

Collegiate Recovery Programs: A Win-Win Proposition for Students and Colleges

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About the Center on Young Adult Health and Development

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What is “recovery”?

Once associated mainly with 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, “recovery” is now a widely accepted concept. Most people who self-identify as being “in recovery” from substance use disorders (SUD) say it means not only abstaining from all mind-altering substances (i.e., sobriety), but also embracing a positive view of personal growth and self-improvement.^{6,8,10,11} Addiction treatment professionals understand recovery as “a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.”⁹

Recovery is seen as an ongoing process rather than a cure, although it might be easier to sustain recovery after many years of abstinence.^{10,11} Recovery requires ongoing support to sustain abstinence to prevent relapse.^{8,12,13} Establishing a strong support network of pro-abstinence peers is seen as critically important.^{7,12} Spending time in situations where alcohol and drugs are being used can intensify cravings, and continuing to interact with friends who drink and use drugs is one of the most reliable predictors of relapse.^{13,14} Parents and other caregivers have an important role to play as well in helping their children maintain recovery.¹⁴

How many college students are in recovery?

Among the general adult population in the United States, it is estimated that 5.3% to 15.3% are in remission from SUD.¹⁵ The exact number of college students who are in recovery is not known. It is estimated, however, that one in six US college students meet standard clinical criteria for current abuse or dependence on alcohol.^{16,17} It is plausible that just as many young adults ages 18 to 20 have a prior history of alcohol use disorder that that occurred more than a year ago,¹⁸ and still others struggle with a past or current SUD involving marijuana and other drugs. All three types of individuals can benefit from collegiate recovery programs (CRPs).

Many individuals in recovery received formal treatment for their SUD at some point during their lifetime. Annually, more than 400,000 public treatment admissions occur among young people ages 15 to 24,¹⁹ while others might remit from their SUD without formal treatment.^{20,21}

Re•cov•er•y: a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.⁹

Why do college students need recovery programs?

Collectively, institutions of higher education have made significant progress in attending to the health needs and well-being of students. Colleges are very heterogeneous with respect to availability of substances on campus as well as the strictness of policies related to alcohol consumption and other drug use. Nevertheless, the college social environment can pose significant challenges for students in recovery, especially in settings where drinking and drug use define the social environment. Those challenges are compounded by adjusting to new academic demands, freedom from parental supervision, and financial pressures, which can also be relapse triggers.^{5,8,22,23} In the absence of campus-based recovery programs, students in recovery are generally referred to off-campus resources. Yet such external services, on their own, might not be adequate to support their recovery because they are not tailored to address the unique set of challenges college students face.²⁴⁻²⁶

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In the face of such challenges, many young people in recovery find themselves choosing between recovery and staying in school. For them, dropping out of college begins to feel like a safer and more attractive alternative to exposing themselves to an environment that runs counter to their recovery.²⁷ In effect, for these students, a pro-drinking, pro-drug college social scene becomes a barrier to college enrollment and completion.²⁶ Accordingly, expansion of recovery support services in academic settings has been articulated as a priority by both the US Department of Education and the Office of National Drug Control Policy.²⁸

What are collegiate recovery programs?

CRPs provide a safe haven for such students to further their education within an alternative social environment that supports their recovery, and helps them guard against the risky influences of other students' drinking and drug use. CRPs are based on the understanding that, given the chronic nature of addiction, continuing care is essential for preventing relapse.

The goal of CRP is to allow recovering students to extend their participation in a continuing care program without having to postpone or surrender achieving their educational goals. Thus CRPs strive to create a campus-based 'recovery-friendly' space and supportive social community to enhance educational opportunities while supporting students' continued recovery and emotional growth.^{8; see also 7,29}

The Association of Recovery in Higher Education (ARHE) is a network of US colleges and universities that have embraced a shared mission of supporting students in recovery.²⁶ ARHE characterizes the overarching purpose of CRPs as:

*A supportive environment within the campus culture that reinforces the decision to disengage from addictive behavior. It is designed to provide an educational opportunity alongside recovery support to ensure that students do not have to sacrifice one for the other.*³⁰

As of 2014, 600 students were being served in CRPs at 33 different colleges and universities in the US, with many more being turned away due to capacity limits.⁸

CRPs have expanded rapidly during the past two decades as college administrators, treatment professionals, and funding agencies have increasingly recognized their value. As of 2014, 600 students were being served in CRPs at 33 different US colleges and universities, with many more being turned away due to capacity limitations.⁸

One CRP model is the Collegiate Recovery Community (CRC) at Texas Tech University (TTU). This model emphasizes the importance of positive reinforcements within the social environment. The CRC, by positively reinforcing sobriety, provides a counterweight to the ways the broader campus community might increase risk for drinking and drug use.¹² The CRC is peer-driven and incorporates 12-step concepts into its structure.³¹ CRPs following this model also often offer substance-free housing and recreational activities, on-site support from staff and peers, and self-improvement/life skills workshops. In the CRC, wellness is promoted through encouraging members to practice self-care.

Another important component of the CRC at TTU is an educational life-skills seminar that is integrated into the collegiate curriculum. The seminar promotes the development of coping and stress-management strategies in order to build resilience to stressful events that might otherwise trigger relapse.² Life-skills training also focuses on “building healthy and supportive relationships” both within the CRC and with outside family and friends.

Typical components of CRPs include^{8,32}:

- Multiple on-campus 12-step meetings
- Substance-free housing
- Substance-free social events
- Professional counseling by addiction treatment specialists
- Full-time, dedicated staff
- Physical facilities (e.g., a drop-in recreation center)

With respect to administrative structure, some CRPs are funded and organized by the college administration, while others coalesce around student-driven grassroots organizations, such as Students for Recovery.^{24,26} The administrative home for CRP services might be student health services, student affairs, an academic unit, or some combination of the three. An academic component has the advantage of facilitating evaluation research and access to graduate assistants.¹² Recovery support services can be delivered by professional clinicians or by peers, and peer-based services are seen as an important area for growth that is integral to CRPs.⁸ If possible, at least some CRP staff should be in recovery themselves, because this might enhance trust and identification between students and staff.²⁴

What are the benefits of a collegiate recovery program?

Research evaluating program outcomes is still in the early stages, but preliminary evidence suggests that CRPs contribute to both better academic outcomes (e.g., graduation rates, GPA) and successful recovery. Members perceive CRP services as helpful, stating that the recovery support services are fundamentally critical to their ability to stay in school, succeed academically, and maintain their well-being,^{1,24,27} especially for students who are at an earlier stage in their recovery.² Interpersonal support and a safe, healthy environment are seen as two of the most helpful benefits of CRP involvement.¹

How are students in collegiate recovery programs doing?

Data from the Collegiate Recovery Community (CRC) at Texas Tech University (TTU) suggest that its members have⁶⁻⁸:



Higher graduation rates

70% of CRC members at TTU graduate, compared with 60% of the general student population.



Higher GPAs

CRC members have a mean GPA of 3.18, compared with 2.93 among the general student population.



4% to 8% relapse rate

Each semester, fewer than one in ten CRC members use any substances.

The benefits of CRP involvement appear to be enduring, in that CRP alumni continue to exhibit success in both academics and recovery.¹ Some experts believe that the benefits of a CRP extend beyond its membership to the entire student body.²⁵ A strong campus-based infrastructure of recovery support services might nudge some students toward abstinence and recovery if they are already contemplating it. Moreover, students in recovery are likely to have a positive influence on reducing their peers' substance use, because their personal experiences represent authentic "cautionary tales" that can "dispel the allure of abusive drinking."²⁵

How are behavioral contracts used in collegiate recovery programs?

In some CRPs, behavioral and sobriety contracts are a key foundational element that fosters group cohesion as well as promoting personal recovery.¹ The behavioral contract sets a standard for behaviors to which all members are expected to adhere while they are participating in the CRP. In addition to abstaining from substance use, required behaviors for these contracts can include¹:

- Attending 12-step meetings
- Avoiding high-risk environments
- Avoiding gambling
- Maintaining student responsibilities

A peer governance system, comprised of CRP members, is sometimes implemented to update and review infractions on behavior contracts, following the model used in the StepUP program at Augsburg College.^{1,12}

What is recovery housing?

Some CRPs provide supervised substance-free housing. The Rutgers University Alcohol and Other Drug Assistance Program implemented recovery housing in 1998 after an increasing number of students, particularly those in early recovery, indicated the need for safe and supportive housing.³³ It then evolved in terms of its structure, requiring members to participate in counseling sessions and 12-step meetings.³³ As of 2009, the program had a full-time clinician to work with students in the program, offering academic support and life skills training.³³ To protect residents from potential stigma or violations of anonymity, the residence hall is not advertised as recovery housing.³⁴ Other CRPs that do not provide supervised housing help students find suitable off-campus housing.¹²

We already have “sober dorms”...isn’t that enough?

Having substance-free housing on campus is not equivalent to a CRP.⁸ Students in recovery who live in “sober dorms” might also need additional peer support that comes from other campus-sponsored activities and programming. Participation in such activities reinforces a shared commitment to recovery principles. Furthermore, at schools where upperclassmen do not live on campus, relying solely on “sober dorms” as the mainstay of a CRP would restrict opportunities to participate for older students.

We already have 12-step meetings on our campus...isn’t that enough?

Access to 12-step meetings is a critical component of successful CRPs, but it is important that they be relevant for college students. Twelve-step meetings typically involve middle-aged adults sharing stories and experiences, to which college students might not relate.^{12,35} The advantage of on-campus meetings cannot be underestimated because of how they can provide an opportunity to create a “fellowship” of peers in recovery.²⁴ Attending 12-step meetings is important for any adult in recovery, but for college students the greatest benefits are seen among people who also get involved in multiple 12-step activities (such as service, reading, and sponsoring).³ By extension, CRPs might have the greatest impact

by encouraging students to engage in several recovery support activities, and ensuring that such activities are readily accessible within the campus community. Additionally, the likelihood of maintaining sobriety is highest among individuals who attend two or more meetings per week.³⁶ Offering just one meeting per week on campus might not be enough for students in recovery to fully benefit from 12-step meetings.

What about other kinds of recovery support services?

There is a wide range of possible recovery support services that college administrators can offer, ranging from formal recovery centers and professional addiction counseling services, to lower-cost outreach and educational efforts, to supporting student-led organizations that promote recovery and raise awareness.²⁶ Seminar-style courses on recovery-related issues, which CRP members take for college credit, can be an important source of social support for CRP members.² At TTU, such classes form part of a curriculum leading to a minor in Addictive Disorders and Recovery Studies.¹²

Creating opportunities for students in recovery to socialize and develop a supportive social network can reduce the risk for relapse.¹⁻⁵

Underscoring their commitment to promoting academic success, the TTU program provides scholarships to qualifying CRC members, such that students with better grades earn larger scholarships.¹² One study identified financial concerns as a major stressor for students in recovery, and suggested that when their financial concerns were alleviated, students felt freer to focus on both academics and their recovery.³⁷

Creating opportunities for students in recovery to socialize and develop a supportive social network can reduce the risk for relapse.¹⁻⁵ For example, alternative spring break trips give students in recovery an opportunity to enjoy a break from school while engaging with peers in a substance-free environment.

What kinds of students participate in collegiate recovery programs?

Students in CRPs are highly committed to both their recovery and academic success. The overwhelming majority remain abstinent, participate frequently in support groups, and maintain a favorable GPA.¹ Many CRP members struggle with mental health issues, yet they report having high levels of social support and personal assets that help them maintain sobriety and well-being.¹ Freshmen and sophomore students make up the majority of CRP members, possibly indicating that the program might be particularly important in helping students adjust to college life within a safe environment, after which they can sustain their recovery in other settings.¹

In some programs, participation is limited to students who meet entry requirements.⁸ These requirements for CRPs vary across campuses. Some only admit students who have received addiction treatment. Other requirements might include⁸:

- Abstinence for at least three to 12 months
- Residing in substance-free housing
- Behavioral (sobriety) contract
- Urine testing

What can I do to create or improve a CRP at my college?

Students are encouraged to start a student-led organization such as “Students for Recovery.” Treatment providers can advocate to campus administrators about the unique needs of students in recovery. Campus leaders can connect with personnel at other colleges with existing CRPs (e.g., through the Association of Recovery in Higher Education) for guidance.²⁴

Where can I find more information?

A step-by-step curriculum from the Center for Collegiate Recovery Communities at TTU can be downloaded from <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/hs/csa/replication.php>. The Center has been one of the pioneers in developing and evaluating recovery support services for college students, and its program has been designated as a national model by the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

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