

Colleges find sleep is key to grade average

September 4 2012, by Justin Pope

As U.S. college students return to campus in the coming weeks, they'll be showered in the usual handouts of coupons, condoms and credit cards. But some schools are also giving students what a growing body of research reveals could make a huge difference in their college careers: ear plugs, sleep shades and napping lessons.

College health officials are finally realizing that healthy sleep habits are a potential miracle drug for much of what ails the famously frazzled modern American college student: anxiety, depression, physical health problems and—more than most students realize—academic troubles. Some studies have found students getting [adequate sleep](#) average a full letter grade higher than those who don't.

But adolescent biorhythms make it hard enough for college students to get the sleep they need, a recommended nine hours. On top of that, campus life turns out to resemble a giant laboratory experiment designed for maximum [sleep deprivation](#): irregular schedules, newfound freedom, endless [social interaction](#), loud and crowded housing, late-night exercise and food washed down by alcohol, coffee and [energy drinks](#). Campuses pulsing with energy at midnight by mid-afternoon resemble Zombie U., with students dozing off in library chairs, on yoga mats and even in [coffee shops](#).

Technology isn't helping, with wireless Internet adding to the 24/7 distractions and students sleeping with their smart phones on. That likely helps explain data showing college students got about eight hours of sleep in the 1960s and '70s, seven by the '80s, and, according to more

recent surveys, closer to six these days.

Campaigning last week, even President [Barack Obama](#) told some students at an Ohio State University diner that he assumed "you guys have arranged it so you don't have really early morning classes." No such luck. "Actually, I failed that," one student replied, telling the president he had one at 8 a.m. the next day.

Now, some counselors and health officials are trying to get the message out in creative ways. At tiny Hastings College in Nebraska, student peer educators plop down a bed in the middle of the student union, dress themselves in pajamas, and talk to passers-by about sleep. Macalester College in Minnesota publishes a "nap map" listing the pros and cons of various campus snooze sites. And many schools are offering seminars on napping (basic lesson: short naps work better).

The University of Louisville is even planning a campus-wide "flash nap"—think of a flash mob but with sleeping, not dancing—later in the school year ("We have to arrange in it advance so our public safety folks know it's not an epidemic of something," said director of health promotion Karen Newton).

Still, given the scope of sleeping problems, what's surprising is that such efforts are exceptional. Major, campus-wide campaigns appear rare or non-existent. Experts say professors (and doctors) aren't always good sleep role models. As for deans and administrators, many seem hesitant to tell parents who've just dropped \$50,000 on tuition that the big push on campus this year will be for everyone to sleep more.

While awareness is growing, at most schools sleep efforts amount to a few posters on campus or perhaps a few lines in a quickly forgotten talk during orientation week. While about three-quarters of college students have indicated occasional sleep problems, the latest National College

Health Assessment found about the same proportion reported receiving no information from their school about sleep (though it's possible, in their sleepiness, some forgot).

"The average student is functioning with a clinical sleep disorder," said LeeAnn Hamilton, assistant director of health promotion and preventive services at the University of Arizona, describing research conducted on students there. They average about 6.5 hours per night (though students tend to over-report in such surveys). But sleep time and quality measurements declined over the course of the academic year, while anxiety, depression and conflict with family, friends and roommates all rose. Hamilton's office has been sending students a "Snoozeletter" with sleep tips.

As described by junior Sara Campbell, residence hall life at UA makes it hard even for students trying to sleep—constant late-night chattering, visitors coming and going, early morning cleaning crews running their vacuums. She aims to be asleep by 12:30 or so but was dumbfounded to find girls on her hall regularly pulling all-nighters for papers and exams—basically, academic suicide, the research shows.

"Not to speak bad of them, but a lot of them are freshmen and just decided to wait 'till the last minute," she said. Her big challenge was managing with a roommate who tries to keep earlier hours; this year the pair are moving off-campus together where they'll have separate bedrooms.

Still, Campbell is applying what she's learned about sleep as a psychology major. This year, she's arranged her schedule to have classes and work start at 8 a.m. every day of the week. That will be tough, but commits her to avoiding the destructive pattern trapping many college students—getting up early one day, then sleeping late the next.

"Regularity is key," Campbell said. "You can pick a schedule here and have a different time to get up every day, but going to bed at a different time every night, it wears on your body."

College mental health professionals are increasingly asking students about sleep right away, finding it's often the low-lying fruit for helping students with a range of issues.

"When you find depression, even when you find anxiety, when you scratch the surface 80 to 90 percent of the time you find a sleep problem as well," said University of Delaware psychologist Brad Wolgast. Many students who think they have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are often just sleep-deprived. Some simple steps to improve "sleep hygiene" are usually far preferable to prescribing drugs like Ritalin or Adderall. (Wolgast is also seeing more students who've been prescribed sleeping pills, which he says usually harm sleep patterns more than help).

"On a campus they're dealing with alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, Ritalin abuse, sexual assault," Wolgast said. In comparison, sleep "looks like a small problem. But the truth is if I could wave a magic wand and change everybody's sleep, there would be fewer problems with pretty much everything else."

But Wolgast and others don't have a magic wand, and have concluded nagging students, or fighting the campus culture, is hopeless. Running napping classes—pitched as ways to help students maximize their sleep—has proved a more effective pitch. Students also happily accept ear plugs. Hastings, with just 1,200 students, orders them in bulk from a manufacturing supply company and hands out thousands, said Beth Littrell, director of campus health services.

The guru of the college sleep crusade is James Maas, who over 48 years taught more than 65,000 students in Cornell University's most popular

class—a sleep-focused version of introductory psychology. Maas evangelized to his students and experimented on them as well, asking them to wear sleep-monitoring headbands and showing them magnetic resonance images of the brains of sleep-deprived college students.

"You can see that nothing is going on in their brains," Maas said. "Literally nothing."

Confronting students with such photos, along with hard data on how sleep undermines academic performance, is the most effective way to change behavior, Maas says. Still, he'd like to see colleges do more: ending early classes, sound-proofing and air-conditioning dormitories, putting sleep education into the curriculum.

The people most receptive to his message on campus are usually coaches. A few years back, he made his pitch to Cornell's basketball coach, who stopped morning practices. The next year the Big Red became the first Ivy League team since 1979 to advance to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA men's college basketball championship tournament.

Sleep efforts have paid off at a number of boarding schools. After Maas spoke at Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts in 2007, the school moved the start of classes back from 7:55 to 8:30 a.m., cut sports practices and homework expectations 10 percent each, and got students back into the dormitories earlier at night.

The results? Twenty percent fewer student visits to the health center (in a bad flu year); 17 percent more students taking time for a hot breakfast, and a record increase in GPA. Also, several Deerfield sports teams enjoyed unexpectedly good years, thanks to late-season surges.

Of course, boarding schools have more control over students than colleges. But Deerfield Headmistress Margarita Curtis says that's no

excuse for higher education. She says Deerfield's efforts worked because students saw the data and bought into it.

"You need to appeal to their intellect," she said. "They responded because they saw that correlation. They saw if you get that extra hour of sleep, this is what happens in your brain, what happened to that athlete."

On many college campuses, the biggest obstacle is a deep-rooted culture of sleep deprivation macho; for both the cool kids and the smart kids, it seems, the thing to brag about is how little sleep you're getting, not how much. Rebecca Robbins, a Cornell graduate student, has researched how [students](#) talk about sleep, and found more than 80 percent of the time, it was in negative terms.

"Kids in the coffee line will brag, 'I got two hours of [sleep](#) last night,' almost like it's a competition," she said. ""If that's all you hear as an adolescent, you begin to think these types of behavior are normal."

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