



# Addictions Peer Support Programs on University Campuses



**Concordia Student Union**

Research and report by Erin Campbell

Supervised and edited by Michèle Sandiford

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## Overview

- Concordia University offers no services specifically targeting students in recovery from addiction
- Drug and alcohol use is an important concern for the student population and needs to be addressed so that affected students may maintain good health and thrive in the university community
- Peer support is recognized as an important tool in addiction recovery
- Collegiate Recovery Programs in the United States provide an effective model for on-campus addiction services

## Recommendations

- Develop definitions of peer support for addictions recovery
- Provide funding for peer support on campus
- Create guidelines to support the development of peer support on campus
  - Including training and participant-led organizational development
- Implement on campus peer support services
  - Well organized, advertised, accessible, and visible
  - Comprehensive: social activities, discussion groups, counseling, access to external resources

# Introduction

Peer recovery programs are integral to the wellbeing of students in the process of regaining their health in recovery from substance use disorder. These types of programs become helpful within the community due to academic related stress and drinking/using culture that surround the university environment. Community recovery programs combat these issues by helping individuals cope with the stressors that exacerbate health problems and recovery by providing care adapted to the needs, interests, and preferences of the participant. However, there is a lack of peer-recovery programs for people in recovery from addiction, as well as, other supports at most Canadian universities. There is also limited research available on student communities in recovery and the needs of those individuals.

In this report, addiction will be defined as follows: “Addiction is a chronic condition involving a repeated powerful motivation to engage in a rewarding behaviour, acquired as a result of engaging in that behaviour, that has significant potential for unintended harm. Someone is addicted to something to the extent that they experience this repeated powerful motivation.”<sup>1</sup>

Concordia University offers only a small portion of health services that may address drug and alcohol abuse. These students may seek out counseling services or utilize the Access Center for Students with Disabilities (ACSD) for assistance to receive some academic accommodation. However, there are significant limitations within these resources. According to the ACSD, Counselling and Development Services have long wait times, often up to one month with a maximum of ten sessions offered. Additionally, many students are not aware that they can go to the ACSD to get accommodations for their classes.

Students in recovery have different needs than other members of the university community, and are faced with significant barriers to treatment. A 2016 survey published by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction shows 47% of respondents identified system-related barriers to treatment, including “**long delays for treatment, a lack of professional help for mental health or emotional problems, cost of recovery services, a lack of programs or supports in their community**”.<sup>2</sup> Despite the effectiveness of addiction treatment for initiating recovery, only 20-50% of patients remain abstinent within the first year.<sup>3</sup> However, specialty aftercare, such as community recovery programs, lessen relapse.<sup>4</sup> During recovery, respondents reported a higher rate of furthering their education.<sup>5</sup>

As reported in Concordia’s 2018 Health and Wellness Review, we must focus on fostering a culture and community that supports student health; that a shift must be made in order for Concordians to develop a **community-centric approach towards student wellbeing**. In this vein we have the opportunity to introduce and “infuse wellbeing into the core of academic operations and services” in order to build and ensure a healthy campus community wherein every student is given the opportunities and support systems to thrive.<sup>6</sup> The Concordia Student Union has directed this research towards peer support models of recovery because these models align with a **comprehensive, community-driven approach**, and because the vast majority of Canadians find these supports important in sustaining their recovery.<sup>7</sup>



# Statistics on Canadian Drug and Alcohol Use

Universities Canada reports that **one-third of Canadians age 18-24 drink heavily**.<sup>8</sup> In a 2016 survey published by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, **82.5% of respondents reported barriers to initiating recovery**, including a “lack of supportive social networks” and “being worried about others’ perceptions of people in recovery”.<sup>9</sup> People struggling with addiction consistently report barriers to accessing treatment, community and family participation, stable housing, healthcare, education and employment.<sup>10</sup> Below are some statistics about the specific challenges students face with substance use and some information about substance use at Concordia.



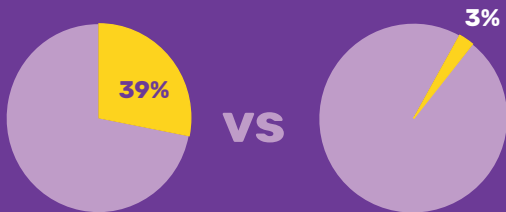
Percentage of people who report drinking at dangerous levels<sup>11</sup>

**32%** vs **26%**

UNDERGRADUATES

GENERAL POPULATION  
AGED 18-24

Rates of dropping out of school or university for people living with addictions<sup>12</sup>



PEOPLE IN  
ACTIVE ADDICTION

PEOPLE IN  
RECOVERY



1/10 undergraduate students reported having experienced alcohol-related violence<sup>13</sup>



1/10 undergraduate students reported being victims of alcohol-related sexual harassment<sup>14</sup>

**12%** 

Concordia students who report having used non-prescription drugs in the past 12 months (2013)<sup>15</sup>

Students who report having used marijuana in the past 12 months (2013)<sup>16</sup>



**20%**

CONCORDIA  
STUDENTS



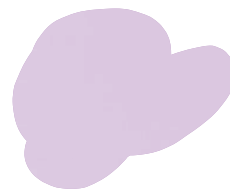
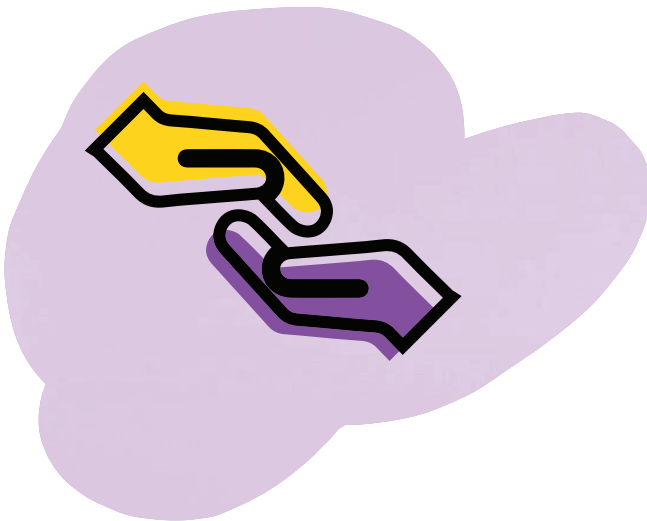
**16%**

OTHER CANADIAN POST-  
SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

# Defining Peer Support

Peer support utilizes interpersonal relationships to activate intrapersonal change, embodying participant choice, empowerment, shared decision making, cultural competency, and programming. It is adaptive to the needs of patients as they navigate their lives. The fundamental and profound role of social connections in our health has important implications for peer support programs: peer support is rooted in a basic and powerful characteristic of human beings. Services like these are a valuable tool for maintaining long term sobriety for people in addiction recovery. **They are designed and delivered by people who have experienced substance use disorder and recovery**, helping participants stay engaged during recovery and reduce risk of relapse.<sup>17</sup> Peer educators provide information and support through a lived experience perspective for peers, mental health workers, or community members.<sup>18</sup>

Sustained recovery requires a strong system of peers who are socially engaged, invested, and part of the recovery process. Groups such as these help individuals **develop a sense of belonging, one that is pivotal to identity development, engagement with schooling, as well as overall mental health care.**<sup>19</sup> Strong support networks of students can address substance-related problems among the campus community. Peer advocates empower individuals or groups of participants to advocate their rights and needs on a range of issues, while peer navigators assist people to find, choose, and gain access to a full range of community resources, networks, and services. Interventions held over long periods of time **“actively bring therapeutic components of treatment to the recovering individual** are more effective than those requiring the student to return to a facility to receive treatment.”<sup>20</sup> Peer support can use several models, ranging from professional-led groups, to individual support, to telephone or email support.<sup>21</sup>

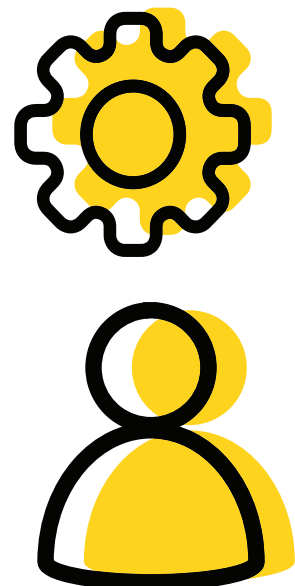


# Four Key Functions of Peer Support

- 1. Linkages to community and clinical care:** Peer supporters aid in bridging the prominent gap between those individuals seeking help and healthcare professionals. All the while encouraging them to seek out clinical advice or treatment.<sup>22</sup> Peer supporters, in addition, help those in recovery identify key resources in the community.<sup>23</sup>
- 2. Assistance in daily management:** Peer supporters utilize their personal experiences with substance abuse in order to help advocate for individuals, as well as support regarding how to navigate recovery and other conditions in their daily lives<sup>24</sup>
- 3. Social and emotional support:** Using tools like encouragement and active listening, peer supporters provide aid for those coping the with social and emotional barriers encountered in recovery.<sup>25</sup>
- 4. Ongoing support extended over time:** Peer-supporters engage with individuals for extended amounts of time through the provision of proactive, flexible, and continual long-term check ins. <sup>26</sup>

# Person-centered Principles of Peer Support<sup>27</sup>

- Affirming the individuality of people in terms of their lives and goals.
- Collaborative rather than prescriptive; providing choice.
- Peerness: non-hierarchical and reciprocal relationships.
- Reducing the insecurity many face surrounding healthcare.
- Empowering people to build self-efficacy.

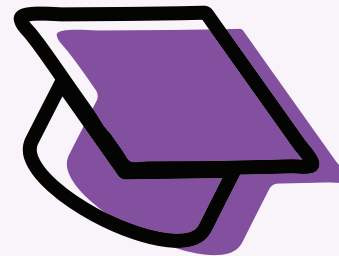


# Defining Collegiate Recovery Programs and Services

**Collegiate recovery community:** Mutual aid support groups on or near campus who gather socially to engage in sober activities. These recovery programs provide peer support within a community setting.<sup>28</sup>

**Collegiate recovery program:** Mutual aid support groups on or near campus that provide physical space for students to gather socially, participate in sober activities, and experience support in a safe environment. Accompanied by institutional acceptance and support of the collegiate recovery community, as well as the academic goals of students in recovery. These programs include the support of staff, counselors, peers, recovery coaches, and student leaders.<sup>29</sup>

Programs of this nature should be **well organized, advertised, accessible, and visible** throughout the university community. Ways to increase awareness include communicating with counseling centers, admissions, academic advising, and student residences.<sup>30</sup> Services provided should include **sober social activities for students and structured services**, including educational, counseling, and support sessions for individuals, groups, and families. Recovery centers should provide **access to community service opportunities, disability support services, and various self-help and support groups, 12 step programs, detoxification, and inpatient therapy.**<sup>31</sup> The sustainability of peer-led recovery communities and clinical services can be achieved through hiring practices and ongoing continuing education.





## Case Studies

Many post-secondary institutions in the United States offer Collegiate Recovery Programs or Communities. Specifically, the University of Colorado–Boulder offers a Collegiate Recovery Center. Founded in 2013, the CUCRC offers support meetings, weekly check-ins, monthly celebrations, peer mentorship, and orientation, as well as individualized peer coaching.<sup>32</sup> The centre is hosted in a private, permanent space, and is staffed by three paid positions.<sup>33</sup> In addition, student participants are eligible for partial scholarships, as well as being supported through academic and admissions advocacy, and referrals for addiction recovery support services.<sup>34</sup> This program is open to anyone on campus or in the local community, and some aspects of the program and services are open to allies and family members.<sup>35</sup> Participants “agree to uphold core values and follow community guidelines”; and attend weekly discussion groups, participate through active engagement with a program plan, and share support in order to help others.<sup>36</sup>

In Canada, University of British Columbia Vancouver’s Alma Mater Society launched a service in 2016 named Vice.<sup>37</sup> It is a service which aims to provide services to students in recovery and education to the community.<sup>38</sup> The approach used by the service does not require abstinence of its participants, but rather connects students with resources and provides group and individual peer-support in a non-judgemental, open environment.<sup>39</sup>

## Collegiate Recovery Fast Facts

**239** academic institutions in the USA offer resources and services surrounding peer support (2017)<sup>40</sup>

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Out of these programs<sup>41</sup>

**39%** have institutionalized recovery resources on campus

**47%** have non institutionalized recovery resources

**Services provided at these institutions:<sup>42</sup>**

**87%** Peer support

**35%** counselling or clinical support

**35%** social activities and sober fun

**39%** identify as collegiate recovery communities

**61%** collegiate recovery program

**10%** as a collegiate recovery residency program

**29%** offering recovery support referrals<sup>43</sup>

# Contributions and Benefits of Peer Support

The peer support model offers many contributions and benefits.

- Peers increase both individual and community understandings of addiction, and as such **reduce stigma**.<sup>44</sup>
- Peer supporters act as **advocates** both for individuals in recovery, as well as the community as a whole.<sup>45</sup>
- Peer centered recovery models build a relationship based on **trust** rather than expertise.
- Peer support allows for individuals to receive **practical assistance** that aids in the achievement and retention of healthy behaviours.<sup>46</sup>
- “Peer Supporters assist individuals in **cop**ing with **stressors** that exacerbate health problems and recovery.”<sup>47</sup>
- The individual receives care that is tailored to their specific needs and preferences.<sup>48</sup>

This model creates a foundation of spaces and activities that promote recovery, **fostering a democratic culture of participation**. Peer support compliments and enhances other health care services by creating emotional, social, and practical assistance necessary for managing disease and staying healthy.



# Implementation Action and Recommendations

## 1. Develop guidelines surrounding the definition of peer support as one that is a prominent component of mental health and a way to address addiction recovery:

- Define the roles and types of peer support that will be implemented.<sup>49</sup>
- Understanding of the standards and core values of peer support.<sup>50</sup>
- Define and develop peer support performance goals and outcome measures.<sup>51</sup>

## 2. Develop guidelines for the funding of peer support for addiction recovery:

- Develop a goal and deadline for the amount of mental health funding that will go towards peer support and addiction recovery communities.<sup>52</sup>
- Create a team of staff that are directly connected to mental health services.<sup>53</sup>

## 3. Create guidelines to encourage and aid the development of peer support for addiction recovery:

- The institution should provide training for both peer workers, staff, and peer advocates.<sup>54</sup>
- Offer peer communities support for participant-led organizational development.<sup>55</sup>
- Facilitate clarity throughout the roles, values, processes, and structures of peer support.<sup>56</sup>

## 4. Implement peer support for addiction recovery on campus:

- It is the institutions responsibility to ensure that services be well organized, advertised, accessible, and visible to those seeking help with recovery.
- Create and support activities and visibility, such as: social sober activities, group and individual counselling, as well as access to external resources.



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