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Campus Life 101: Staying Sober

Colleges Set Up Courses, Scholarships and Centers to Welcome Recovering Addicts

By KEVIN HELLIKER

As a high school senior, Aaron Weir decided to attend Texas Tech University in Lubbock, not for any particular academic program but for the hospitality that school extends toward students in recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction.

Aaron Weir picked Texas Tech for its program to help students recovering from alcohol and drug abuse. The junior from Amarillo, Texas, receives a \$3,000-a-year scholarship for staying sober and earning high grades.

"I was 16 years old when I got clean and sober and I want to stay that way in college," says Mr. Weir, a 20-year-old business major now entering his junior year at Texas Tech. Among amenities including a sober-student hangout with study pods, pool tables and 12-step meetings, Mr. Weir receives a \$3,000-a-year scholarship from the university for earning near-perfect grades while staying sober.

A growing number of universities are following Texas Tech's model by creating so-called recovery communities, which often feature on-campus clubhouses, recreational opportunities, academic support and recovery courses.

To promote the spread of the concept, about 20 colleges this summer formed the Association for Recovery in Higher Education. On the campus of one founding member—Georgia's Kennesaw State University—the community of 50 recovering students is up from three when the program was launched in 2008.

Two Big Ten giants, the University of Michigan and Penn State University, this summer are launching recovery programs that they expect eventually to serve hundreds of students, not only addicts but also the adult children and siblings of substance abusers.

Amid rising concern about college binge drinking, no-alcohol social groups are springing up on many campuses to offer students a drug- and alcohol-free route to having fun. Sue Shellenbarger explains.

With a starting budget of \$10,000 from university health-service funds, Michigan's Collegiate Recovery Program offers counseling, self-help recovery courses and alcohol- and drug-free activities to help students steer clear of tempting

situations. Penn State is dedicating campus space and staff to its new recovery program.

Among Americans seeking treatment for substance abuse, no demographic is growing faster than students age 18 to 24. During the decade ended in 2009, treatment providers say the number of students in that age range seeking help more than doubled, compared with a 9% jump in the 25-and-older category, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The rate of heavy alcohol use—defined as five or more drinks on five or more occasions within the past 30 days—is highest among Americans aged 20 to 22, according to SAMHSA. And within that demographic, consumption is heaviest among college students.

Students exiting treatment have long been advised to live at home and commute to class or else postpone college until possessed of a significant spell of sobriety.

"For a young person trying to stay sober, college can be a very, very difficult place," says Joseph Lee, a psychiatrist at Minnesota treatment provider Hazelden, who specializes in youths and young adults. This summer Hazelden is opening a high-end recovery dorm in New York City for students from any nearby college.

Most colleges and universities offer few if any services for students trying to get or stay clean and sober. Often, the only recovery services are off-campus 12-step meetings, typically populated by middle-aged residents of the neighboring communities, recovery experts say.

Left to fend for themselves amid opportunities and pressure to partake, students often drop out or flunk out. College administrators say booze and drug usage plays a role in the 20% dropout rate of among college freshmen.

Darian Kelly, 21, dropped out of the University of Kansas during the first semester of freshman year, and from nearby Pittsburg State University during the second semester. "I couldn't get away from booze and drugs," he says.

But he says it is easier to stay sober since he was enrolled at the College of the Ozarks, a Missouri Christian college that ranks high on the Princeton Review's list of so-called Stone-Cold Sober Schools.

"None of the students here drink or do drugs, and that makes it so much easier," Mr. Kelly says.

Texas Tech says its Center for the Study of Addiction and Recovery helps retain about 2% of tuition revenue each year, a significant amount in a school of 30,000 students. The center was originally devoted to the study of addiction, but began

offering support services and amenities to recovering students 25 years ago.

Today, about 80 students—the size of a typical fraternity or sorority—belong to the center's "collegiate recovery community." Membership requires attending a one-credit class in relapse prevention each semester, along with performing 10 hours of community service and active participation in a closely monitored recovery program.

Among the many 12-step meetings at the center, the best-attended is a weekly Cocaine Anonymous meeting, says Kitty Harris, director of the Texas Tech program.

About 50 community members qualify for \$1,000 to \$6,000 annual scholarships based on academic performance while staying sober through the recovery programs. The school doesn't test the students for drug or alcohol use. The center's \$2.5 million endowment from anonymous donors funds the scholarships, Ms. Harris says.

Over the past 10 years, center students have posted a cumulative grade-point average of 3.34, a graduation rate of 80% and an annual relapse rate of about 6%, she says.

Those numbers sound credible to officials at federal education and substance-abuse agencies, who in recent years have granted the Texas Tech program nearly \$700,000 to tell other universities about its program and how to replicate it.

"Recovery programs and other efforts of colleges and universities can help students from relapsing, as well as support them in meeting their higher education goals," says William Modzeleski, a U.S. Department of Education officer.

Students entering recovery have often put college on hold, as Tobias McKenna did after emerging from a 28-day inpatient treatment program for alcohol and drugs at Hazelden in Center City, Minn.

A dropout from Connecticut's Trinity College, Mr. McKenna returned to class only on a commuting basis, driving to St. Thomas College in Minneapolis while living in a so-called sober house with other adults in recovery.

At 27, he is four years sober, and one class short of a business degree.

Mr. Weir was kicked out of his house in Amarillo, Texas, one high school and a G.E.D. program before getting sent to a detox facility in Idaho for his alcohol addiction and drug use.

During two years at Texas Tech—an institution known as a party school—Mr. Weir has established a network of sober friends who share his interests in movies, live music and the outdoors.

"I know there's a lot of partying at TTU, but when you hang out at the recovery center you don't really encounter it," Mr. Weir says.

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