

Investigating Service Needs and Barriers within a Collegiate Recovery Program

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Abstract:

College students experience higher rates of substance use disorders (SUDs) compared to the average population, attributable to factors such as the perception of colleges being an “abstinence-hostile” environment and low treatment rates. This population’s unique needs have contributed to increasing interest in Collegiate Recovery Programs (CRPs) to address the needs of college students with SUDs, and research has found that these programs are effective. Research about CRPs has historically focused on demographic data of participants, so research about the necessary characteristics, services, and barriers that may predict CRP effectiveness is still emerging and necessary to create a more effective, standardized model of support.

This research aims to investigate and evaluate the service needs and barriers to access within Florida State University’s collegiate recovery program using interviews with CRP participants. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews of students who identified as in recovery and who have participated in the CRP. Researchers utilized data coding to identify common themes regarding the service needs and barriers experienced by participants within the program.

Thematic coding revealed that the most frequently cited service needs included diverse resources within the CRP and social connections/peer support within the program. Students also identified clearly defined expectations and self-advocacy mechanisms as service needs. Students frequently identified campus-wide recruitment difficulties as a barrier. Students also referenced the lack of sober housing and limited program availability for commuters, off-campus students, graduated students, and students on break as barriers. These results revealed the most prevalent service needs and barriers to access for participants in a campus CRP.

The results can contribute to improving the program (and other CRPs) by using it as a guiding framework to implement program features that students cite as being pivotal to recovery as well as mitigate barriers to the CRP

Background:

- Collegiate Recovery Programs (CRPs) are programs within universities aimed at providing support to students in recovery from substance use disorders (SUDs) via (including but not limited to) providing peer support, drug-free spaces on-campus, sober housing, and cultivating environments that wellness (Laudet et al., 2016).
- College-aged adults and college students have a higher risk for SUD than any other age group, and the majority of college students with SUDs do not receive treatment (Arterberry et al., 2020). Because college is seen as an “abstinence-hostile environment,” CRPs have the potential to provide for the unique needs of college students with SUDs (Burns et al., 2024).
 - This claim is supported by the available evidence: Students who participate in CRPs have higher GPAs, higher retention and graduation rates, and lower relapse rates compared to those not involved in CRPs (Laudet et al., 2015).
- Most research has focused on the characteristics of CRPs and participants rather than the features of CRPs or the needs of students in recovery (Kollath-Cattano et al., 2017). More research is needed to understand these aspects of CRPs and their participants, as these features can predict and shape underlying mechanisms of CRPs that contribute to participant success and a more effective, standardized model for CPS (Burns et al., 2024).
- Our study aims to identify the service needs and barriers to access for students in recovery who are involved with LIFT, FSU’s CRP, for the purpose of improving the program and other CRPs.
- Guiding question: What are the potential barriers and service needs of current lift CRP members and university students who have engaged with LIFT services?



Recruitment flyer



References

Methods and Results:

- The target population (students who are members of LIFT or have utilized LIFT services) are recruited by advertising during LIFT meetings, placing flyers for recruitment around campus, and snowballing.
- The needs and barriers to LIFT access for the targeted students are evaluated in a semi-structured virtual interview lasting 20-30 minutes.
- Data is gathered through asking questions about their recovery journey, the influence of the LIFT program, what needs of theirs (and other students in recovery) aren’t currently being met, and what barriers exist to access LIFT resources on campus.
- Data gathered is analyzed via thematic data coding. Researchers review interview transcripts identify specific codes from the data (e.g. late night studying) that are developed and consolidated into larger themes (e.g. academic burnout) that represent the meaning of the data and answer the research question.
- These themes are then named and described to present results addressing the research questions.
- Through thematic coding, participants of FSU’s LIFT program were found to have distinct but unifying service needs and barriers that would improve the efficacy of the program if addressed.
- Students referenced multiple major service needs. This included diverse campus resources (physical and mental health, academic and career support, social events, and other programming focusing on “holistic wellness), social connectedness, clear expectations and accountability measures (details varied from person to person), and opportunities for leadership.
- Students also expressed numerous barriers to the program that they or other students experienced. Students referenced recruitment issues, with participants being deterred because of stigma associated with recovery and the campus’s “abstinence-hostile” culture.
- Physical distance and lack of availability during breaks and post-graduation also made LIFT services difficult to access. Lack of sober housing to create a consistent substance-free environment was cited as a recovery barrier.
- Students also cited barriers that were unique to FSU’s environment. Students of color are more vulnerable to substance use and the LIFT lounge is directly above the floor that hosts CARE (services for first generation and marginalized students), but most CARE students are unaware of LIFT and collaboration is minimal.

Conclusion:

- Our results indicate that, as per the research question, participants of FSU’s LIFT program experience numerous service needs and barriers to accessing the program. For service needs, this includes but is not limited to peer connectedness, diverse resources within the program, and accountability and self-advocacy mechanisms within the program. For barriers, this most prominently include recruitment issues and lack of accessibility of services due to distance, school breaks, and graduation.
- By identifying student needs and barriers, this data is contributing to emerging research examining individual and program factors that predict recovery, helping develop a more effective, standardized recovery framework. Utilizing qualitative data in the form of personalized interviews greatly facilitates altering and developing FSU LIFT programming to accommodate its students’ needs
- However, there are limitations in our research.
- Our sample size was small, limiting diversity of opinion and therefore applicability to the LIFT program and other programs.
- Our sample size also lacks diversity, being predominately white. As raised in other research, the lack of diversity enables the potentially different or more acute recovery needs of minorities to go unaddressed.
- Because our study only targeted participants of the LIFT program, we could not gather data from students who were interested in or would benefit but the program but did not join, potentially because of barriers discussed in this study.
- Research evaluating service needs, barriers, and other specific predictors of success should continue to develop more effective standardized care models for collegiate recovery programs. Particular attention in future research should be paid to minority access to collegiate recovery programs to address historical underrepresentation in research and understand how minority student needs may differ from other students.