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The Campus as a Recovering Community: A Model Program for College-bound Students in Recovery

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Sarah is about to graduate from high school and like many of her peers is anxiously awaiting entrance into college. What makes Sarah's situation somewhat unique is that she is recovering from a substance abuse problem that nearly took her life. Both Sarah and her parents are apprehensive about how Sarah's newfound sobriety will fare as she leaves her current supports and faces old and new temptations in the college environment. The fears of Sarah and her parents are justified. One doesn't have to go far to hear stories about students whose fragile grasp of recovery unraveled in their transition from high school to college. Imagine the advantages if students such as Sarah could pursue their educational dreams in a recovery-supportive environment.

Having worked in the addiction treatment field for some three decades, I have often been asked for guidance from recovering students and their parents regarding this transition dilemma. However, it wasn't until recently that I discovered a most unique resource that I could share in response to such requests. Imagine a place

where recovering students are eligible for scholarship assistance based on their recovery status. Imagine a place where recovering students support each other personally and educationally. Imagine a place where vibrant support groups and personal recovery assistance exist right on campus. Imagine a place where recovering students academically outperform their student peers. That place exists on the campus of Texas Tech University (TTU) in Lubbock, Texas. Here's what I discovered on a recent visit to the campus.

A Man and a Vision

The story of the Center for the Study of Addiction at TTU begins with the story of Dr. Carl Andersen, a professor at Texas Tech, who began his own recovery from alcoholism in 1982. Andersen entered recovery with advanced degrees in theology, special education and marriage and family, and a distinguished teaching career at TTU. When "Dr. A." (as he is affectionately known today by his students) returned to the University following his own treatment, he

wanted to direct his professional as well as personal energies toward the arena of addiction recovery. That interest culminated in the opening of the Center for the Study of Addiction (CSA) in September, 1986. His original vision was to provide an academic curriculum to prepare people to work as addiction counselors. During the very first semester, however, an incident occurred that exerted a profound influence on the future of the CSA.

One of the early CSA students confessed his addiction to alcohol and cocaine and asked Dr. Andersen to help arrange his admission to treatment. While in treatment, the student and his family contacted Dr. Andersen and expressed their concern about the lack of a drug free environment in which this student could continue his college education. That conversation was a turning point. Dr. Andersen explains:

The question of how this young man could continue his recovery in a supportive environment really got the wheels turning, and I realized we needed to create that kind of recovery environment right here on campus. What emerged was a vision of a community of recovering students who lived together, worked together, went to school together, and played together.

Fourteen years later, the fruits of this vision can be seen as recovering students flow in and out of the CSA office to say hello or seek the advice of Andersen and his staff. It is quite a scene to behold: Andersen's powerful persona—tall, Texas-tanned, and ruggedly handsome with a honeyed drawl born for the pulpit—moving through the CSA reception area offering effusive praise to one student, a bit of tough love to another, and quiet counsel to still another. And equally important is the fact that these same types of interactions can be witnessed in the students' communications with each other and with the other CSA staff. This is not just a story about the achievement of one man, but a story of how one man's vision became

a recovering community and how that community became a center of academic excellence.

The CSA Program

The goal of the CSA is to enhance educational opportunities and achievement for recovering students while supporting their continued recovery and emotional growth. Requirements to enter the CSA program include a high school degree or equivalency, one year of sobriety, and a commitment to fully participate in CSA's academic and support activities. The major elements of the Center's program include:

- Dr. Andersen and two other full time staff who coordinate the program, teach classes and provide counseling support to the students. (All staff are licensed chemical dependency counselors.)
- a scholarship program that to date has provided more than \$300,000 in academic scholarships.
- a minority recruitment program that allocates nearly half of current scholarships to minority students.
- the Substance Abuse Studies Curriculum that academically prepares those students who want to pursue careers in addiction counseling or who want an academic minor in addiction studies.
- on-campus recovery support groups that meet in the "Serenity Center" several times per week with a combined attendance of more than 400 students.
- a Thursday night Celebration of Recovery gathering that regularly exceeds more than 100 students.
- a peer tutorial support program.
- an association of recovering students (Addiction and Substance Abuse Specialists) that sponsors professional development workshops and community service activities.

These elements are enveloped in a recovering community of more than 100 Texas Tech students. For Ashley Hix, a 21-year old Freshman in the CSA program, the CSA staff and her fellow students were like “instant family” when she arrived on campus. Andersen describes how a new student is integrated into this recovering community:

After visiting with me, I get them attached to two or three students who will take them to the Serenity Center, get them hooked up to get to support meetings, study groups, and social activities. They get phone numbers that become a safety net for them. From the time the student first walks in the door, they are connected to this larger community of support. They have people who they can rely on and people who will be looking out for them.

Jim Harris, an enthusiastic first year student, provided an apt description of the CSA program when he stated that it offered people another chance who through their addictions had destroyed most of their early opportunities for success.

CSA’s recovering community exudes a contagious hope and joy about the potential of recovery that permeates the larger TTU campus. Evidence of this effect is found in the fact that an average of one student per week from the larger campus enters recovery through his or her association with CSA students and activities.

Funding of the Center for the Study of Addiction has come from two major sources: early seed grants from the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse and a \$1.3 million endowment. The contributions that created the endowment constitute not just a pool of money, but a deep reservoir of pain and joy. Andersen explains:

The dollars that endow our scholarships reflect tragedies and triumphs. We have scholarships named for people who lost their lives to addiction, and we have

scholarships that reflect a deep sense of gratitude for the gift of recovery.

CSA students are provided a \$500 scholarship their first semester and then receive scholarships whose amounts are determined by their grade point averages: \$2,000 for a 4.0 GPA, \$1,500 for a 3.5 GPA, and down to \$500 for a 2.5 GPA. Scholarships are re-calculated every semester, providing a direct link between level of academic performance and level of financial support. Andersen believes that these scholarship resources are crucial in supporting students who, having burned their financial bridges during their addictions, would not have access to higher education without such financial assistance.

The Results

Since 1986, students from all regions of the country (and from other countries) have come to Texas Tech University to be part of the Center for the Study of Addiction. To date, more than 4,000 students have taken courses through CSA, 733 have successfully completed the Substance Abuse Studies Curriculum, and more than 600 recovering students have graduated with bachelor’s degrees. A study comparing the academic performance of the CSA students with those of the wider university found that the average cumulative G.P.A. for CSA students was 3.37 compared to the an average G.P.A. of 2.68 for all undergraduates at the University. CSA graduates have gone on to pursue graduate education in such areas as counseling, theology, medicine, law, and business administration.

One could surmise that the relapse rate would have to be quite low to produce such levels of academic achievement. In fact, the relapse rate of students in the CSA program has remained below five percent since its inception—a remarkable figure when one considers the high rate of relapse of young people following traditional substance abuse treatment. When relapse does occur, there is often a process of rapid re-engagement in recovery. One such student

shared what happened when she relapsed while in the CSA program.

When I relapsed, there were people here to help pull me out of that. Dr. Andersen and the staff and all the recovering students were so helpful and understanding and forgiving.

With all these recovery support activities and all those good grades, it might appear that the climate of the CSA is a most serious and somber one, but this is not the case. Enthusiasm and laughter fill the air of the CSA program. The experience of being part of the CSA is illustrated by Stephanie Beck, a fourth year student. Stephanie had failed out of two high schools before getting into recovery and graduating from a third school. She was encouraged to go to Texas Tech specifically because of the CSA program. After noting how important the recovery supports and classroom help have been to her, she describes what to many might be the most surprising element of the CSA milieu.

A lot of people would think not drinking or getting high during your college years would be pretty boring, but we have a blast. Besides, we've done all of that, and that kind of so-called fun had long ago turned to pain for us. Today, we enjoy showing people how much fun we can have sober—the kind of fun you can feel good about and remember.

When Dr. Andersen was asked to reflect on what he was most proud of as the

founder of the CSA, he offered the following reflection:

There are so many young people in recovery who are just not going anywhere. They are in recovery, but their addiction took so much from them. I think I am most proud of how many of our students have made the transition not just from addiction to recovery but from addiction to responsible, productive citizenship. They have become more than recovering addicts; they have become real people who are now giving back to their families and communities.

The Center for the Study of Addiction at Texas Tech University stands as one of the most innovative and effective approaches to recovery support that I have seen anywhere in the United States. It should be replicated in states throughout the country to provide recovering high school students and adults returning to college an environment in which education and recovery are not only compatible but inseparable.

Admission Information

Information on admissions and scholarships can be obtained by writing or calling: Dr. Carl Andersen, Center for the Study of Addiction, Texas Tech University, Box 41162, Lubbock, TX 79409-1162. (806)742-2891.