Dispelling the myth of “smart drugs”:
Cannabis and alcohol use problems predict nonmedical use of prescription stimulants for studying

MAJOR FINDINGS:

This study challenges the popular perception that nonmedical prescription stimulant use occurs primarily among students who are high achievers. Students sometimes use these drugs nonmedically because they believe it will boost their studying efforts and therefore lead to better grades. In contrast to this popular notion, researchers hypothesized that nonmedical use of prescription stimulants (NPS) for study purposes is associated with academic difficulties resulting from other drug use and drinking problems. To test this hypothesis, researchers followed 984 college students over the course of four years and examined whether substance use problems predicted NPS for studying both directly and indirectly via increases in skipping classes and decreases in grade point average (GPA).

Results confirmed these relationships between substance use problems and NPS for studying. Students with more cannabis problems during their first year of college—and those whose cannabis problems increased more rapidly over time—were more likely to engage in NPS for studying at some point during college. Results also showed that increasing cannabis use problems predicted increases in skipping class (or, decreases in class attendance), which in turn predicted lower GPAs over time. Furthermore, this chain of events was linked to NPS for studying. Alcohol problems similarly predicted NPS for studying, both directly and through skipping more classes and declining GPA. The figure below summarizes the relationships between alcohol and cannabis use problems, academic problems, and NPS for studying.

Because the study only investigated NPS for studying cumulatively at any point in time during college, causal inferences cannot be made between substance use, academic delinquency, and NPS for studying. However, this is the first study to show the relationships between substance use, skipping classes, and subsequent changes in the GPA.

Of major interest to:
- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers

The Center on Young Adult Health and Development
University of Maryland School of Public Health
www.cyahd.umd.edu

Note. Cannabis and alcohol problems were measured and analyzed separately.
**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** College administrators are urged to consider how student involvement in drugs and alcohol might affect overall academic achievement. Given that college students who experience academic difficulty are more likely to engage in NPS and use other drugs, academic advising programs might be a good place for screening for substance use problems. For example, an abrupt decrease in GPA could signal the need for a student to be assessed for substance use problems. If a problem is identified, the student could then be given a brief intervention or referred for a more comprehensive evaluation and treatment. Based on results from this study, efforts to reduce substance use might also result in improved academic performance. Additionally, students with declining grades who are caught using prescriptions stimulants nonmedically might benefit from a comprehensive evaluation of reasons underlying their academic difficulties, including possible problems with alcohol and drug use.

Parents of college students should not condone or facilitate NPS for studying. Rather, parents should regard it as a red flag for possible underlying problems with alcohol and other drugs. If they identify or suspect their child is using prescription stimulants in this way, parents should seek out a comprehensive evaluation of substance use and mental health problems.

Students should be reminded that there are few shortcuts to success. Prescription stimulants are not a “quick fix” for poor academic performance. Good grades are usually the result of working hard, having good study habits, getting enough sleep, and attending class regularly. Substance use is likely to interfere with both short-term academic goals and long-term career success.