

Collegiate Recovery Programs are An Effective But Underused Resource on College Campuses

Emily Graham

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Nearly half a million college students identify as in recovery from alcohol or drug use disorders.
- Collegiate Recovery Programs (CRPs) make college campuses more recovery friendly, but the stigma of being in recovery hinders the use of these programs.
- Recovery ally training reduces stigma, increases knowledge about substance use, and promotes student engagement.

Substance use disorder¹ is one of the most serious public health issues for young people in the United States. About 30% of full-time college students develop a substance use disorder during their academic careers.² These students often must take leaves of absence to receive substance use treatment, disrupting their academic and personal lives. If they return, they must navigate collegiate life without their recovery support systems and are put in situations that could trigger relapse. To help mitigate the risks of relapse in college and provide on-campus support, Collegiate Recovery Programs (CRPs) were established.

However, having a CRP on campus does not necessarily mean students use this resource. Barriers such as college party culture, the stigma associated with being in recovery, and an overall lack of education on the recovery process keep students from accessing recovery-based programs.³ Therefore, college campus administrators must cultivate a culture that dismantles substance use recovery stigma and encourages students to access supportive services like CRPs. This brief explores the barriers to accessing CRPs on college campuses and provides recommendations to enhance student engagement.

College Culture Unknowingly Promotes Substance Use

Students often assume alcohol and other drug (AOD) use is typical of the “college experience.”⁴ Excessive partying and substance use is normalized and seen as a rite of passage. However, for some, the “college experience” can lead to long-term consequences.⁵ Dangerous behaviors involving the use of substances during the college years increase the risk of developing a substance use disorder. For example, binge drinking, characterized by consuming four or more drinks in a 2-hour period, increases the likelihood of developing alcohol use disorder.⁶ It is estimated that 50% of college students binge drink regularly.⁷ Meanwhile, students who do not engage in these behaviors report feeling like outliers and often feel pressure to engage in AOD use to

make connections and feel included on campus. Because college culture promotes and celebrates substance use, it is easy for students to look past problematic behavior. Today, roughly 20% of college students unknowingly meet the criteria for having a substance use disorder.⁷

CRPs Make Colleges More Recovery Friendly

Brown University established the first CRP in 1977 upon noticing an increase in the number of students in recovery.⁸ Today, the need for CRPs is as relevant as ever. Defined as “an institutionally sanctioned and supported program for students in recovery from substance use disorder seeking a degree in higher education,” the goal of a CRP is to make campus more recovery friendly by supporting returning students who recently received treatment or are in recovery for substance use disorders.⁹ Depending on the college, the programming includes peer-based recovery support, relapse prevention, skills training, case management, counseling, substance-free activities, academic and financial support, and sober living on campus. As of 2022, there were more than 150 CRPs nationwide.¹⁰

These programs have [proven to be beneficial to student success](#). Students in recovery who engage in CRPs have higher Grade Point Averages (GPAs), retention and graduation rates, and lower rates of relapse compared to those in recovery who do not participate in CRPs.¹¹ For some students in recovery, returning to college is only possible with the presence of a CRP, and the decision of where to go to college depends on the robustness of the recovery program and the supportive resources available to individuals in recovery.

Stigma Is a Barrier to CRP Use

Despite the proven benefits of CRPs, the stigma of being in recovery dissuades students from using them. Full time college students make up the largest group of individuals meeting the criteria for substance use disorder but are the least likely to seek out treatment services.¹² This gap is due to the glorification of substance use in college party culture and the social stigma associated with being in recovery.

Those who do seek out services often fear the judgement of others. Therefore, many decide not to disclose their status.¹³ Unconscious biases and negative language used to describe people with substance use disorder (such as “addict”, “alcoholic”, and “abuser”) makes disclosure of a recovery status difficult.¹⁴

Many students report that the consequences of stigma result in loneliness and isolation.¹³ Isolation and loneliness can lead to a relapse. To reduce the likelihood of a relapse, students in recovery report needing community and social support that includes compassion, acceptance, and understanding. In addition, they emphasize the necessity of broader societal education regarding addiction and recovery.¹³

Recovery Ally Training Helps Reduce Stigma

Colleges and universities must do more to reduce stigma and encourage the use of CRPs. For a college campus to be recovery friendly, it needs to use recovery inclusive language, recognize and support those in or seeking recovery, and create a culture where there is not any judgement toward those asking for help or receiving services for substance use disorders. To achieve this, university leaders need to implement programming that breaks down the primary barrier to accessing CRPs: stigma around recovery. University leaders can spearhead this by offering recovery ally training to their students, staff, and faculty.

Recovery ally training aims to reduce stigma toward people with substance use disorders by increasing awareness about individuals living in recovery.¹⁵ Throughout the training, participants learn how to express support for those in recovery and learn about on- and off-campus resources for recovery.¹⁵ After completing the training, participants are able to describe the science of substance use disorders and recovery and demonstrate how to initiate a conversation with a person struggling with substance use.¹⁵ Allies are trained to use more inclusive, person-first language about recovery, placing the person before the clinical diagnostic label, such as “person with a substance use disorder.”¹⁵ This aids in reducing unconscious bias from campus community members.

Recovery ally training is an easy way to help reduce barriers to recovery-based programs on college campuses. It helps reduce stigma, spread awareness, and normalize the conversation on recovery. Seeing or hearing the word recovery around campus more frequently normalizes the idea of being in recovery and refraining from AOD use, encouraging those who need help to seek it and those in recovery to engage in these programs without the fear of stigmatization.¹⁶

References and Notes

1. Substance Use Disorder is defined as "a disease that affects a person's brain and behavior and leads to an inability to control the use of a legal or illegal drug or medicine." Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2022, October 4). *Drug addiction (substance use disorder)*. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/drug-addiction/symptoms-causes/syc-20365112>
2. Greenagel, F. (2016, October 12). History of collegiate recovery programs. *Hazelden Betty Ford*. Retrieved April 27, 2022, from <https://www.hazeldenbettyford.org/articles/greenagel/history-of-collegiate-recovery-programs>
3. Mackert, M., Mabry, A., Hubbard, K., Grahovac, I., & Holleran Steiker, L. (2014). Perceptions of Substance Abuse on College Campuses: Proximity to the Problem, Stigma, and Health Promotion. *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions*, 14(3), 273-285.
4. American Addiction Centers. (2023, March 20). *Substance abuse in college students: Statistics & Rehab treatment*. American Addiction Centers. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/rehab-guide/college>
5. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2022, October 4). *Drug addiction (substance use disorder)*. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved March 2, 2023, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/drug-addiction/symptoms-causes/syc-20365112>
6. Texans for Safe and Drug-Free Youth. (2019, October 7). Alcohol use trends among college students. *Campus Initiatives*. Retrieved April 27, 2022, from https://txsdy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/TxSDY_Alcohol-Use-Trends-Among-College-Students.pdf
7. Alcohol Rehab Guide. (2022, March 1). College alcoholism. *Alcohol Rehab Guide*. Retrieved April 27, 2022, from <https://www.alcoholrehabguide.org/resources/college-alcohol-abuse/>
8. Pennelle, O. (2019, December 20). *The history of collegiate recovery*. Association of Recovery in Higher Education: ARHE. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from <https://collegiaterecovery.org/2019/12/20/the-history-of-collegiate-recovery/>
9. Association of Recovery in Higher Education. *FAQ*. Association of Recovery in higher Education. Retrieved March 27, 2023, from: [https://collegiaterecovery.org/faq/#:~:text=Collegiate%20Recovery%20Programs%20\(%20CRPs%20\)%20and,a%20degree%20in%20higher%20education](https://collegiaterecovery.org/faq/#:~:text=Collegiate%20Recovery%20Programs%20(%20CRPs%20)%20and,a%20degree%20in%20higher%20education)
10. Texas Tech University. (2023, February 10). Center for collegiate recovery communities. *TTU*. Retrieved March 2, 2023, from <https://www.depts.ttu.edu/hs/csa/>
11. Laudet, A. B., Harris, K., Kimball, T., Winters, K. C., & Moberg, D. P. (2016). In college and in recovery: Reasons for joining a Collegiate Recovery Program. *Journal of*

- American college health: J of ACH*, 64(3), 238–246.
12. Laudet, A., Harris, K., Kimball, T., Winters, K. C., & Moberg, D. P. (2014). Collegiate Recovery Communities Programs: What do we know and what do we need to know? *Journal of social work practice in the addictions*, 14(1), 84–100.
 13. Spencer, K. Voices of Recovery: An Exploration of Stigma Experienced by College Students in Recovery from Alcohol and/or Other Drug Addiction through Photovoice. (2017). Directed by Dr. James M. Benschoff. 199 pp.
 14. McNeill Brown, Austin, "We Need to Change the Language we use to Describe Individuals with Substance Use Issues" (2019). *Population Health Research Brief Series*. 75.
<https://surface.syr.edu/lerner/75>
 15. UT Center for Students in Recovery. (2022). Recovery ally training. *UT Center for Students in Recovery*. Retrieved October 18, 2022, from
<https://recovery.utexas.edu/allytraining.html>
 16. Safe Supportive Learning. (2019, March 28). Supporting Recovery and Building Resilience on Campus: The Role of

Collegiate Recovery Programs. *National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments*. Retrieved April 27, 2022, from
https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Federal_Climate_Discipline_Resource%20Directory_School-Staff_FINAL.pdf

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Alexandra Punch, Shannon Monnat, and Natalli Amato for edits to previous versions of this brief.

Recommended Citation

Graham, E. (2023). Recovery Ally Training Helps to Reduce Stigma Against College Students in Recovery. *Lerner Center Population Health Research Brief Series*. 226. <https://surface.syr.edu/lerner/226>

About the Author

Emily Graham (egraha22@syr.edu) is the Assistant Director for the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion & Population Health at Syracuse University and a United States Navy Veteran.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LERNER CENTER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PROMOTION & POPULATION HEALTH RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES

Series Editor - Shannon M. Monnat
426 Eggers Hall | Syracuse | New York | 13244
syracuse.edu | lernercenter.syr.edu
To access all our briefs, visit: <https://surface.syr.edu/lerner/>

The mission of the Syracuse University Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion & Population Health is to improve population and community health through research, education, and outreach focused on the social, spatial, and structural determinants of physical, mental, and behavioral health and health disparities.