

Researcher finds integrated approach critical to teen health

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Kansas State University's Bryant Miller, master's student in family studies and human services, left, presents his research poster, "Kansas Adolescent Health Needs Assessment," at the recent Capitol Graduate Research Summit in Topeka. Credit: Kansas State University

As rural communities struggle to obtain access to health services, a Kansas State University student is researching how medical, dental, social work and mental health providers can collaborate to meet the

needs of teens.

Bryant Miller, master's student in marriage and family therapy, Goessel, said an integrative approach is critical in addressing hot topics for teens, including substance use, obesity, teen pregnancy and parenting, depression, anxiety, ADHD, self-harm, harm to others and suicide.

Miller's research was part of the statewide Adolescent Health Needs Assessment, funded by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment for its Title V Maternal and Child Health application for federal funding. Bryant presented his work at the 13th Capitol Graduate Research Summit in the Kansas State Capitol Building on Feb. 2.

"It was very important to communicate our research to Kansas state legislators and the Kansas Board of Regents to show the impact Kansas State University has not only in the state but also nationwide," Miller said. "Sharing cutting-edge research with our government officials can inform them of work being done each day to continue making our state a great place to live, work and raise a family."

Miller and fellow members of a student-faculty team, which included Elaine Johannes, associate professor of family studies and human services and Miller's major professor, took a mixed-methods approach to the community-based research. Their assessment, conducted by Kansas State University's Kansas Adolescent Health Project, consisted of a review of existing [health](#) data, an online community input survey, community [focus groups](#) and interviews with key individuals and leaders.

The team received more than 850 responses to an online survey, which was open from August-September 2014. In 2014, more than 320 adolescent Kansans shared their perspectives through 26 focus groups conducted in Chanute, Dodge City, Great Bend, Hoisington and Kansas

City. In 2015 and earlier this year, the team conducted focus groups in Abilene, Fredonia, Herington, Junction City, Kansas City and Leavenworth.

"My favorite part of this was getting out into the communities and hearing what teens themselves have to say about their perceptions on health issues," Miller said, adding he was especially impressed by teens' understanding of how seemingly unrelated health problems play into cycles that necessitate holistic approaches to health.

"For example, teens were able to connect how someone struggling with depression may feel that way because they are being bullied at school for being overweight, which causes them to cope by overeating, causing them to struggle with being overweight, which influences them being bullied at school, leading to a deeper struggle with depression," Miller said. "Teens were able to see how all aspects of health influence and are influenced by each other. With this knowledge, teens expressed a need for help that acknowledges a systemic mentality of health."

Miller plans to continue reaching more communities each year. In the next round of focus groups, he aims to receive input from teens about their communities' strengths.

"Looking at what's going well in Kansas can help us know what we can do to help teens with their health needs," he said. "As these adolescents become emerging adults, it's imperative that we as health professionals set them up for success."

Miller said he was drawn to researching teen health because he thinks adolescence is an extremely fascinating time of life as young people transition from middle school to high school to college, undergoing substantial mental and physical changes along the way.

"My hope for our research is to give a voice to the voiceless, to empower those who are disempowered and to begin breaking down barriers in communication about health between adults and [teens](#)," Miller said. "I hope for people at all ages to prioritize and become stakeholders and advocates not only for their health, but also for the health of others."

Provided by Kansas State University

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