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Undergraduate

**Environment and Health:
A Literature Review on College Student's Risk Behavior**

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Introduction

A college student's health dynamic consists of their environment, behavioral choices, and their mental stability. Their environment influences many of the risk behaviors they choose to take part in. The World Health Organization defines *risk behaviors* or *risk factors* as any attribute, characteristic or exposure of life style activities that put an individual at an increased likelihood of developing particular conditions, illness, or injury to themselves or others (2016). Risk behaviors like drug and alcohol consumption, sexual practices, and eating habits have been recognized by researchers to have a negative impact in college students' future health. Mental health is also an important aspect in college students' health dynamic as it can determine external choices like drugs use or vice versa. *Mental health* is a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community (World Health Organization, 2016). These are all aspects that are interrelated in how college students develop their health.

College student's knowledge on health and lifestyle choices is determined by their understanding of sexual, mental, and physical practices. Current research has yet to find a solution to unhealthy patterns in college students' life style. Many experts have tried using universities as a source to diminish these unhealthy patterns. According to Brener and Gowda (2001), at least half of the nation's college students received information regarding AIDS/HIV and STDs in a college class. College students are most likely to receive information from sources they believe are credible like the health center medical staff, health educators, faculty or coursework, and parents (Vader et al., 2011). Another study by Yorgason, Linville, and Zitzman (2008) examined the

connections between the mental health of university students and their knowledge and use of campus mental health services. The study found that students who had experienced mental distress either did not know about the psychological services offered at their institution or knew about them but decided not to use them. This research indicates that not all college students will use services their institutions offer even though they may need it. For example, students can get free condoms from the health office but that does not mean that students will practice safe sex. The health information given to them by their institutions can affect their choices in risk-behaviors connected to their wellbeing. The environment college students risk behaviors are associated with affect their health dynamic.

This article will discuss how a college student's environment contributes to their risk behaviors in health. The first section of this article assesses the effects environmental risk factors on choices in their health dynamics. The next section addresses sexual practices, obesity, and alcohol and drug consumption within college students. The final section examines the stigma surrounding mental health among college students.

Environmental Risk Factors

The risk factors in their environment influence college students choices. Two studies conducted on health literacy showed that a student's health choices depended on their living status. Students who lived apart from their parents were more likely to receive health information by health professionals, supporting previous research on how they are highly trusted sources of information (Brener & Gowda, 2001; Vader et al., 2011). Another study by Mathur, Stigler, Lust, and Laska's (2014) saw a correlation between 4-year college students having better eating

habits because they had parents who were at least college graduates. Their social environment influences the choices and factors surrounding an individual's health.

Many college students work to finance their education. This rise of employed college students has contributed to increasing mental and physical distress. A study that examined work school conflict saw that it was a significant predictor of poor psychological health, but rarely physical health, in full time college student workers (Park & Sprung, 2013). The findings suggested the benefits of work school facilitation, supervisor work-school support, and personal fulfillment in reducing the effects of work school conflict and its impact on their health. Another study suggested that employment during the academic year had a significant role in college student's drinking (Butler, Dodge, Faurote, 2010). Significant stress levels were reported in the study and students resorted to alcohol consumption as a coping method. This shows that their choice of 'stress relievers' is selected given what is easily available in their environment. College students that consumed drugs were in a drug environment (Mohler-Kuo, Lee, Wechsler, 2003). Findings are consistent and show how early-age smokers were more likely to use other drugs, drink alcohol, have school problems, experience depressive disorders, and engage in lifetime drug use. These studies show the risk behaviors in an individual's environment and their contribution to lifelong health issues. A college students' environment influences the choices they make regarding their health. Environmental health dynamics is the vital key to figuring out how these patterns in risk behaviors emerge.

Risk Behaviors

As defined above, risk behaviors are lifestyle actions that can affect an individual's health. The risk behaviors discussed in this section are sexual practices, obesity, and alcohol and drug

consumption. Research has indicated these risky health behaviors have become increasingly problematic among college students.

Sexual health is an important focus among college students as many of them are beginning to explore their sexuality. According to the U.S. Department of Human Health and Services, individuals' between the age of 15-24 years old account for about 10 million new cases of sexually transmitted diseases and infections every year (2016). These alarming statistics have become a concern for many researchers trying to find a pattern in the risk behaviors college students choose in their sexual practices. Research by Trieu and Marshak (2011) explored the sexual and reproductive health behaviors of college students in California. There was a high rate of risky sexual behaviors, such as lack of condom use during sexual intercourse. There were also high rates of unintended pregnancies and use of emergency contraception. There were also low rates of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) testing and sexually transmitted diseases. A correlation between those who had reported more sexual partners, being tested for HIV, and lower rates of condom usage was found. This opens questions regarding the information students receive and whether they understand the risk behind their actions. Even though many of these colleges had access to educational programs, family planning services, condoms and HIV testing, many of the students still chose to risk their sexual health (Trieu & Marshak, 2011). Another concern is the growing numbers of obesity in America indicate that new generations learned a pattern through their environment.

Researchers are examining this growing rate of obesity among college students. Mathur et al. (2014) study identified and described health behaviors associated with weight status among 2- and 4- year college students. The study found a connection in obesity risk within older female students showing an increase in weight with age. They concluded that in order to understand and

refine weight-related health behaviors they needed to develop a successful intervention program for college students to discuss the risk and strategies needed to lead a healthy eating life style (Mathur et al., 2014). Besides eating habits, there are other factors in their environment that contribute to a college student's health.

Recent research has shown an increase of alcohol and drug consumption among college students. Beck et al. (2010) showed the prevalence and frequency of alcohol consumption increased significantly at the age of 21. It also showed that males were more likely to engage in these behaviors as well as increase drinking frequency every year unlike females who maintained a same level of drinking habits. About 25% of college students have driven while intoxicated or ride with someone who's intoxicated. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), found that alcohol abuse, including binge drinking, has a negative affect on student's academic and social environment. They also found patterns in alcohol consumption as it significantly dropped by 29% during the summer but increased by 31% in the fall when school started. They also saw increases in the spring by 18% when festivals were taking place. The NIAAA states that every year about 1,825 college students die from alcohol-related injuries, about 690,00 students are assaulted by another student who had been drinking, and more than 97,000 students become victims of alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape. Considering these facts, they also saw that about 150,000 students report having developed alcohol-related health problems during their time in college. With all this in mind, researchers seek to diminish the risk behaviors associated with uncontrolled alcohol consumption as well as reduce consumption. Butler et al. (2010) also found a correlation between higher alcohol intake related to the student's environment of being employed and having to go to school. Research has established that college students have the highest percentage in binge drinking than any other adults. This lack

of restraint when consuming alcohol and risk behaviors behind this decision is one of many central issues in public health.

Drug consumption has also increased as shown in Mohler-Kuo's (2003) study that examined college students' illicit drug use pattern. There was a significant increase in marijuana use in college students from 1993 to 2001, about 98% of marijuana and other illicit drug users also smoked, binge drank, and/or used another illicit drug. These findings show the dramatic increase of drug use in college. These patterns in drug and alcohol consumption increase the likelihood of developing long-term drug and alcohol abuse.

Mental Health

Mental health is an imperative part of any college students' health dynamic. The high prevalence rate in mental disorders is concerning researchers seeking to reduce it. This section will discuss the increasing prevalence rate of mental illness among college students and factors such as awareness and de-stigmatization.

An individual's mental health can affect their physical and emotional wellbeing. However, the stigma surrounding mental illness may stop many individuals from receiving the help they need. Phelan and Basow's (2007) showed the impact of labeling and stereotyping mental illness has on college students' desire for social distance between them and those afflicted. The results showed that participants labeling a character mentally ill were more likely to view them as dangerous. A decrease in social distance was associated with empathy and labeling. These findings suggest that stigma surrounding mental illness is still prevalent in society, which causes people not to seek help when suffering from them. Recent research has demonstrated a rise in depression and anxiety among college students. Kim (2015) depicts the social stigma surrounding mental

illness. The study showed a varied presence for depression symptoms among students and high rates of recognition and help seeking; recognition for anxiety was low compared to depression across all the participants regardless of psychological symptoms. Understanding mental illness may lead to de-stigmatization and better psychological health.

Environment such as work school conflict, work-school facilitation, and supervisor work school support all had a negative correlation to psychological health (Park, 2013). Yorgason et al. (2008) found a correlation in students who lived off campus, were male, and had less years in college related to having less knowledge of mental health services; a correlation in female and more years in college predicted more service use. Research has indicated a national increase of mental illness among college students.

Baloğlu and Masten (2007) explored how college students from different countries experienced anxiety. They measured every interaction that occurred within anxiety with the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. They believed that each country would experience different levels of anxiety. However, their results demonstrated significant differences in anxiety by gender and indicated a negative correlation with age and anxiety levels, as they found that the younger participants had lower anxiety levels (Baloğlu & Masten, 2007). This study shows that mental illness is universal and the only difference is how we experience and deal with them.

Conclusion

The risk behavior patterns that are related to a college student's environment affect the choices regarding their health. These patterns have shown researchers the issues found within their health dynamics. Although universities can be a resource to many students regarding their health choices, they cannot be held accountable of the risk behaviors they decide to take. Researchers

should analyze these patterns and create intervention programs to help these students develop better life style choices. Finding accommodating new ways to stipulate health information for newer generations of college students may decrease the poor health choices influenced by their environmental risk factors in years to come.

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