Purpose: For many students, college represents an important stage in their transition from adolescence to adulthood during which they experience increasing autonomy, develop new relationships, and establish more independent identities. Students are making more health-related decisions on their own for the first time such as food-choice and health information seeking behaviors. Additionally, students are faced with unique challenges to their health and well-being including increased levels of stress, sleep problems, alcohol and drug use, among others. Despite the research pointing to college as a critical period of time for making decisions or developing behaviors that may impact one’s long-term health outcomes, few health promotion campaigns consider students’ level of health literacy before crafting important communication.

Health literacy is a serious concern in the US with approximately one-third to one-half of Americans considered to have low health literacy due to difficulty obtaining, understanding, and acting appropriately on health information. Often individuals with lower health literacy hide their challenges from medical practitioners due to a perceived stigma associated with low health literacy, a concern that may be exacerbated among the college population. Assuming college students have high health literacy levels may actually contribute to a student’s propensity to conceal their difficulties in understanding health information.

Methods: Participants will be undergraduate students recruited from a large Southwestern University. A survey was created to measure health literacy using the Newest Vital Sign (NVS), preferred source for health information (e.g., Internet, physician, parents, etc.), if the student is international, and other relevant demographic information. Traditionally, the NVS is delivered verbally; however, college students are presented with health-related information in various media – increasingly via the Internet. Thus, three rounds of data collection will take place in order to deliver the survey via paper and pencil, online, and verbally.

Findings: Round one of data collection (paper and pencil survey) was completed (N=273). Just over half (55%) of participants identified as White, 27% as Hispanic, 11% Asian, 4% Black, and 3% as other. Seventy-nine percent were female and the average age was 18.54. Initial findings indicate approximately 1 in 11 students had less than adequate health literacy, scoring 3 or lower on the NVS. Additionally, NVS score was negatively associated with race, such that non-White students exhibited a 0.364 point lower health literacy score when compared with White students, t(271)=-6.426, p<.001. Subsequent rounds of data collection are ongoing and will be complete in March 2014 (total expected N=500). All data will be analyzed for presentation at the conference.

Conclusions: The purpose of this project is to examine health literacy levels among college students. While this particular population is frequently presumed to have adequate levels of health literacy, preliminary findings indicate some college students may actually struggle with obtaining, understanding, and acting on health information. It is important that health communicators and medical practitioners avoid making assumptions about health literacy levels among students – particularly considering the impact health decisions made during this phase of life influence future health behaviors and outcomes.