The National Institutes of Health has awarded an Academic Research Enhancement Award (AREA) grant to Kean University for a 3-year research project to study how exposure to the criminal justice system influences substance use during the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. Dr. Connie Hassett-Walker, Assistant Professor in the School of Criminal Justice and Public Administration, is the Principal Investigator.

The study of the relationship of substance use with justice system involvement is of critical concern to public health. The reduction of substance use is an objective of Healthy People 2020, the nation’s health planning document. Also, identifying the predictors that increase or decrease youths’ initiation of substance use during and/or after their involvement with the justice system, including entering prison, can help inform interventions; and finally, racial and economic disparities exist in terms of which youth are exposed to the justice system and how substance use may evolve over time.

Dr. Hassett-Walker has assembled a team of researchers for this project including Dr. Gilbert Gee from the University of California, Los Angeles, and Drs. Katrina Walsemann and Bethany Bell from the University of South Carolina. Kean students will participate with Dr. Hassett-Walker in research related to the proposed study with additional mentoring from Drs. Gee, Walsemann and Bell. Students will investigate a research question or hypothesis stemming from the study. Students will also learn about the intersection between public health and criminal justice, and will receive instruction in analyzing a longitudinal data using advanced statistical techniques such as cross-domain analysis of change. Students will present the findings from their studies at Kean Research Day as well as at professional conferences. These student researchers as well as other interested undergraduate criminal justice majors will participate in regular “journal club” meetings organized by Dr. Hassett-Walker to discuss contemporary public health and criminal justice research. This wider group of Kean students will have the opportunity to meet and discuss their research interests with Drs. Gee, Walsemann, and Bell during periodic meetings held at Kean.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse, one of the 27 institutes and centers that comprise the National Institutes of Health (NIH), leads the nation in bringing the power of science to bear on drug abuse and addiction through support and conduct of research across a broad range of disciplines and rapid and effective dissemination of research results to improve prevention and treatment and to inform policy as it relates to drug abuse and addiction. The AREA grant program supports small-scale research projects in the biomedical and behavioral sciences conducted by faculty and students at educational institutions that have not been major recipients of NIH research grant funds.