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Recovery on Campus: An Interview with Jennifer Cervi, Collegiate Recovery Program, University of Michigan

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Introduction

There are many historical milestones in what has been referred to as the recovery school movement in the United States, including early recovery support services developed at Brown University (1977) and Rutgers University (1983), the emergence of more fully developed recovery communities at Texas Tech University (Center for the Study of Addictions, 1986) and Augsburg College (StepUP Program, 1997), and the opening of the first recovery high school—Ecole Nouvelle (now Sobriety High) in Minnesota in 1987. The growth of recovery schools led to the founding of the Association of Recovery Schools in 2002. While considerable attention has been given to the more established collegiate recovery programs, less attention has been given to such programs at their earliest stages of development. To explore this early

developmental process, Jennifer Cervi was invited to discuss the development of the Collegiate Recovery Program at the University of Michigan.

Personal Background

Bill White: Could you introduce yourself to our readers and share how you became involved in the Collegiate Recovery Program at the University of Michigan?

Jennifer Cervi: My name is Jennifer Cervi. I am an MSW intern here at the University of Michigan, and I decided to utilize my field placement for the school of social work to implement a collegiate model of recovery here at the university. We are the first Big Ten school to have a recovery program, although Penn State is now also developing a program.

Bill White: I'm very interested in what inspired your involvement in this initiative and how the program got started.

Jennifer Cervi: I am 5 ½ years clean and sober—a recovering methamphetamine addict. My addiction and recovery journeys inspired me to want to bring recovery to a college campus. Ivana Grahovac (who is now the Manager of the Center for Students in Recovery at the University of Texas) and I started a student group here three years ago called “Students for Recovery.” From that, we discovered that there were more needs than a student organization could meet. So, when I entered the school of social work, I started working with my field placement to bring a more formal model of collegiate recovery support to campus. We started working with Dr. Kate Harris and Dr. Matt Russell at Texas Tech University and last November, field advisor Mary Jo Desprez and I visited the Texas Tech program to see how their program worked and how it might be adapted for the University of Michigan.

Program Overview

Bill White: For those unfamiliar with the recovery school movement, how would you describe the collegiate recovery program at the U of M?

Jennifer Cervi: There are several components. I provide case management to the students who are within our program. That includes the availability of recovery housing from our housing department, linkage to student disability services if needed, and assistance with other challenges experienced by students in recovery. It also includes participation in our student recovery organization and networking with the AA community here in Ann Arbor as well as here on campus.

I meet weekly with students in the recovery program to provide academic and social support. We sit down and review some of the basics: “How many meetings per week are you attending? Do you have a sponsor? How are your classes in terms of balancing academic pressures with recovery support? Is your housing situation a threat or a support to your recovery? Do you need a more recovery-supportive housing environment? Are your financial support

needs being adequately met? Do you need any counseling either here on campus or through referral to outside resources? The whole process is very comprehensive and very personalized.

Bill White: You mentioned earlier the linkage to the AA community. Are there students who are also involved in NA and other recovery support alternatives?

Jennifer Cervi: There are some students who feel more comfortable going to NA, and we have Marijuana Anonymous here in Ann Arbor. Although Ann Arbor is very AA-focused, we do have other alternatives.

Recovering Student Profile

Bill White: Is there a common profile of the students who are involved in the Collegiate Recovery Program?

Jennifer Cervi: Honestly, no. They’re all very, very unique and represent a diversity of individuals by age, ethnicity, addiction histories, and life experience. There are not a whole lot of similarities except they have a desire to stay sober. We have a lot of students who were in recovery before returning to school and others who started their recovery after attending the U of M.

Staffing and Funding

Bill White: Jennifer, are you the only staff person in the program?

Jennifer Cervi: I am also advised by Mary Jo Desprez, who’s in charge of all of the U of M’s campus alcohol and other drug prevention programs. We also utilize volunteers in the program.

Students who have more sobriety—some of our grad students are 6 to 7 years sober—provide support to our younger students who are earlier in their recovery.

Bill White: How is the collegiate recovery program funded at this point?

Jennifer Cervi: We've had parents who have generously donated money, and we've also had some University Health Services (UHS) support as well. UHS has granted us funding for travel expenses to the annual Collegiate Recovery Conference, as well as funding for operating costs. Up to this point, we have been operating on a minimal budget. As the program looks into the future, the budget will include a full-time employee, a team building group for the winter semester, and possible scholarships. Individuals may donate through our online website, www.uhs.umich.edu/recovery.

Bill White: Some campus recovery programs have received sizable endowments—some from parents who had lost a child to addiction and from parents grateful for their child's recovery—that provided scholarships for students in recovery to return to school. Is that the case with Michigan?

Jennifer Cervi: That's what we're working towards; we're just not there yet. We're working with our development office to help make that a reality.

Effectiveness and Key Ingredients

Bill White: The early reports that came out of Texas Tech and other campus recovery programs noted two major findings: a very low rate of resumed alcohol and other drug use among students in the program and very high rates of academic performance. Has that also been your experience at Michigan?

Jennifer Cervi: We've only been active since September, but so far, the data seems to support those two findings. Our students are doing extremely well academically this semester, and they are very involved in the recovery community.

Bill White: What do you think are the special ingredients that make campus recovery programs so effective?

Jennifer Cervi: Number one, community. Number two, a safe place to be in recovery.

We are creating both on the U of M campus. We are reducing stigma and isolation by creating this recovery community within the larger campus environment.

Challenges and Lessons

Bill White: What have been some of the challenges of building a campus recovery program?

Jennifer Cervi: We've been pursuing this since last February, and it's been a very positive experience so far. I think the only thing that has been challenging has been working through the typical campus bureaucracy. Things just take longer than you would think, such as getting furniture for our recovery space. But overall, it has been a very smooth process. From the day that we brought Texas Tech here in February, we have had all of our primary stakeholders from the Vice President of Student Affairs to the Dean of Students on board. We expected a lot more difficulties than we've actually encountered.

Bill White: What are some of the lessons you've learned through this early process?

Jennifer Cervi: It takes time. It's a process. Also, I think recovery support is very, very different for each student. They're all very, very different.

I didn't necessarily know what to expect in the beginning. But honestly, this campus has been overwhelmingly welcoming and supportive of this movement.

Future of the Program

Bill White: What is your vision for the future of the Collegiate Recovery Program?

Jennifer Cervi: I have a vision of stable, sustainable funding that will ensure that we have an ability to reach all potential students in recovery and also that we have the ability to reach all who need our services. There are 40,000 students on this campus. My desire is to reach every single one who needs our services.

Bill White: When I was at Texas Tech, one of the things that struck me was the number of students on campus who entered recovery because of their contact with students in the campus recovery program. Are you seeing some of that at Michigan even in this early period of your development?

Jennifer Cervi: Without a doubt. We have those who did not see their drinking or drug use as a problem until they met students in recovery and heard their stories. And we have people who went through a local treatment center who had left the U of M because of their addiction, but had not thought of returning to campus to continue their education. Now they are coming back because there are supports for their recovery on campus. Both are powerful statements about what a recovery program can mean to a college or university campus.

Bill White: Do you see a time when the students in the program will be doing more formal outreach to the larger campus?

Jennifer Cervi: Without a doubt. And we're starting to do some of that in the dorms. We're trying to get to as many venues as we can, including speaking at classes on campus.

Personal Reflections

Bill White: On a personal level, what's been the best part of this process for you so far?

Jennifer Cervi: I think that this is my passion, my life's work. Seeing students have the ability to not just recover, but to live to their full potential, that's really powerful to me. I think that's why I went through everything on my journey. Now it is time to give back, to be of service. I absolutely love this work.

Bill White: Are there any incidents that you can think of since you started that capture the essence of what this program is all about?

Jennifer Cervi: I've seen some students who had struggled to get their recovery started achieve four months sobriety while simultaneously completing a semester of good academic work. That's really what it's all about. And to see this community coming together as we approach the end of the semester, that's what it's all about to me.

Bill White: I'm really struck by the passion you have for this work. Do you see yourself involved with campus-type recovery programs far into your future?

Jennifer Cervi: That is my long-term career goal. If I could write my next career step, it would be as a Program Coordinator after I graduate in April.

Bill White: Is there anything we have not touched on that would be important for our readers to understand about the Collegiate Recovery Program at the University of Michigan?

Jennifer Cervi: I think our websites are important. If readers want to know more about our program, I would encourage them to visit <http://www.uhs.umich.edu/recovery>.

This is where we're at today at our early stage of development. We will continue to grow. I appreciate you giving us the coverage because the more people we reach, the more we will grow as a recovery community.

Bill White: Jennifer, thank you for your willingness to discuss the University of Michigan Collegiate Recovery Program, and thank you for all you do for students in recovery.



Students in Recovery gathering.



Students for Recovery in front of the Michigan Union.



Students for recovery at the much anticipated Michigan versus Notre Dame football game.



Students in the Collegiate Recovery Program at the annual Big House Big Heart Run for charity.

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