s database includes roughly 250 total programs or courses available, from isolated undergraduate courses up to master’s degrees in graduate institutions. This includes 9 graduate degree programs and 14 undergraduate degree programs. This number is poised to continue growing at a rapid rate, especially when the always-inevitable-but- never-imminent federal legalization of cannabis finally comes to fruition.

A Quick Note: Increasing Number of Programs

Using graduate degree programs as an example – all of the graduate degree programs in CFRCR’s database have been established within the past 5 years. This illustrates a fairly consistent trend across the data, in all subsets – that the further we progress into the 21st century, the more cannabis programs that will pop up in higher education.

Size of Host Institutions

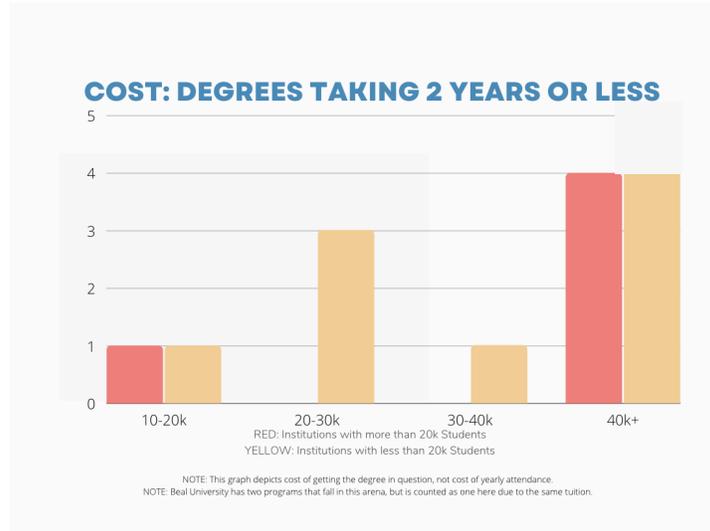
We found the disparity in size of host schools to be interesting. Undergraduate degree programs are more than four times as likely to be at a university with less than 20,000 students. Additionally, as illustrated in the graph below focused on graduate degree programs, roughly 55% of graduate degree programs are offered at universities with less than 20,000 students.



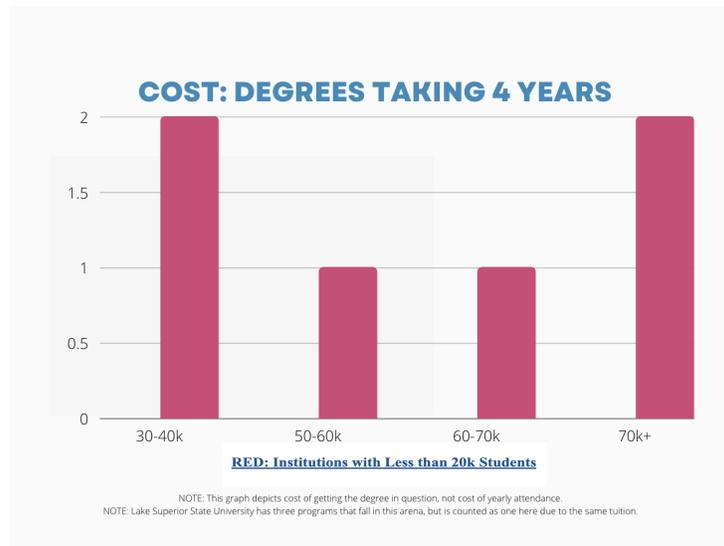
Cost of Degree

Relative to cost accessibility of cannabis degree programs at undergraduate and graduate institutions, cannabis programs are middling in cost accessibility (with some outliers). According to a study completed in 2022, the average cost of a college degree for out-of-state students is \$108,092 for four-year programs and roughly \$31,500 for two-year programs (averaged between for-profit and nonprofit private two year

universities).⁴ As seen in the graphs below, CFCR’s database contains a total of 20 schools⁵ offering undergraduate or graduate degree programs – with six of the 20 offering four-year degrees, and the remainder offering two-year degrees.



Within the two-year degree delineation, the majority of the programs check in above the national average (eight of fourteen) with costs above \$40,000. Of those above the average, there are an equal number of larger and smaller institutions. Interestingly, the smaller institutions dominate the space under the national average, with four of the five values.



As for programs with four-year completion, only one of the two programs listed here as 70k+ checks in above the national average. The remainder of the schools listed (four of five) are well below the national

⁴ Melanie Hanson, *Average Cost of College and Tuition*, EducationData (Jun. 12, 2022), <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college>.

⁵ *Author’s Note:* Some of these schools offer more than one program, explaining the difference in numbers between programs offered when compared to schools offering them.

average for the cost of a four-year degree. Additionally, the only institutions offering four-year programs in CFCR's database are institutions with less than 20,000 students.

This data is intriguing for a few reasons. Firstly, only 5 of the institutions offering degree programs of some form have over 20,000 students – and none of those larger institutions offer four year degree programs. There are two sides to this coin – on one hand, more programs at larger universities would afford a wider pool of students the opportunity to sample cannabis educational programming where they otherwise may not have pursued it. Alternatively, bigger universities can have higher costs of attendance on average (4 of 5 large institutions are above the 2-year cost average, whereas only 6 of 15 small institutions are above the average for their respective degree length). This could support an alternative hypothesis that more programs at smaller higher education institutions could provide better access for those seeking out programs as a prerequisite to college applications.

As things currently stand, the accessibility for a student interested in cannabis coursework or programs prior to attending a university is high – there are many programs available, at various levels. Often, they are at smaller (and typically less expensive) institutions. However, challenges could appear relative to the niche-nature of having more degree programs at smaller schools – limiting the potential pool of interested students to smaller pools than larger institutions would offer.

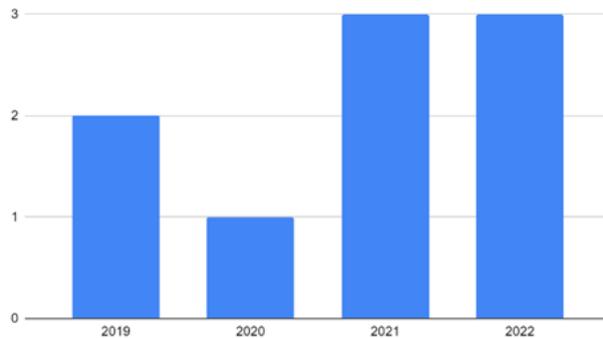
Notable Trends

Relative to general trends identified in the data, a small handful of things stood out to us as points of note or potential avenues for more future research. Each is identified below with a brief explanation.

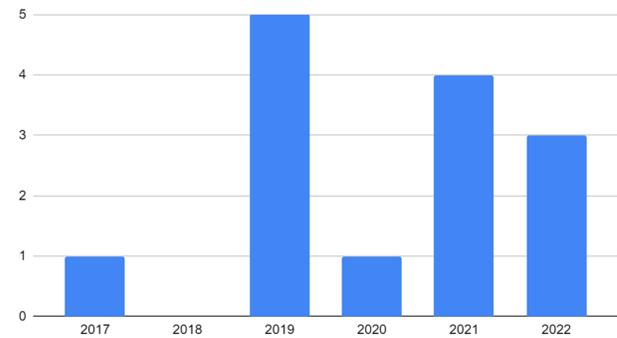
Year of Establishment

First, there seems to be a general trend towards establishment of graduate and undergraduate degree programs at more universities over the past five years. Although the data does not illustrate a linear trend of a growing number of programs being established each year, the past six years (except for 2018) have all seen the addition of at least one new degree program at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. 2019, 2021, and 2022 saw the most new additions to the fold within the past six years.

Graduate Degree Programs by Implementation Year



Undergraduate Degree Programs by Implementation Year



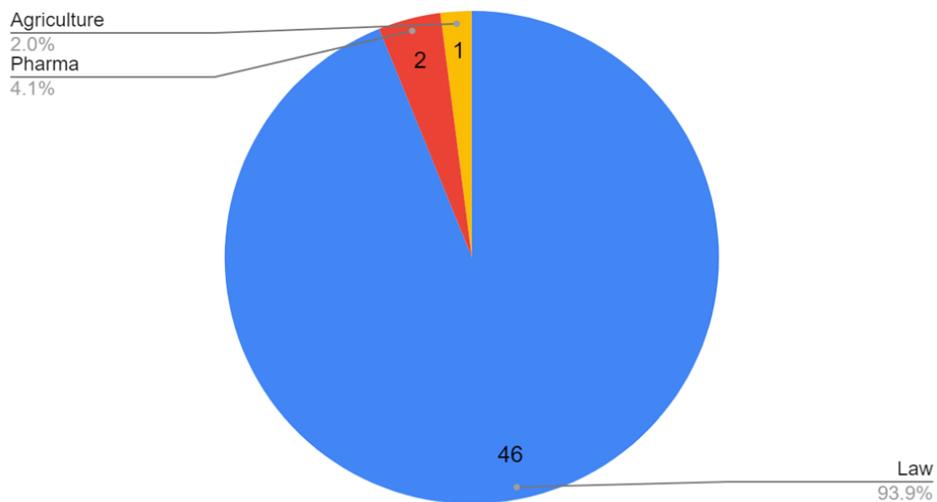
The lack of linear growth relative to the number of new programs established illustrates that the higher education industry hasn't quite fully embraced cannabis as an area of study. Schools, although becoming more interested in recent years, are still hesitant to establish new programs. Additionally, continued federal illegality poses issues for institutions in states where cannabis is still against the law – and has the likely effect of imposing a “wait and watch” attitude on the vast majority of institutions in states where cannabis is legalized on one level or another.

As long as the logically despondent dichotomy between state and federal law on cannabis continues to exist, there is low likelihood of a true explosion in cannabis programming at major universities – in part due to fears of federal regulators, but also in part due to the fledgling amount of clinical research conducted on cannabis. However, the fact that each year out of the past six has seen the introduction of at least one cannabis degree program at the graduate or undergraduate level illustrates that universities are slowly starting to change the way they see cannabis – and that their perception of its value within higher education is shifting towards a more positive outlook.

Law School Courses

When we began this research project, it was intended to focus on degree programs offered by graduate and undergraduate institutions. While we do believe that those data categories are some of the most important that we have collected (in that those institutions are likely to become industry standard setters), we began to develop an interest in isolated coursework offered at these institutions. Although there is a litany of isolated coursework and operator-specific training courses available at undergraduate institutions, it did not have any overwhelming discipline of focus. However, within graduate school programs for traditional career paths such as pharmacy, agriculture, and law – we began to see an interesting trend relative to cannabis courses.

Amount of SINGLE Courses Offered at Graduate Schools



As an opening primer, we do not claim to have identified every isolated graduate school course on cannabis. This is intended to be an indicative sample based on what CFCR found during the course of its research period.

With the exception of two elective classes within pharmacy programs and a single elective class in one agriculture program, law schools completely dominate the field of offering elective classes in cannabis for their professional students. We found 46 courses in law schools focused on cannabis in some fashion, with the majority focused on cannabis law and policy. Other courses centered around cannabis business law, cannabis reform, cannabis practice, and more.

While we did not begin the research with this as an area of focus, it became difficult to ignore as we found more and more courses offered in law schools. Similar to institutions as a whole, the vast majority of these courses have been established within the last decade – illustrating that law schools are also beginning to see cannabis as an important area of study. Interestingly enough, though, we did not find any law schools that offer more than a few cannabis courses – and no law school has a comprehensive

ancillary program track for a “Cannabis J.D.” (whereas graduate schools within the fields of Pharmacy, Agriculture, Business, and more have established cannabis specific graduate degree programs encompassed by their discipline). For a more in-depth look at the past progression of cannabis courses in law schools, see The Ohio State University’s Drug Enforcement and Policy Center whitepaper on the topic [here](#).⁶

Major Players

As we progressed through our research and began to see more and more examples of the various levels of professionalism and framework within cannabis programs, it became apparent that there are a few institutions and groups poised to spearhead the standardization and quality assurance of cannabis programming in higher education as the space moves forward. At a more macro level, it isn’t a far leap of inference to say that institutions with established degree programs are best situated to lead this charge – and the closest within the current landscape to being role models for emerging programs.

Schools like Northern Michigan, Lake Superior State, and Colorado State have years of experience in the area of undergraduate degrees. Their established programs, seemingly well-assembled curriculum, and readiness of information set them apart from the field. Additionally, Lake Superior State seems to be an unlikely leader amongst leaders – as its offering of multiple cannabis degrees gives it a unique perspective into challenges that face the educational sector relative to cannabis in disciplines such as science, business, and chemistry. In the field of graduate school education, the few programs that are available for graduate degrees seem to be consistently well put together. However, even within an elevated field of players, one stands out as a true standard setter – the University of Maryland’s MS in Medical Cannabis Science and Therapeutics (MCST).

University of Maryland

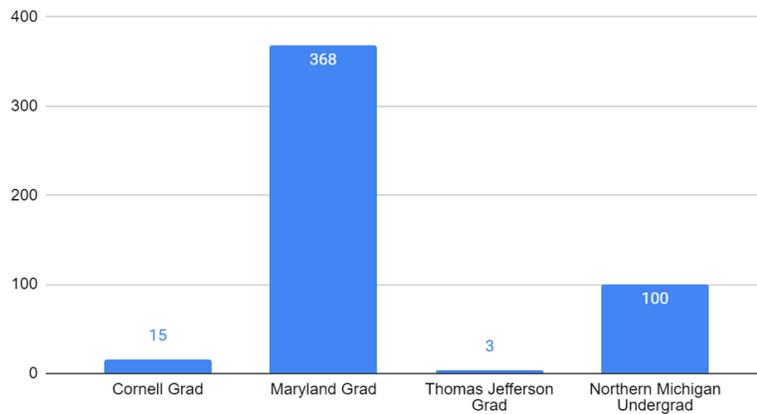
The University of Maryland established its graduate degree program in MCST in 2019, making it the first graduate school to establish a medical cannabis master’s degree program.⁷ As the first major institution wading into the world of cannabis in graduate education, the array of information and availability of point contact information on the site is one of the things that immediately sets Maryland’s program apart from its peers. This is illustrated by the information provided to CFCR by the university’s program director, Leah Sera – since its inception in 2019, the program has seen over 360 graduates, employs 15 professors, and has over 200 students currently in the program. These numbers dwarf those provided to us by other graduate degree programs, with the closest being Cornell University’s 15 graduates in the same time frame of operation as Maryland.⁸ Northern Michigan is the leader in undergraduate degree program graduates with 100 – which is especially impressive for the MCST program, considering that NMU’s program was established two years prior to Maryland’s.

⁶ Jana Hrdinova, Ashton Marr & Cameron Wade, *Teaching Drugs: Incorporating Drug Policy into Law School Curriculum, 2021–2022 Cannabis Curriculum Survey Update*, The Ohio State University’s Drug Enforcement & Policy Center (Mar. 2022), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4049962.

⁷ Martin Austermuhle, *You Can Get a Master’s In Medical Cannabis in Maryland*, NPR (Nov. 9, 2019), <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/11/09/777695183/you-can-get-a-masters-in-medical-cannabis-in-maryland#:~:text=via%20Getty%20Images-,Maryland%20now%20offers%20the%20country's%20first%20master's%20degree%20in%20the,we%20dispensary%20in%20Denver%2C%20Colo.>

⁸ *Author’s Note*: Of the 9 graduate degree programs we identified, only 4 responded to our request for information. These assertions are based on those 4 responses, as this data is not publicly available for all existing programs.

Number of Program Graduates Disclosed



Students fare well in the program with an average GPA of 3.5 (per Sera’s survey response), illustrating a consistent level of student success. Additionally, the program has a high rate of graduates entering the cannabis industry in some fashion. According to Sera, common job placements include “[P]olicy and advocacy, analytical and research laboratories, quality control and quality assurance positions, dispensaries, growers and cultivators, continuing education (e.g., Ph.D. programs), etc. Many in our program already have primary occupations within the cannabis field (growers and cultivators, dispensary workers, public policy and advocacy, entrepreneurs, etc.), and they are seeking more in-depth training regarding cannabis. Additionally, we have many medical professionals (doctors, nurses, pharmacists, therapists, etc) seeking to gain knowledge in the area of medical cannabis so that they can better educate their patients. Finally, we have some that come in seeking a new career path. We’d estimate around 1/2 to 2/3 of the students go into a career related to [the] cannabis industry.” These factors and points of data all support the idea that Maryland’s MCST Program is poised to set the standard within cannabis education (at the minimum, in Pharmacy) for years to come.

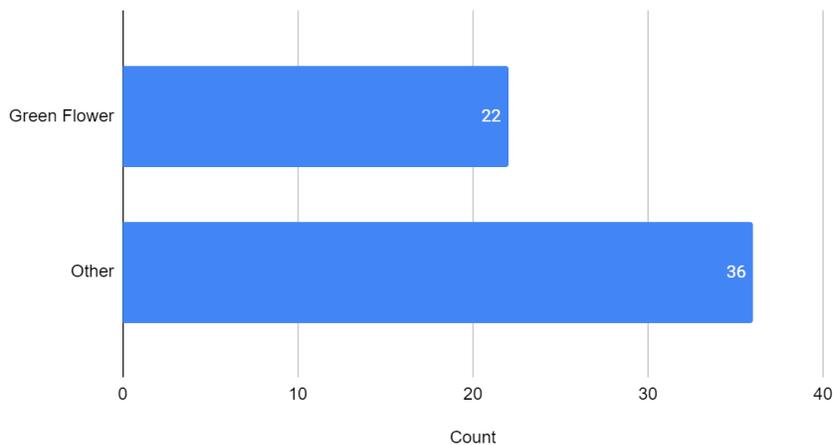


Green Flower

Interestingly, a second major player in the cannabis educational space isn't an educational institution at all. As we progressed through our research, we kept finding schools with extremely similar websites for cannabis certificate programs – offering the same courses, with the same web layout, similar contact emails, and more. As this kept occurring, we decided to look into the company that seemed to be putting on these courses for various universities.

Green Flower is an independent provider of cannabis industry training in various forms. The business serves as a potential partner for higher education institutions looking to foray into cannabis educational programming. As they enter their ninth year in the cannabis education space, Green Flower has been around longer than many of its competitors. According to Max Simon, CEO, the company has partnered with 32 academic institutions in higher education and has more partnerships coming soon.

Schools with Undergraduate Certification Processes



In addition to partnering with higher education institutions to help facilitate access to high-quality cannabis educational services, Green Flower also provides industry training services to businesses. These services include compliance programs, professional certificates, and ganjier certification – providing a range of training and certification to those already within the industry. The Ganjier program is particularly interesting, as it focuses on training cannabis professionals in a manner similar to wine sommeliers. This illustrates Green Flower's range of expertise, as well as their direct involvement with the industry through providing credentials to operating businesses. This parlays perfectly into preparing industry entrants through offerings of those same credentials in higher education.

The company is not only currently providing an important service to many institutions, but is also poised to become one of the most important parts of the future of cannabis in higher education. Green Flower's approach is very hands-on – once a university agrees to partner with them, Green Flower controls the majority of the program design and content aside from final approvals by universities it partners with.

From marketing to creating the course framework, to the infrastructure design of enrollment platforms and beyond – Green Flower has extensive experience in designing uniform certificate courses for areas such as policy, business, agriculture, and more. Additionally, their industry expertise stemming from years of activity in the space has allowed them to build internally defined standards of self-accreditation for their programs, with additional input from over 700 subject matter experts. This internal expertise allows Green Flower the benefits of uniformity across its courses at different institutions, supported by an expert-consensus-based approach and years of experience in the cannabis industry.

Cleveland School of Cannabis

Finally, there is one cannabis-centric career institution that stands out as unique amongst a field full of universities, community colleges, and fly-by-night certificate programs – the Cleveland School of Cannabis (CSC). Per its website, CSC is the only state-approved career school for cannabis education east of Colorado.⁹ What stands out about CSC is not its establishment as a cannabis career center that provides certifications and training for those interested in working with cannabis – but rather, its focus on accreditation.

While there are a growing number of cannabis career schools similar to CSC, one of the biggest issues in the space is that none of these career schools are nationally accredited (to CFCR’s knowledge). Certificates from schools such as Oaksterdam University in California still hold considerable weight within the cannabis industry, but graduating students are unable to attain a real degree due to lack of accreditation. CSC is moving to be a pioneer in this way – in addition to being the sole state-approved cannabis career school in the eastern United States, CSC is currently a candidate for national accreditation with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. This would be a notable step for cannabis career schools everywhere and could begin a landslide of attempts to uniformize cannabis career training at similar schools. CSC’s pioneering efforts could lead to a more regulated and higher quality field of choices for cannabis career training for those who wish to enter the industry, but do not wish to pursue higher education.

⁹ <https://csceducation.com/about>.

Conclusion

Most Prevalent Issues

Disparity of Information

One issue that we identified during research is the difficulty of finding substantive information on the specifics of the courses and program offerings. While this issue may not be directly relevant to the quality of cannabis programming in higher education, we decided it was important to note as both a barrier to parts of our research and a potential issue for those interested in obtaining a cannabis education.

Firstly, there is no central database that allows for comparison of programs on any level – from degrees down to single courses. Prospective students are, in theory, tasked with hunting down information about which institutions offer courses or programs – as well as finding the information about each course they identify. While there are a small handful of articles that detail the specifics of a few of the bigger programs, there is an absolute lack of centralized data on the wide range of programming that is available.

Beyond the difficulties of a prospective student looking to decide between programs, the range of information that existing programs offer varies extremely. Program websites for degree programs are well designed and contain the most information, but even within this delineation, there is considerable variance as to the quality of information offered. By way of example – top tier programs such as Maryland Pharma have websites offering a significant amount of information about all aspects of the program and it is easy to find within their Pharmacy page. When compared to the degree program at the Community College of Denver, it is immediately apparent that there is a dropoff in readily available information. Additionally, it is fairly common for these pages to have a “contact us” form rather than an email for correspondence – which seems to be a far less personable way to collect information, as it eliminates the ability of students to follow up on messages and (in our personal experience) often leads to less efficient responses from schools.

While there is some disparity among degree program websites, the true gap in quality begins to show itself as one ventures into the worlds of certificates and isolated courses. Isolated courses are often buried in course catalogs, and it was common to find less than three sentences as to the focus of the course. For prospective students looking to find institutions with cannabis courses (perhaps, for the purpose of testing out their interest in the industry), it does not seem effective to have courses deep within catalogs and lacking any other mention on sites. Not all institutions are guilty of this, but it became an easily identifiable trend as we continued with our research.

Relative to certificate programs, academic institutions are fairly uniform in providing a decent amount of information. Although there is still disparity here, the true issue arises when cannabis career services marketed as educational services are brought into the equation. Some of these certification programs seem to be fly-by-night, with little information on staff, courses, or how they go about setting their standards and curriculum. We didn’t venture too far down this rabbit hole, but the best illustration of this issue is to simply provide an example: <https://thegrowschool.org/> has a bit of information on the courses offered, a litany of student reviews, and other miscellaneous information. However, it does not define how it sets its

standards or even provide any information on professors. While some are better than others, this seems to be a consistent issue with many non-institutional certification services.

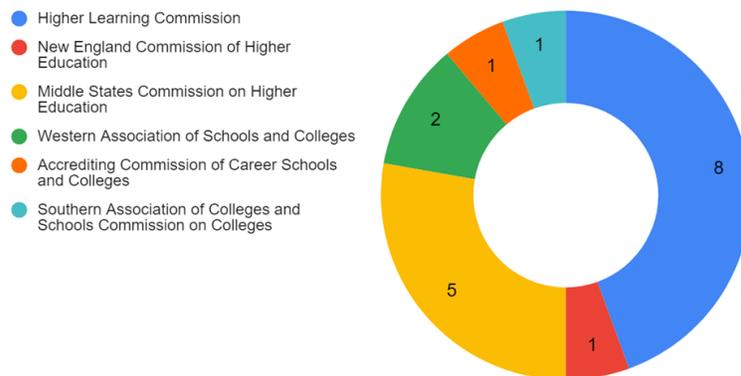
Uniformity and Consistency

The biggest issue we were able to identify through this research was a lack of uniformity and consistency among programs and institutions, relative to both course content and accreditation services.

While accredited higher education institutions that offer degree programs are significantly uniform in their level of quality than their course and certificate offering counterparts, that uniformity still lacks in areas of accreditation and approval of cannabis-specific programs. All degree offering institutions in CFRCR’s database are accredited by traditional bodies of higher education examination, but two issues stand out – one more so than the other.

To begin, different bodies accredit these institutions. We felt it would be relevant to start from the top down for this issue — as even the overall accreditation for schools as academic institutions comes from different sources. While garnering regional accreditation based on institution location is common across higher education, it illustrates two things. First, that it is possible to provide quality accreditation services without a single central body – showing that a uniform accreditation-esque service for cannabis doesn’t have to be shouldered by one body alone, and can be segmented by area of academic discipline. Secondly, and more importantly, these organizations lack direct criteria and the ability to adequately examine specific programs within universities (such as cannabis programs). For example – Middle States doesn’t accredit a Pharmacy graduate school or undergraduate program (directly, at least)¹⁰, as they do not have specific criteria for separate disciplines of academia. This role is filled by the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education, a specialized body focused on standard setting for Pharmacy education. This is the first area in which the cannabis higher education space lacks uniformity – there is no discipline-specific accrediting body for programs hosted by institutions.

Regional Accrediting Agencies of Universities that Offer Degree Programs

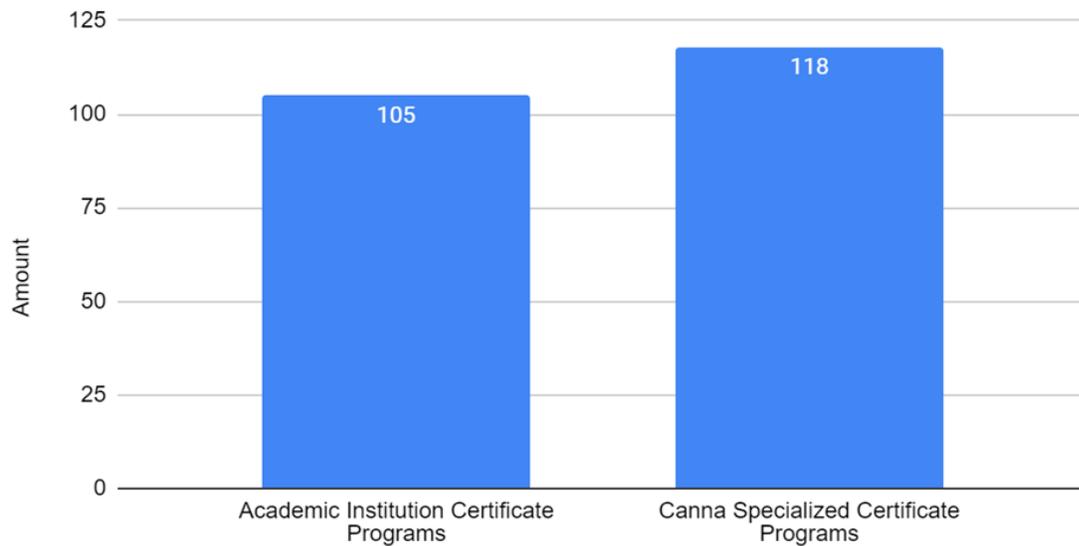


¹⁰ While a Middle States accreditation is indeed relevant to the establishment of such programs, they focus on the broader picture of the institution as a whole. *See* <https://www.educationcorner.com/middle-states-association.html#:~:text=The%20Middle%20States%20Commission%20on,specific%20programs%20within%20an%20institution.>

This can also be illustrated by survey responses CFCR received. Our survey contained a question asking if a program had been certified by any cannabis educational authority. Oftentimes, this was met with an “n/a” response – but sometimes, institutions referred to the fact that their school board had approved it. As is obvious, this is far from the expertise that would be necessary to truly provide a uniform system of quality within the cannabis higher education space.

This issue persists as one goes further down the ladder of cannabis education services that are available. There is no body that ensures a cannabis law and policy course at one school is equal in quality and content to the same course at another school. The same is true for certificate programs – and the disparity intensifies as ancillary non-accredited cannabis educational services are brought into the mix. Not only do many of these certificate programs lack uniform peer review similar to the aforementioned sectors, but many don’t have readily available information as to how they set their standards of quality and pick foci of curriculum. It is apparent from the graph below that there are a litany of non-institutional certificate programs – and if academic institutions struggle to bring uniformity to the table, how is one to be confident that a cannabis business certificate from an unaccredited cannabis specialized service adequately prepares an industry entrant when compared to the same course offered by Green Flower through a university?

Amount of Certificates Offered by Academic Institutions vs. Cannabis Specialized Universities



The only semblance of uniformity in this area comes from the aforementioned Green Flower – their system of standard setting, uniform courses, and peer-reviewed quality of education for their certificate programs provides a unique consistency across schools that it has partnered with for certificate programs.

It is important to be clear here – by no means are we asserting that there is an across-the-board need for higher quality programming at the accredited institutional level. These schools are experienced in completing the due diligence necessary to create separate programs for professional disciplines, and we

are confident that cannabis was treated with the same (if not more) scrutiny. What we do intend to assert are two ideas: firstly, that the quality of cannabis education is policed less and less as one descends the ladder from the highest tier of degree programs and academic institutions offering coursework. Secondly, we aim to identify a need for an overarching body with a system of experts, extensive experience, and a library of information that can provide that policing from degree programs down to cannabis career prep services. While we recognize that the quality is present in many existing programs, the key to our assertion is seeing the need for consistency of that quality throughout all levels of cannabis higher education.

Moving Forward

Potential for More Expansion into Law Schools

While not directly relevant to the need for consistency and uniformity, the trend in the data of law schools dominating isolated coursework at the graduate level caught our attention – and could be built upon to begin cultivating a new generation of legal experts for the cannabis industry.

The amount of courses in law schools illustrates both a high level of interest in the cannabis industry among law students and a fair number of professors with sound expertise to serve as instructors. Though it would seem common for graduate disciplines to offer one-off courses in this area, law schools’ dominance of other professional schools relative to cannabis courses is readily apparent. Speaking as a law student who took a cannabis course in law school and subsequently found a taste for learning about the industry, these courses serve as an effective introduction into the field for young attorneys.

However, the paths beyond those single courses are sparse. Most law schools only offer one or two courses, and many don’t have a high number of students or faculty who enter the industry that can provide advice to students who complete such courses. However, we see a potential avenue for the field of law and the cannabis industry to work together to foster a more informed and specialized generation of lawyers who will be prepared for this unique industry.

Some law schools provide course tracks within their curriculum in specialized areas such as legal negotiation and international law, providing students with groups of courses that will best prepare them for a certain niche of legal work. Although a student completing such a course track earns no special form of Juris Doctorate, they are significantly more prepared to succeed within their chosen area of expertise. This is what we envision could help to create a more informed and prepared crop of attorneys who specialize in an interesting, new, and growing industry. Offering just a few more courses with a wider array of topics within cannabis and grouping them together as a recommended course track for law students with an interest in the industry would allow a litany of young and interested professionals to become experts at the cutting edge of cannabis.

As with any great idea, there are barriers to this becoming reality – but they are not insurmountable. Easy things to point to are a lack of law professors with knowledge or interest in the subject and a lack of standard curriculum for many of the courses that would have to be created. It would take a uniquely situated institution to be able to spearhead this initiative, but there are existing law schools that aren’t far

from the mark. For example, the Ohio State’s Moritz College of Law’s cannabis courses are supported by an ancillary organization within the school: The Drug Enforcement and Policy Center. The DEPC and its expertise could potentially provide the necessary support and manpower to start moving towards making this idea a reality – but there is still much work to be done relative to uniformity and consistency of content that must first be addressed.

Uniformity and Consistency Solutions

At this point we likely sound similar to a broken record – the consistency of quality among courses and uniformity within the discipline of cannabis in higher education is easily the most prevalent issue we have identified. While all levels of the field are in need of a solution to this problem, we believe that the current market for certification programs provides a small-scale example of a solution that can be worked toward.

The emergence of certification programs and certificate awards at various levels of the cannabis educational sphere has led to many universities offering similar programs to prepare cannabis industry entrants in various fashions. Green Flower provides a model for what this area of higher education could become – a standardized, peer-reviewed system of accreditation created by experienced industry experts and academics that allows for quality consistency and control. Using their network of experts and library of information that have been in the works for nearly a decade, Green Flower’s system of uniformity and consistency among its courses is a model that the entire industry should be rushing to get behind.

Although they partner with institutions to offer the programming, Green Flower does just about everything behind the scenes – from marketing to curriculum setting, to exam design, and beyond. The expert-consensus-based scientific approach that they have employed has led to a high level of quality in programming at schools that they partner with – and more importantly, a consistent level of quality. Students in a Green Flower program know what they are getting, and they know that it will prepare them as best as possible for work in their niche of choice within the cannabis industry. Additionally, Green Flower’s swiftly growing number of partnerships illustrates that this level of quality and consistency is beneficial for all parties, including the institutions that they partner with. Universities are concerned with both the quality of their academia and profits – and Green Flower’s growing number of partnerships illustrates that these institutions see them as a beneficial service in a discipline that strongly lacks what Green Flower provides. If an accrediting body makes it easy for institutions to adopt these programs as Green Flower has, institutions are more likely to provide more and more of these courses to their students.

While Green Flower’s focus at the moment is only on certification processes to “credentialize the cannabis industry”, their system serves as a model for what all proponents of cannabis in higher education should be striving to perfect: an accrediting body for cannabis educational programs in higher education. A uniform accreditation service could increase accessibility through practices such as setting price ceilings for different levels of education, policing fly-by-night certification schemes that purport to be academia, and providing a higher level of consistent quality within the field. Additionally, this could be secularized into different areas of industry expertise – similarly to how different accrediting institutions serve colleges today, a cannabis education accrediting body could develop subcommittees of expertise in areas such as cannabis in pharmacy, cannabis business, and so on.

Psychopharmacology: A Potential Future Trend

As academia and research around cannabis continues to trend upwards, it has opened the door for other areas of study focused on traditionally illicit drugs and their effects on mental health. Within this vein of new research, an existing discipline has garnered fresh interest and support: that of psychopharmacology.

Psychopharmacology is the scientific study of the effects of drugs on the mind and behavior.¹¹ A common area of focus within the field is studying medications that are used to treat mental health conditions, as well as exploring new ways that existing drugs can be employed to help those with such conditions.¹² As cannabis has begun to remove the stigma that has existed for over half a century in the United States surrounding itself and other psychoactive drugs, substances like psilocybin (found in “magic mushrooms”) and MDMA (“molly” or “ecstasy”) are being viewed with fresh eyes by researchers and examined for potential benefits they could provide to those with mental health disorders or issues.¹³

Higher education institutions across the country are also directing energy towards initiatives focused in psychopharmacology (including MS programs in clinical psychopharmacology at Drake University, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Idaho State University, and more).¹⁴ Additionally, the University of Wisconsin introduced a new MS program in the fall of 2021 centered on psychoactive pharmaceutical investigation. UW’s new program seeks to develop future leaders in the field of therapeutic development and deployment of psychedelics, entheogens, cannabinoids and other psychoactive substances.¹⁵

Although some of these programs existed before cannabis legalization began to take the country by storm, and research focused on illicit psychoactive substances has been slowly growing since the 1990s, the study of illicit psychoactive drugs has garnered renewed social support in recent times. As the medical benefits of cannabis continue to be identified through research, we believe it will further stoke the fire behind new research concerning the psychopharmacology of traditionally illicit drugs and alternative therapies – an important and intriguing new industry that is worth keeping an eye on.

¹¹ Ian Morris, *Psychopharmacology seeks to close gaps for Americans in need*, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology (Feb. 2022),

<https://www.thechicagoschool.edu/insight/psychology/psychopharmacology-seeks-to-close-gaps-for-americans-in-need/>.

¹² *Psychopharmacology (Medication Management)*, ColumbiaDoctors,

<https://www.columbiadoctors.org/treatments-conditions/psychopharmacology-medication-management>.

¹³ See Harriet de Wit & Deepak Cyril D’Souza, *Psychedelics: Old trips, new destinations in psychopharmacology research*, *Psychopharmacology* 239, 1643–1645 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-022-06152-2>.

¹⁴ See Morris, *supra* note 11.

¹⁵ See *PHARMACEUTICAL SCIENCES: PSYCHOACTIVE PHARMACEUTICAL INVESTIGATION M.S.*, University of Wisconsin,

<https://guide.wisc.edu/graduate/pharmacy-school-wide/pharmaceutical-sciences-ms/pharmaceutical-sciences-psychoactive-pharmaceutical-investigation-ms/>.

Takeaways

As this new industry continues to develop, one of the most important frontiers to conquer is that of higher education. Developing an informed and prepared generation of academics and industry professionals that are well equipped to serve the needs of the industry and build upon its shortcomings is the only true way to ensure that the cannabis industry will continue to flourish and improve in the coming years. This is especially important given the long and misinformed history of cannabis in the United States. While we applaud the pioneering efforts of the generation that came before us, we also recognize that the impending legalization of cannabis presents a ripe opportunity to educate the next generation the right way – through consistent and uniform science-based, consensus-based higher education programs.
