Assessing Problem Marijuana Use in College Students
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I began working with college students who had substance abuse problems over a decade ago and often wished for an assessment instrument that specifically addressed marijuana problems. Every year I have a number of students come through my office who are marijuana smokers only. I asked colleagues at other schools what they used for assessment of students for marijuana use and no one had a good answer.

All the assessment tools my colleagues were using included other drugs or alcohol as well, and these tools just seemed too long to suit my needs. Students have so little time and do not want to sit for long assessments. I wanted to find a tool that made the best use of the time I had with each student and would lead me to a correct assessment as well.

When it was time to select a topic for my doctoral dissertation at Nova Southeastern University I thought this could be an opportunity to solve this problem that had frustrated me for so long. The doctoral program I was in (Organizational Leadership through the School of Education) permitted dissertation topics be something very scholarly or practical that would make a contribution to your field.

It was very exciting when my dissertation topic “An Investigation of Marijuana Assessment Instruments for Use with College Students” was approved! The dissertation is now complete and I can say with authority that yes, there are several assessment tools available that are specific to marijuana use and work well to assess if college students have a problem that needs treatment.

Continuing Need for Assessment of Marijuana Use

Marijuana use by college students continues to be a significant problem in the United States. In a recent study, 49% of college students reported lifetime use of marijuana and 17% reported use in the past month (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2006). Similarly, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH, 2006) found 32% of full-time college students and 32.1% of part time college
students reported using marijuana during the last year for the years 2002-2004.

The numbers of students who drink at high risk levels in a given month are more than double the number smoking marijuana in a given month; however the numbers of marijuana users along with newer research that suggests use of marijuana may have more significant long term effects than have been previously thought indicate a continued need to have reliable assessment instruments readily available.

**Availability of Marijuana Specific Screening Assessments**

There are marijuana specific screening instruments in existence that are suitable for use with college students. Even more useful to campuses may be the knowledge that, as of this writing, all other instruments are available at no charge (with one exception). The instruments are easy to administer and score and do not require extensive training to use with students.

My study examined 11 assessment tools already existing and found 5 of them that would work well with college students. The findings were based on a systematic review of each instrument and a survey that was sent to 42 research experts who had published studies related to assessment of college student addictive behaviors and/or assessment of marijuana use. The systematic review gave each instrument a numerical score that came from issues of clinical utility such as length of the assessment, how easy it is to score and interpret the results, and cost for use.

The research experts strongly endorsed certain factors important in an assessment instrument for college students. The most important factors named by over half of the experts were sound psychometric properties, reliability, and validity, followed by sound psychometric properties as seen in a college student population.

Other elements of an assessment tool strongly endorsed by the experts were whether the instrument contained measures of quantity and frequency of use, and whether the optimum time frame (period of use) measured in college students was within the past 90 days. Many respondents also rated assessment of consequences of use and diagnostic criteria for dependence and abuse (based on DSM-IV) as important.
Five instruments were found to be good choices for use with a college population. Those instruments are the Cannabis Use Problems Identification Test (CUPIT); Cannabis Abuse Screening Test (CAST); Electronic THC Online Knowledge Experience (e-TOKE); Severity of Dependence Scale: Cannabis (SDS); and Adolescent Cannabis Problems Questionnaire (CPQ-A).

The e-TOKE is the only assessment that has a fee for use, but it is more than an assessment; it also includes brief treatment. It is available commercially. The other assessments can be located in professional journal articles or obtained directly from the authors.

If you are interested in additional information about specific instruments described in this article, please contact the author for additional information on obtaining these assessment instruments. She can be reached at Betsy_Foy@wustl.edu.