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Article 14

Recovering College Students: Practical Considerations for College Counselors

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The substance of choice for most college students, alcohol, is readily available and plays a part in the college socialization process (Prendergast, 1994). Recent prevalence data of drinking on college campuses indicates that 85% of college students reported having tried alcohol (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2009), while a particular subset of college students (40%) drinks “heavily,” defined as five or more drinks in a row (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman & Schulenberg, 2009). A study of more than 14,000 students at 119 U.S. colleges reported frequencies of DSM-IV diagnoses for alcohol abuse and dependence at 31.6% and 6.3%, respectively (Knight, Wechsler, Kuo, Seibring, Weitzman, & Schuckit, 2002).

A review of the literature concerning the recovering college student yielded few articles. Two articles, based on anecdotal evidence, described recovering college students as “gifted and self-destructive” (Bratter, Parker, & Pierson, 1995, p. 23), or “bright and angry” (Bratter & Parker, 1994, p. 23). Several articles described services such as a supportive counseling group (Bauer, 1994) or a project that involves recovering students volunteering in alcohol and other drug abuse prevention activities on campus (Rapaport, Minelli, Reyes, & Norton, 1992). The need for sober student housing also was addressed (Donovan, 1989; Pimental & Malaney, 1993).

Doyle (1999) surveyed college and university personnel to explore whether services were provided specifically for recovering students. Findings indicated that there may be a significant number of recovering college students on campuses and that services for these students do not appear to be widely available. Doyle called for future empirical research to learn more about recovering college students, particularly concerning their needs as a hidden group of students on college campuses. Despite this call for research, there has been only one other study to date that involved recovering college students (Cleveland & Harris, 2010). This study used a daily diary method to study patterns of cravings among college students who were maintaining abstinence from substance use as they navigated through negative affect states and various social experiences on campus (Cleveland & Harris, 2010). No other studies conducted to date specifically focus on recovering college students.
This qualitative study was conducted as a starting point for filling this gap in the literature. Themes were developed from the data obtained from three recovering students who volunteered to tell their stories. The themes that are presented here highlight what college counselors who are interested in helping this non-traditional population need to consider.

**Method**

**Research Site and Sampling Plan**

A Mid-Atlantic, public university served as the research site for this study. Only one university was chosen because this qualitative study was context specific and was not designed to make comparisons across university settings. A report regarding the 1999-2000 academic school year by the executive director of the student health center at this university showed that there were 88 student visits to the emergency room that were alcohol related. In addition to acute intoxication, these students were diagnosed with anxiety, gastritis, coma, respiratory failure, scalp and facial lacerations, fractures, sexual assault, and depression. Since 1989, one to three deaths each year were associated with alcohol. This background provides some context for the environment from which participants were recruited.

Participants were selected following the logic of purposeful sampling, which requires that information-rich cases be chosen. More specifically, “intensity sampling” (Patton, 1990) was used, selecting cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest with a certain intensity so as to be interesting, but without being extreme or deviant cases where they might “be so unusual as to distort the manifestation of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 1990, p. 171).

Three students volunteered for this study after being told about the project by the faculty advisor. They were currently enrolled students with undergraduate status who self-identified as being in recovery from substance abuse. “John” was a transfer student from a community college whose substance abuse history included severe binge drinking in high school. His story included the significant consequences of going from outstanding academic achievements to repeated stays in mental hospitals and rehabilitation programs. “Sandra” was a binge drinker in high school whose substance abuse escalated on campus, resulting in a medical leave after one semester in college. She returned to the university for her second semester following an outpatient treatment program. “Sal” also transferred from a community college; however, he was a polysubstance abuser who lost a ROTC scholarship in his first attempt at an undergraduate education. Both “Sal” and “John” were in their mid-twenties when they transferred to the university. “Sandra” was twenty years old.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the research site approved the investigation, and the access that was granted by the IRB and the participants was honored and protected.
Procedure

Research Objectives

The first objective of this qualitative study was to present examples of recovery among the undergraduate student population. The primary process for collecting data was in-depth individual interviews about the participants’ life stories. The personal accounts of these students were the backbone of this research, i.e., their stories provided the data that was shaped into case studies about their experiences with substance abuse and recovery as undergraduates. The full case studies can be found in a published dissertation (Woodford, 2002). The second objective was to develop themes across cases. These themes are presented here to offer insight for college counselors about the clinical needs of recovering college students.

Research Questions

Several general questions guided the research: a) How do the students define themselves in recovery? b) What was their experience with substance abuse and how did they come to be in recovery? c) What is their present experience of being in recovery? d) Are there factors that either inhibit or support recovery while they are students at the university? If so, what are these factors?

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis: Qualitative Inquiry

The nature of the research called for qualitative methodology because the interest is in understanding meaning perspectives, i.e., how individuals experience recovery from substance abuse within a given context, specifically an undergraduate setting. Two specific approaches to qualitative research offered beginning guidelines for the collection of data for this investigation -- Phenomenological research methods (Moustakas, 1994) and Grounded Theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Both approaches have been put forth as the most applicable forms of qualitative research for the counseling profession (Nelson & Poulin, 1997). Phenomenological methods served to guide data collection, particularly the format of the interviewing process (Seidman, 1998). The grounded theory paradigm informed the entire process of data collection and analysis.

The most distinguishing feature of the in-depth phenomenological interview model is the conducting of a series of three separate 90-minute interviews with each participant. The first two interviews took place in the fall semester and were at least one week apart, and no more than one month apart. Interview three, the final interview of the series, took place in the middle of the spring semester, and was approximately three months after the first two interviews. The interviews were spaced in a manner that helped triangulate information over time (through one full academic cycle), as well as elucidate any possible processes that might change throughout the academic year in response to specific events (e.g., mid-terms, final exams, or holiday breaks, etc.).

Data Organization

Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software, specifically ATLAS/ti (Barry, 1998), was used to increase the ability to systematically analyze the large amount of data that came from approximately 20 hours of interviews. To develop themes across cases, the process of open coding was employed by reading the text derived from the
interviews line-by-line, and attaching codes, or meaning units, to segments of text. Open coding sessions produced a total of 1064 codes, which were condensed into 12 themes.

Although the primary method of data collection was in-depth individual interviews, the researcher also was a participant observer at open recovery meetings. No material was recorded from these recovery meetings. The researcher merely observed as a way to possibly verify information obtained in the individual interviews, e.g., observing a participant celebrate a recovery anniversary when the participant had stated in the interview that this would occur at the recovery meeting.

**Validity Issues**

In judging the validity of the findings, the following questions were asked that reflect Straus and Corbin’s (1998) research philosophy: 1.) Do the themes fit the data? (Are the developing themes grounded in the data?); 2.) Are the themes dense? (Do the properties and dimensions of the themes have descriptive depth or density?); and 3.) Are the themes clear, consistent, credible?

In addition to the grounded theory questions concerning validity, traditional qualitative methods for a rigorous study were employed. For example, member checking occurred specifically in the third individual interview, and then again as participants were asked to read their case studies for accuracy and appropriate use of quotations in context. Triangulation occurred through observations at recovery meetings and by interviewing participants in-depth over an extended period of time. Finally, two peer reviewers audited and examined the data collection methods and analysis at different stages throughout the research process. There are noted limitations in terms of generalizability of the findings to larger populations of recovering college students. However, the study has internal validity through the use of thick descriptions for the case studies (Woodford, 2002) and developing themes. The study also has qualities that Lincoln and Guba (1985) call “transferability,” in that, contextual information is provided for readers to decide whether the results will transfer to other cases with similar characteristics.

**Results**

Through a cross case analysis, themes were created that shed light on the experiences of recovering college students as they attempted to navigate the landscape of a four-year undergraduate institution. These themes are focused primarily on the time period from when they entered the university to the present.

One point needs to be made before discussing the themes. These students have all experienced some form of substance abuse treatment, and they have found a stable level of recovery through the program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA; 1976); “stable” meaning that they have all been sober for at least one year and have been followed throughout one full academic cycle in recovery. The sampling plan for this research did not include choosing only members of AA, however, only AA members emerged in response to the call for participants, and therefore one of the obvious themes is that AA, and certain language that is found in the AA tradition (“sponsorship,” “the program,” “the steps,” etc.) is infused throughout the results section.
Adapting to the College Environment

Shock of the campus environment. Whether one returns to the university after being on medical leave for substance abuse treatment, or one has been sober for a few years and is returning for a second attempt at an undergraduate education, there is a certain level of environmental “shock” that occurs. John elucidates this phenomenon: “I can remember trying to eat my breakfast. I had to clear away the beer, a case on one side, and a six pack on the other, to get a little space on the table so that I could eat my cereal and go to school.”

One student discussed how he had been warned by a community college professor not to get involved in the heavy drinking scene on campus. Ironically, the professor did not know that the student was in recovery: “He just said he had had students transfer from the community college, and then have alcohol problems after that, and to ‘watch out for it’, type deal.”

Response from the administration. The recovering college students in this study looked upon a broad spectrum of positive responses from the administration favorably. A permanent substance abuse prevention program was created and an alcohol-free “coffee house” was established during their time at the university. The coffee house was seen as an alternative to fraternities and sororities: “Those things help.”

Sandra, who came to her most difficult period with substance abuse on campus, received a very positive response from the administration. Once she admitted that she had a problem and that she needed help, the administration started “supporting her all the way.” They offered her medical leave instead of suspension from college and placed her in a dorm that was centrally located on campus when she returned, making access to services and academic buildings easier.

The importance of social support. There was clearly a period of adapting to college life that was turbulent, even for the students who had been in recovery for several years prior to coming to the university. Given that the environment tested these students’ recovery efforts, and that the administration responded in a variety of ways, how did these students fare in terms of adapting to the environment? The theme of social support emerged as a factor that supported their efforts while they were at the university.

Upon arriving on campus, these students sought out and found a social support network that was akin to the network that they had experienced in the communities where they had established themselves as recovering individuals. One student described this phenomenon as an “automatic support network” that “a lot of college students don’t have.” For these students, the AA community welcomed them with substantive support, including: time and attention through sponsorship and other activities that were non-alcohol related, transportation to meetings in the community, and through a “gratitude email list” that connected recovering college students through an electronic medium.

The campus recovery meeting was a special part of the social support network for these recovering students. It occurred on Saturday nights at 9:30 in a prestigious building that was centrally located on campus. The campus recovery meeting became a place for recovering college students to meet other recovering college students and to find sponsorship, a key aspect of the participants’ recovery efforts. The participants talked about the importance of this relationship during their first attempts at staying sober and throughout their recovery. Sandra spoke about meeting her sponsor at the campus recovery meeting. Sal described the relationship with one of his sponsors as being the
source for his “concrete sobriety.” John spoke about having a sponsor who was a member of the professional community in the area who had successfully navigated the difficulties of a rigorous academic course load that was similar to John’s while maintaining his recovery.

**Recovery and Academics**

**Finding balance.** Several themes directly related to academic study were identified. Two of the students struggled with balancing their academic endeavors with their recovery efforts: “How do I keep sobriety number one when I spend so much time doing schoolwork?” or “How do I balance AA and school and all the other things that I want to do?” When John and Sal felt unbalanced in their lives, it was due to overwork in terms of their academics. The antidote to feeling unbalanced was a return to the AA fellowship.

In discussing her experiences as a recovering college student, Sandra did not mention struggling with balancing recovery and academics. The reason for Sandra’s absence of experience with this theme may be about her need to be involved with many activities at once. Her lifestyle in recovery may be demanding of her time and energy, but she may be actually thriving on this dynamic.

**The influence of recovery: Choices and attitudes.** Recovery as a way of being affects the choices that these students make about their academic work. Students’ choices of a major of study may be influenced by their desire to “give back” to society by choosing an academic path that could lead to service work as a career or avocation. Their choices about subjects for papers or class projects are influenced by their experiences in recovery. For example, Sal spoke about writing a paper on AA as an unusual form of social organization. He also chose to study shamanism as a metaphor for those members of AA who have nearly died from their substance abuse, but have survived to help others overcome their afflictions. These students have listened to suggestions from their sponsors about taking classes that are enjoyable, or taking classes that stretch their experiences beyond the average requirements in their discipline. This latter suggestion has resulted in another theme that emerged, a new attitude towards learning.

The statement by Sandra that, “college isn’t for the diploma anymore, it’s for knowledge and the journey,” accurately reflects this theme. An “education” is seen as much broader than an event that ends once the diploma is conferred. There is a love of “soaking up new knowledge” during a lifetime of learning that these students attribute to their changes of attitude about life that has occurred as a direct result of their recovery.

**Twelve-Step Principles on Campus**

The three additional themes that emerged, i.e., service, self-disclosure, and spirituality, may be directly related to the principles of AA.

**Service on campus.** The 12th step of Alcoholics Anonymous states: “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” This step encourages helping other “alcoholics,” but has been extended by these recovering college students to mean helping other people in general (service work) in any way that one is able to (“in all our affairs.”)
Two of three participants either were or will be resident staff members (RA’s) in college housing. Sal, who was graduating at the end of this academic year, had spent the last year as an RA on a first year dorm. He specifically chose a first year dormitory because the period of his most intense escalation of substance abuse occurred when he was a first year college student. His thinking was that he could possibly help someone like himself who might be heading down a self-destructive path during the transition phase of adapting to college life. Ironically, in the academic year following the interviews, Sandra will be an RA in the same dorm from which she was asked to leave when she was “hitting bottom” in terms of her substance abuse. Like Sal, she wants to be of help to any student who may be having difficulties with substance abuse. She describes her RA’s as having been instrumental and supportive in her recovery process.

**Self-disclosure on campus.** Self-disclosing about one’s substance abuse and recovery is a theme that these students have reflected upon from the beginning of their recovery efforts. The process of self-disclosing ran along a continuum of no disclosure to full disclosure, depending on the circumstances. For example, John shared that prior to coming to college, he had experienced a few negative instances with a boss and some former friends that influenced his choice to rarely self-disclose. In addition, his sponsor’s position on the issue affected his stance, in that, his sponsor’s professional status in the community served as a reason for his reluctance to self-disclose, a sentiment that John shared during his initial time at college. However, this position changed over the course of his time at the university. One positive instance that John relayed was in his choice to self-disclose to his girlfriend early in the relationship, which “just took a huge weight off of my shoulders.”

Sal described his choices about self-disclosing as a “mixed bag.” On the one hand, he might tell someone that he “used a lot of drugs” (or drank a lot of alcohol), “but don’t anymore,” and leave it at that. On the other hand, he might tell a close friend that he was an “alcoholic” or “drug addict” in recovery, and a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The theme of self-disclosure connects to the theme of “service work.” Sharing their stories with individuals who may be suffering from substance abuse, or perhaps with the family members of someone who is struggling with this issue, is one possible way to help others. Sal’s disclosure about his recovery in class brought about a very positive response from his classmates and his fellow residence life staff.

Despite some reluctance to self-disclose, these students have received positive feedback when they chose to do so. Sandra disclosed her substance abuse when applying for the RA position because she needed to explain several disciplinary actions that were taken against her by the administration after she had the experience of “hitting bottom.” Sal had applied to graduate school for social work and was accepted. In his personal statement, he shared about how his story was a significant reason for his application to graduate school. John applied for the prestigious residence during his final year of college, and was accepted by a committee of his peers.

**Spirituality on campus.** The final theme that emerged from this study involved spirituality and recovery. These students experienced “spiritual aspects” in their recovery efforts that were woven throughout their stories. As stated, this spiritual outlook may be a result of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous that suggests developing a “conscious contact with God as we understood Him” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976, p. 76). These
students read spiritual books, studied subjects for class concerning spirituality, and talked about how important their relationship with their “Higher Power” was to their recovery in every aspect of their life— from their choice of a college major, a job or a vocation, to their choice of friendships. When these students were asked to make meaning about how they see substance abuse and recovery in their lives, they all began by saying how it had resulted in a spiritual awakening of some kind.

**Discussion**

**Practical Implications for College Counselors**

In order to grasp the practical implications of these findings, one must imagine what adapting to college life can be like for these recovering college students. As indicated above, there is a shock to one’s system in terms of the exposure to alcohol and peer behaviors associated with alcohol use on campus. From these students’ perspectives, helping them to find the recovery support networks on campus (and in the larger community) can be crucial. College counselors can also be advocates for these students with the administration in terms of finding appropriate housing and roommate situations that are conducive to sober living.

If students are in early recovery, then they may exhibit emotional swings that may be misdiagnosed. Sandra stated that in her first year of recovery, she was having feelings that seemed to come from nowhere and for no reason. Although these feelings may be signs of some form of diagnosable mental disorder, they may also be signs that the student is learning to deal with a full range of emotions for the first time in a number of years. Having coping strategies that help students deal with negative emotional states, such as problem solving skills (Cleveland & Harris, 2010), and careful relapse prevention plans, can help students to deal with craving states that may arise on a daily basis.

Some important practical considerations emerged from each of these student stories. For example, as Sal’s story suggests, relapse is often a part of early recovery, because one may be ambivalent about making the life changes that are necessary to stay sober. When relapse occurs, college counselors can normalize this experience and help the student to learn from the relapse, rather than feel completely demoralized by it.

As John’s story indicates, when one is first attempting to stay sober, sometimes life seems to get more difficult before it gets better. Depending on the severity of the substance abuse, medical leave may be recommended, or even strongly suggested, if an attempt at recovery through outpatient counseling leads to relapse after relapse. With the appropriate knowledge, proper referrals can be made and suggestions can be offered to students who are contemplating addressing their substance abuse issues.

Sandra felt that, even though the administration was suggesting that she take medical leave, it was her parents’ insistence that she get treatment that helped her. This brings up an interesting point. If parents are unwilling, should the administration set limits and guidelines for how students will address their substance abuse issues, which might include taking a semester off for medical leave? Perhaps legally, this coercive stance is impossible. However, a strong stance by the administration would show that they take the risks of substance abuse seriously and that after treatment, recovering college students may have tremendous potential for being productive members of the
university community, particularly in terms of their capacity and inclination for service work, as well as the diversity of experiences that they would bring to the classroom.

Sandra’s story brought up another issue that may be relevant to college counselors as well. Sandra had met no other undergraduate females in recovery on campus, despite being very active in the recovering community. Are female drinking patterns being minimized or ignored, because heavy drinking is thought to be a male problem at college? Are we underestimating the need for females to get treatment, or are there simply fewer females abusing substances? The answer to these questions will require future research. It may be significant that there were no other female undergraduates in recovery that Sandra knew about on a campus with approximately 15,000 students.

Another implication for college counselors was indicated through Sandra’s comment when she was talking about the invisible suffering that occurs for college students who are in the depths of their abuse. She said that a great justification for not addressing one’s substance abuse problems is that, as a college student at a prestigious undergraduate institution, one can easily say: “I’m not an alcoholic… I’m at a prestigious school… and I’m not failing out… and I don’t have any health problems from using other than feeling hung-over from time to time,” etc. Students may appear functional in their outer lives (passing grades, no legal difficulties, etc.), but in their inner life, they may be struggling to exist with a substance abuse problem. The substance abuse could go undiagnosed if a student appears to have minimal problems in her or his outer life.

Lastly, as these students indicated, spirituality was a key piece for their recovery efforts. Being open to discussions about spirituality, and understanding and supporting their spiritual needs, may be an important piece in helping these students to find stability in their lives on campus.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this investigation. First, the students were all members of 12-Step recovery groups. If there are students in recovery due to other forms of intervention or treatment, such as Rational Recovery or motivational interviewing counseling, they may have very different experiences in dealing with their substance abuse issues. Second, the participants were students at a mid-sized public university that was located in a predominately suburban community in a Mid-Atlantic state. There may be significant differences in the experiences of students at smaller schools, schools in predominately urban environments, or in a private school setting. Third, all of the participants were Caucasian students from middle- to upper-middle class, two-parent families. Therefore, the findings are lacking in terms of transferability to other family structures, and other socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Directions for Future Research

This investigation was a rich source for generating ideas for future research. First, there was the question raised earlier regarding whether female drinking patterns are minimized or ignored, because heavy drinking is thought to be a male problem, or whether there simply are fewer females abusing substances are worthy of investigation. Second, research comparing the recidivism rate of students who live in substance-free
housing versus students who are placed in standard college dormitories is needed. Similarly, a qualitative study could further our understanding about the ways that the administration or clinical staff can help support students living in these two different dormitory environments in their recovery efforts, which may in turn help recidivism rates in terms of dropout and/or relapse. Third, future studies could address the limitations that were noted earlier in terms of finding multiple cases across multiple sites, including, but not limited to students from other family structures, and other socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds as well as students from significantly different settings including community colleges, smaller public schools, schools in predominately urban environments, or private schools. Each of these variations across cases and sites are rich areas for future investigations.

Conclusions

Prior to this study, there was little empirical knowledge about the phenomena of recovery from substance abuse among undergraduates, specifically information from the students themselves. These research findings have implications for how university administrators, college counselors, and other college personnel address the needs of recovering college students. Furthermore, recovering college students are valuable resources for the college community. The impact of addressing their needs will have implications for confronting the broader issues of substance abuse on college campuses.

References


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