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Recovery Programs for Chemically Dependent College Students

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Currently, the body of literature concerning the topic of on-campus specialized support services for chemically dependent college students in recovery is quite limited. The population of U.S. college students in recovery has increased over the past 10 years, as the number of adolescents entering substance abuse treatment programs has increased by 65% (Cleveland, Harris, Baker, Herbert & Dean, 2007). Several institutions have developed programs that are designed to support students in their recovery process while maintaining academic enrollment. This article serves as a review of the current literature on the topic of recovery programs on college campuses, specifically the need for such programs, barriers to program development, and current examples of campus recovery programs. The article concludes with topics for future research to better serve this population of students.

Much of the current literature regarding college students and alcohol or substance abuse involves prevention and treatment for students or only studies the amount that this behavior occurs on college campuses. However, there are a small number of studies and papers discussing the topic of on-campus specialized support services for chemically dependent college students in recovery. The population of college students in recovery has increased over the past 10 years as the number of adolescents entering substance abuse treatment programs in the United States has increased by 65% (Cleveland, Harris, Baker, Herbert, & Dean, 2007). Several institutions have developed programs that are most often referred to as campus recovery programs; they are designed for students who have completed their treatment prior to entering college and students who enter treatment while in college. These programs often have different names and range in size and structure, however they all recognize chemical dependence as

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a medical problem and focus on each student's recovery (Cleveland, et al., 2007; Finch, 2004; Gose, 2000). This article serves as a review of the current literature on the topic of campus recovery programs, specifically the need for such programs, barriers to development, and current examples of recovery programs on college campuses. The article concludes with topics for future research to better serve this population of students.

Literature Review

Need For Recovery Specific Programming on College Campuses

Much has been written about the behaviors of college students regarding binge drinking and substance abuse and how that may lead to future dependence. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (April 2008), binge drinking is defined as "a pattern of drinking that brings a person's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08 grams or above." The Centers describe that this often occurs when males consume 5 or more drinks within 2 hours, or when females consume 4 or more drinks in the same time period. Individuals will usually consume the highest amount of alcohol during their late-teens and early 20s, with college students generally consuming more than their non-college peers (Baer, Kivlahan, Blume, McKnight, & Marlatt, 2001). Approximately 44% of US college students are binge drinkers, with residential colleges tending to have higher rates of binge drinking students than commuter schools (Wu, Pilowski, Schlenger & Hasin, 2007). These findings suggest that students living away from their parents were significantly more likely to drink heavily than students still living with their parents. Because these students are away from their traditional support systems, such as family and friends, campus recovery programs can help to build new support systems for their sobriety efforts (Gfroerer, Greenblatt, & Wright, 1997). Although this is not the case with every student, Moore (2005) found that heavy drinkers often have an unrealistic estimate of the amount of alcohol their peers consume; she assesses that campus recovery programs can work to correct these assumptions by working with student regarding campus norms of alcohol consumption.

Finch (2004) points out that two main concerns for college administrators are student retention and substance abuse. The number of campus recovery programs, however, does not reflect the administrators' understanding that one concern is linked with the other in terms of students with a chemical dependence. Due to the over-popularization of alcohol and illegal substances on college campuses and the social environment it creates, many students state they are simply not ready to give up alcohol or drugs (Moore, 2005; Wu et al., 2007).

Several factors contribute to the creation of this environment, such as distance from parents, large-group social events, membership in social organizations, athletic events, and community residency, all of which can support and contribute to social drinking behavior (Baer, et al., 2001).

Many students in recovery have expressed their desire to find an environment where they are not exiled from the mainstream due to their substance-free lifestyle. It is often hard to find a well-balanced group of friends who do not drink or who are tolerant and respectful of those who do not drink or use drugs (Cole, 2004; Karlin-Resnick, 2004). Because currently such an environment is difficult to find, an overwhelming majority of alcoholics and drug addicts who return to their previous environments relapse, particularly students on college campuses. This leads to many newly sober students taking extended, sometimes permanent, leaves of absence from college (Cole, 2004; Finch, 2004). Campus recovery programs are one avenue college administrators can take to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students in recovery.

Humphreys and Noke (1997) found that in the United States, 12-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA), are the most prevalent type of support group, as well as the most common source of help for those in recovery. Cleveland et al. (2007) have shown there is a greater probability of long-term abstinence when one is affiliated with such a group. Often AA or NA members stay involved in the organization due to the positive social connections they have formed and use AA or NA as a social resource (Cleveland et al.). These findings reflect the same sentiment many students expressed about finding a social environment where they feel comfortable about being in recovery and not surrounded by the social triggers that enabled their dependency before treatment. As will be discussed later, many current campus recovery programs use AA or NA meetings as one key component of the recovery process for their programs.

Barriers Against the Development of Campus Recovery Programs

Based on college student drinking trends and the positive impact of 12-step programs, the need for campus recovery programs is easily identified. However, four major barriers stop campuses from developing this type of program, including funding, stigma, lack of awareness and limited research (Cellucci, Krough & Vik, 2006; Finch, 2004; Karlin-Resnick, 2004). Funding a program on campus typically requires the money be used for the maximum number of participants possible, especially when competing with other programs for limited funds. Because recovering students represent a small percentage of the total student body

on a college campus, administrators are unlikely to spend money on a program which will only benefit a small number of students (Colleges push for services for recovering addicts, 2004). Many college administrators do not see the necessity of providing on-campus recovery services if there is a large number of off-campus locations for similar services (Karlin-Resnick, 2004). Specifically in larger towns and cities, AA and NA meetings can often easily be found at off-campus locations. Many campus officials refer their students to these locations without regard for the students' comfort or recovery in an unknown environment.

The fear of stigmatization by multiple parties is another barrier to developing recovery programs for chemically dependent college students. First, in the college recruiting environment many colleges do not want to portray an image of an alcoholic student body. Institutional image is an important tool used to recruit potential students and their parents. Many institutions, however, feel that advertising on-campus recovery services may damage their image for potential students, many of whom may not need services of a campus recovery program (Finch, 2004). There is a common social stigma attached to receiving professional treatment. Many students attach this stigma to themselves or fear that others might attach it to them. Cellucci et al. (2006) attributes this fear to the significantly low number of students seeking help. Once they admit to having a problem and receive treatment, many students are then concerned they will be stigmatized for participating in the on-campus program. They worry they will be exiled from their environment or social network. For example, if the campus recovery program has specific alcohol-free housing, students may worry they are being stigmatized for living in the specialized housing, and may then choose not to share where they live with their peers, thus resulting in isolation (Cole, 2004).

Lastly, there is a general lack of awareness and limited research available regarding this student group. Most people underestimate the number of chemically dependent college students and their specific needs (Finch, 2004). The campus recovery programs which support these students are also generally unknown, due in part to the aforementioned fear of stigmatization by universities, as well as the limited research on these programs. Little research has been done on the impact of these programs or to encourage awareness of the medical problem faced by many of today's college students (Finch, 2004).

Examples of Programs on College Campus

The first campus recovery program began at Rutgers University in 1983, how-

ever many other programs have been developed since then, and none seem to be completely identical because there is not a specific model on which campus recovery programs should be based (Karlin-Resnick, 2004). However, what these programs do have in common is the focus on chemical dependency and the students' commitment to recovery. Most campus recovery programs are not punitive or a result of criminal sanctions, but rather an option for students seeking support while trying to maintain or improve their academic standing (Karlin-Resnick, 2004).

Although the programs are voluntary, students must demonstrate a commitment to a drug and alcohol-free lifestyle prior to entering the program. Students demonstrate this commitment through a variety of ways. For example, some programs may require a sobriety minimum, such as at least one year at Texas Tech University (Karlin-Resnick, 2004). Other institutions, such as Case Western Reserve University, require students to submit academic and recovery goals prior to entering the programs as another way of showing their commitment to sobriety (Gose, 2000).

Although each institution differs on several components of their respective recovery program, it seems that each recognizes the importance of using 12-step programs as a core element of the program. Meeting attendance requirements are an integral component of most programs (Cole, 2004; Finch, 2004; Gose, 2000; Karlin-Resnick, 2004). The requirement of attendance not only reinforces the idea of long-term abstinence through a 12-step program, but also shows that the student is serious and committed to sobriety. The 12-step meetings are held on-campus so students may form support groups and a connection with peers to help maintain their sobriety. Along with these meetings, some programs offer specialized housing, on and off-campus, for their students so they do not need to share a room or an environment with their former drinking friends (Colleges push for services for recovering addicts, 2004; Karlin-Resnick, 2004). These programs work to encourage students to develop a new social norm for themselves, as well as work against the perceived social stigma of being in recovery.

Future Research

As previously stated, little research has been conducted concerning chemically dependent college students and specialized support programs on college campuses. The need for such programs is demonstrated through studies of drinking behaviors and the increasing trend in binge drinking among college students.

Several programs have been developed to meet the needs of these students, however there have not been studies showing the impact of such programs on the long-term abstinence or academic achievement of students in these programs. Qualitative studies should be done to explore how current and former students in such campus recovery programs assess the programs. Studies should explore the overall experiences of the students, as well as the specific positive and negative aspects of the programs from a student perspective. Since many campuses choose to refer their students to off-campus recovery services, quantitative research should be done comparing the success rates of these students to students with on-campus support. This research can then be used to create a best practice model to be used as a benchmark for all colleges to use and adapt to their campus. More research and literature is needed to fully understand the impact of these programs and how higher education can benefit as a whole.

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