

Recovery Space in Educational Settings

William L. White



Remarks Prepared for Collegiate Recovery Day and the 2021 ARHE/ARS/AAPG Conference

William L. White, M.A.
Emeritus Senior Research Consultant,
Chestnut Health Systems

Good morning. I have been asked to share a few reflections on the rise and evolution of recovery high schools and collegiate recovery programs. I regret that advancing age, health challenges, and pandemic restrictions prevent me from being with you in person.

After more than two centuries of worldwide preoccupation with alcohol- and other drug problems, we are finally entering the age of recovery. This jarring shift in attention from pathology to the positive transformation of individuals, families, and communities is evident in many quarters. We are witnessing:

- The growth and international dispersion of secular, spiritual, and religious recovery mutual aid organizations,
- The exponential growth of online recovery support resources, now accelerating in the wake of the COVID19 pandemic,
- The emergence of resistance, resilience, and recovery as new organizing concepts at policy and service practice levels led by increased representation of people in recovery within these venues,
- Efforts to extend acute care models of addiction treatment to models of sustained recovery management nested within larger recovery-oriented systems of care,
- The expansion of peer recovery support services as adjuncts or alternatives to professional treatment,
- The exponential proliferation of new recovery support institutions: recovery community organizations, recovery community centers, recovery residences, recovery support within educational settings, recovery industries, recovery ministries, recovery cafes, recovery music festivals, and recovery adventure and sports venues,

- Mass public recovery advocacy and recovery celebration events attended by thousands of people.
- Sophisticated recovery-focused political lobbying, and
- A dramatic increase in recovery-focused research studies and the number of scientists devoting themselves to recovery research.

These and related innovations are the downstream effects of the cultural and political mobilization of people in recovery and their allies. The emergence of a new recovery advocacy movement and an ecumenical culture of recovery reflects an important historical shift. People from diverse pathways of addiction recovery are identifying themselves as “a people” with a distinct history, shared needs, and a linked destiny. As this movement transitions beyond mass mobilization and institution building, it is pushing recovery-friendly policies and practices within the arenas of law, government, health care, popular and social media, religion, business, entertainment, and education.

Recovery high schools and collegiate recovery programs are an important part of these larger shifts. They will continue to focus on their unique blend of peer-based recovery support and academic achievement, but they will increasingly extend their missions in three specific areas. First, advocacy of recovery-supportive campus/community policies and practices will rise as an increasing focus. Second, efforts will intensify to expand the physical and social space in which recovery can flourish in both campus and community environments. Third, they will extend their student support focus to the development of recovery studies as an academic area of concentration and assert recovery as a topic of legitimate scientific research. We see in these projected trends a move to transcend clinical models that focus on intrapersonal changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to ecological models that focus on creating healthy environments that elicit hope and healing. The former offers a vision of personal transformation; the latter envisions campuses and communities in which recovery is welcomed and supported.

Historically, experiential knowledge and professional/scientific knowledge have existed as two separate worlds within the alcohol and other drug problems arena. Collegiate recovery support programs and recovery studies curricula offer a potential bridge of integration between these two worlds. The future of recovery will be profoundly influenced by such integration as it will be by the shift from a narrow focus on personal support to creating the physical, psychological and social space in which recovery can flourish. Many of you will be the vanguard in this movement to bring recovery to the very heart of wounded institutions and communities.

We are at a precarious time in our national and international history. Our very culture has been wounded and is in need of recovery. As people in recovery and allies of recovery, we can play important roles in this cultural healing by conveying the lessons and values of recovery. This is what we know. Self-absorption can be diminished through open acknowledgement of one’s imperfection. The masks of grandiosity can be shed and replaced by genuine humility. Distortions of reality, projection of blame, and

scapegoating can be shed when we openly accept our brokenness, embrace our common humanity, strive for honesty with self and others, and assert personal responsibility. Personal and collective amends can mitigate past sins of omission and commission. Personal and collective excesses can give way to greater balance and harmony—from competition and conflict to compassion and care. Bitterness and resentment can give way to forgiveness and gratitude. Preoccupations with power and control, close-mindedness, and aggression can give way to tolerance, mutual identification, and mutual support. Anguished self-absorption can give way to connection to community, shared joy, and laughter. Sanctuaries can be created where people actually listen to one another without interruption or condemnation. These are among the lessons of recovery. It is time we extended our healing efforts with each other to healing the wounds of the communities and cultures we are seeking to re-enter.

Earlier generations in recovery missed this larger calling. In those years, most people entered recovery later in life and spent years healing the wreckage of the past with little time left to embrace this greater mission. Today, people are entering recovery with decades to live their lives in health and service. Education-based recovery programs are preparing a vanguard of people in recovery who have an unprecedented opportunity. Many years ago I penned an essay referencing the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell in which he noted a common structure to heroic tales: the hero's departure, the hero's transformation through great trials, and the hero's return to share the fruits of their experience. I likened the experience of addiction and recovery to these three acts, but raised the question of whether we as people in recovery had fully returned home or whether we returned to hidden closets within our communities. We have reached the time when we can and must return home.

Some of you listening to these words may not realize it, but you were born for this moment in time—born to serve as a catalyst of healing not just for individuals and families, but for whole communities and cultures. As an old man nearing the end of my own recovery ministry, I envy what lies ahead of you as you seek such a destiny. Know that you are the fulfillment of the dreams of people in recovery who came before you. We rest well knowing the baton is now in your hands. We wish you Godspeed on this journey into the future of recovery.

Bill White is Emeritus Senior Research Consultant at Chestnut Health Systems, past-chair of the board of Recovery Communities United, and a volunteer consultant to numerous recovery community organizations. A person in long-term recovery, he has a Master's degree in Addiction Studies from Goddard College and has worked in the addictions field since 1969 as a streetworker, counselor, clinical director, trainer, and research consultant. Bill has authored or co-authored more than 400 articles, monographs, research reports, and book chapters, as well as 21 books. His books include *Slaying the Dragon – The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*, *Alcohol Problems in Native America*, *Addiction Recovery Management*, and *The History of Addiction Counseling in the United States*. He is also the author of more than 340 recovery blogs. Bill's sustained contributions to addiction recovery have garnered awards from more than 20 of the field's leading organizations.

