

A New Emerging Trend: College Students in Recovery

Finding Success in Recovery-Unfriendly Environments

By Scott Washburn, EdD, LADC

Years ago, the prospect of a young adult new in recovery attending college seemed clinically inadvisable. The college and university social environment has historically been unfriendly at best, if not hostile, to the prospects of recovery for emerging adults with substance use disorders (Cleveland, Harris, Baker, Herbert, & Dean, 2007). For decades, researchers have found the culture of U.S. colleges and universities to engender and promote excessive alcohol and drug use among certain groups of students (Dowdall, 2013). Although campuses differ in their rates of binge alcohol and drug use, statistics regarding the consequences of excessive patterns of substance use paint a stark and alarming picture leading many to identify excessive alcohol use as the number one health threat facing college students in the U.S. (Wechsler & Wuethrich, 2002).

Most clinicians who work with adolescents and young adults with substance use disorders are well aware of these facts and trends. However, what may not be as commonly known is the emerging trend of Collegiate Recovery Programs (CRPs) supporting students in recovery and helping them find success on college and university campuses. The research on the effectiveness of these programs is still emerging but points to a likely emerging evidence-based practice effective for this population.

A Unique College Counter-Culture Phenomenon

Most experts agree that risky alcohol use on college campuses has been at epidemic proportions for decades. Based on the results of the Harvard School of Public Health's *College Alcohol Study*, which consisted of an ongoing survey of over 50,000 students at 140 four-year colleges in forty states from 1993 to 2001, Wechsler and Wuethrich (2002) concluded that the culture of American colleges and universities is essentially the promotion of alcohol consumption. They observed,

On college campuses across America, alcohol-related culture takes many forms, from revered campus traditions to fraternity initiations, football tailgating parties, twenty-first birthday 'bar crawls' where the celebrant 'drinks his age' with twenty-one shots, and more. Over many decades a culture of alcohol has become entwined in school customs, social lives, and institutions. Winked at for decades, this culture has its darker side (pp. 3-4).

Others have claimed that the college years are one of the riskiest periods of development for emerging adults and risky alcohol use presents the greatest health threat to college students today (Ham & Hope, 2003; Raskin-White & Rabiner, 2012; Saltz, 2004; Wechsler & Wuethrich, 2002).

The health threat of risky alcohol use by college students is clear and well-established by research. According to the SAMHSA 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, approximately 60 percent of college students ages 18 to 22 consumed alcohol in the past month, and almost two out of three students engaged in binge drinking during that same timeframe. The consequences of these behaviors are alarming. Studies estimate that over 1800 college students between the ages of 18 to 24 die

each year from alcohol-related injuries; over 650,000 students are assaulted each year by another student who had been drinking; about 97,000 students report having been sexually assaulted or date-raped each year with alcohol being a major factor; about one-fourth of college students report negative academic consequences (missing class, falling behind, failing grades, etc.) due to alcohol use; and, approximately 20 percent of college students meet criteria for an alcohol use disorder (NIAAA, *College Fact Sheet*).

Colleges and universities have historically addressed the problematic culture of excessive alcohol use by means of primary and secondary prevention efforts with some notable success and identification of promising practices. After decades of investigation, development, and practice, many researchers agree that multiple prevention interventions are necessary, including environmental approaches to produce long-term effects on college student drinking (Cronce & Larimer, 2012; Ham & Hope, 2003; Saltz, 2012). However, gaps in prevention efforts across institutions remain.

Supporting college students in recovery is an emerging area in both research and practice with impressively promising results. The history of organized recovery support on college campuses in the United States followed the emergence of the recovery schools movement, beginning at the secondary level with recovery high schools. White and Finch (2009) claimed that this movement arose when the need reached a tipping point resulting in the coalescence of new structures of recovery support. The history of the collegiate recovery support movement began in the mid-1970s and has proliferated nationally in the 2000s.

The collegiate recovery support movement began as organized but disparate efforts in various configurations. The first documented Collegiate Recovery Program (CRP) started in 1977 at Brown University in Rhode Island (White & Finch, 2006). It was followed by a second CRP at Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1983, and a third program at Texas Tech University in 1988 (Harris, Baker & Cleveland, 2010). A fourth CRP, StepUP, launched in 1997 at Augsburg College in Minnesota (Botzet, Winters, & Farnhorst, 2007). This movement has proliferated greatly in the past decade. In 2009, the Association of Recovery in Higher Education formed to support the propagation of CRPs and currently lists 140 colleges and universities with existing programs or efforts to start CRPs on campuses in the United States. Although these programs differ in their configuration and structure, they all share in common the organized effort with dedicated or trained staff to support and foster the success of students in recovery from substance use disorders on their respective campuses.

In many ways these CRPs consist of small communities on college campuses forming a counter-culture to the perceived norm of excessive alcohol and drug use by college students and its disastrous consequences. These communities support the norms of remaining abstinent as a form of recovery, promoting success academically, and giving back to the community at large as a recovery entity. Several college and university administrators have recognized these communities of students as assets to the



overall campus because of their successful recovery and academic progress (*Recovery Campus*, 2013).

An Emerging Evidence-Based Practice

Collegiate Recovery Programs are emerging as an evidence-based practice providing impressive outcome results with their students. Although the research on these programs and their students is still relatively new, it highlights positive outcomes with students in recovery achieving notable success. Findings from several pioneering programs indicate the successful abstinence rates of students in these communities are consistently above 90% each year. Furthermore, the grade point average of students in CRPs as a community is frequently above a 3.0 on average. (Augsburg StepUP Annual Report, 2014; Harris, et al., 2008; Laitman & Stewart, 2013; Botzet, Winters, & Farnhorst, 2007). The following table illustrates these findings from three pioneering CRPs:

Table 1: Sample CRP Outcomes

Institution	Student Abstinence Rates (Average per year)	Student Grade Point Averages
Augsburg StepUP Program	87% to 95%	3.2
Texas Tech CSAR Program	92% to 95%	3.18
Rutgers University Recovery House	83% to 95%	3.13

The significance of these findings is striking. First, these outcomes provide a strong contrast to the typical abstinence rates of adolescents and young adults. Post-treatment relapse rates for this population can range from 60% to 79% within the first year and reach as high as 90% after five years (Brown, Tapert, Tate, & Abrantes, 2000; Winters, Stinchfield, Latimer, & Lee, 2007). Second, students participating in CRPs often must overcome additional challenges resulting from their previous substance use disorders, highlighting even more the significance of their successes. For example, the first national study of students participating in CRPs (N=496 from 29 different CRPs) found that many of students reported high levels of substance use disorder severity, having used multiple substances, and, many reported recovering from multiple behavioral addictions as well (Laudet, Harris, Kimball, Winters, & Moberg, 2014).

The factors helping these students find success in both their recovery and academics are varied and reflect multiple dimensions of support. Researchers have found that the social support from peers in the CRP and the community of the CRP itself provide an important protective safety net or context for them to live in as college students (Wiebe, Cleveland & Dean, 2010; Cleveland, Wiebe & Wiersma, 2010). This helps these students to meet the significant challenge of making new friends as they attend college. A friendship group is already present as a community of recovering peers. Other important identified supports include the safety of a substance-free recovery housing environment, the counseling and advocacy support of CRC staff, the availability of on-campus 12-Step meetings, academic skills support, financial assistance, and the opportunity to be of service to others (Bell, Kanitkar, Kerksiek, et al. 2009; Casiraghi & Muslow, 2010; Finch, 2007; Washburn, 2016).

These findings are not surprising given the body of literature regarding student success in college. One of the best predictors of whether a student will graduate from college is the presence of the quality of persistence. The level of support the campus environment offers to its students to enable

them to persist is equally important (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010). Colleges and universities that provide a CRP are providing the necessary support to enable students in recovery to successfully persist in their respective college environments.

Tinto (2016) framed persistence as one form of student motivation. He argued that central to motivation are the qualities of self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and a perceived value of the curriculum. CRPs provide a milieu of services distinctly designed to generate self-efficacy and a sense of belonging. My own research in this area revealed that students in CRPs build a sense of self-confidence and efficacy through the modeling of peers within the CRP, thereby creating a positive peer influence. This combined with a sense of belonging provides a collective shared investment in a “culture of success” within the CRP (Washburn, 2016).

In essence, CRPs provide an important, safe, and supportive environment for students in recovery attending college. While other campus resources and off campus recovery self-help and mutual support groups can play important role for students in recovery, the interpersonal support from peers combined with specialized professional support by trained staff knowledgeable of addiction and recovery are critical for helping these students succeed.

A New Referral Resource

What remains for investigation is how CRPs on college and university campuses serve as a tertiary prevention modality affecting the greater “drinking culture” of their respective campuses. In my current role as Assistant Director of a CRP, I see anecdotal evidence of how CRP students in recovery have a positive outreach influence to other non-CRP students struggling with alcohol and drug use issues. A few studies have framed CRPs as a form of AOD prevention on college campuses and have begun to examine their impact on the greater institutional context (Smock, Baker, Harris, & D’Sauza, 2010; Watson, 2014). However, this research is seminal and ripe for much further investigation.

Conclusion

CRPs provide a valuable resource of support for young adults recovering from substance use disorders wanting to attend college. Addiction and mental health professionals who work with these clients now have an important referral resource to consider if their clients are thinking of going to college while maintaining their recovery. Young people in recovery need structure, purpose, meaning, and peer support in order to do more than simply survive, but actually thrive, in their recovery. Attending college in a supportive environment with peers pursuing the same journey, provides a great opportunity to meet those needs. Colleges and universities offering CRPs provide an opportunity for young people in recovery to be successful.

Find a Collegiate Recovery Program near you at collegiaterecovery.org.

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