

# Colleges using sober dorms to combat alcohol, drug addiction



Students attend the 2017 annual retreat for continuing and new residents at Rutgers University's Recovery House in New Jersey. Students' faces have been blurred in this image to protect their privacy. (Rutgers University)

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**O**ver 20 million young Americans started college this fall. For most of them, the next few years will be a time of intellectual challenges, new friendships and career exploration. But for many, those years will also include a lot of partying and exposure to an abundance of alcohol and drugs.

According to a 2016 report by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 1.2 million full-time college students drink alcohol, and more than 700,000 use marijuana on an average day. Binge drinking is common. More than a third of surveyed students reported binge drinking (taking five or more drinks in quick succession), according to a 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

Most students learn to navigate the college party circuit without much damage. But for those who arrive at school already struggling with substance abuse, easy access to drugs and alcohol poses a real danger. For them, living on a campus where partying is common and alcohol and drugs are readily available can be daunting.

After dropping out of the University of South Dakota because of substance abuse, Anthony, 25, of South Amboy, N.J., says he wanted to finish college but was reluctant to return to an environment where drugs and alcohol would be easily accessible. "I didn't want to take the risk," he says. (Anthony's full name has been withheld to protect his privacy.)

As many as 30 percent of college students are battling substance-use disorders, says Lisa Laitman, director of the Alcohol & Other Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "That's a lot of students who need help," she says.

## Collegiate recovery programs

To meet this need, schools are developing "collegiate recovery programs" (CRPs) that help students stay sober and remain in college. Programs typically include mental health and substance abuse counseling, addiction support group meetings, peer-to-peer support, and a wide variety of substance-free programs and social activities that help students bond and sustain their sobriety in the "abstinence-hostile environment" of college campuses. Several

programs also provide special on-campus housing, giving students a safe place to live where no drugs or alcohol are allowed and where residents support one another.

According to Transforming Youth Recovery, a nonprofit organization, the number of CRPs increased from 35 to more than 150 in just the last five years. About 50 include residence halls dedicated to sober living.

### **CRP success stories**

Cody Thompson's struggles with substance abuse began when he was 13. Growing up with an alcoholic parent and coming to terms with his sexuality (he is gay) in the small town of Crosby, Minn., Thompson says he turned to alcohol to cope. He entered the University of Minnesota but failed his classes and had to drop out after freshman year because of his abuse of cocaine and alcohol. Thompson fell into a deep depression and even considered suicide after leaving college, but nine months later, at age 19, he entered a treatment center in Bovey, Minn., and began his recovery.

As he improved, Thompson considered returning to college but was concerned about the party culture. Then he learned about the StepUp program, a CRP at Augsburg University in Minneapolis. He enrolled last January — and “my life forever changed for the better.” Thompson, now 24, says he found a new “meaning I never thought possible.”

In addition to extensive counseling services and peer support activities, the StepUp program provides on-campus sober housing at the Oren Gateway Center. Thompson has been living there and was recently accepted as a Resident Peer Advisor who gives emotional support to other residents and advocates for the university's CRP. This work “has allowed me to connect with so many students on a whole new level,” he says.

Anthony from South Amboy found what he needed at Rutgers University. Rutgers is a pioneer in this field, having established its student recovery program in 1983. Rutgers offers counseling by licensed alcohol and drug professionals, recovery support programs, academic and career support services, and substance-free social activities. It also provides a substance-free residence hall called the Recovery House.

Anthony says the Rutgers program, and the Recovery House in particular, allowed him to pursue his educational goals while staying sober because he did not feel isolated from the college community. “When you go home, you have friends who understand your situation ... people who watch out for you and can give you that social life everyone is looking for in college” without the danger of drugs and alcohol.

Anthony earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in social work and now works to support nonprofit organizations dedicated to recovery. He will celebrate six years of sobriety this December.

### **New programs in Illinois**

[Illinois State University](#) in Normal began its CRP this fall. In addition to providing counseling sessions to discuss and support a student's recovery plans, ISU has a dedicated space in its Student Services building for students to gather and get to know one another. The school will soon add weekly seminars about sobriety and recovery skills, including relapse prevention and stress management. A peer-mentoring program is also being developed, and 12-step meetings are available at several locations just off-campus.

Connecting with other sober students is crucial for recovery, says Jamie Laurson, Alcohol and Other Drug Interventionist counselor at ISU. The more a student is surrounded by peers who are sober, “the stronger (his or her) recovery is.”

Another new program is under development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Bill Roberts, associate director of the school's Counseling Center, says there are plans to set up a comprehensive recovery program in the next year or two. “It's a growing concern on college campuses,” he says.

Campus culture is hostile to abstinence, says Rutgers University's Laitman. Without CRPs, “students don't know how to navigate that environment.” But, with them, they have “a kind of oasis in the desert” that helps them sustain their recovery while taking advantage of all college has to offer.

“Some of my happiest moments in life have been in recovery,” says Thompson, reflecting on his time at Augsburg. Thompson has been sober for 18 months and is on track to earn his bachelor's degree in 2020.

*Claire Altschuler is a freelancer.*

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