Doing it Right: How The Claremont Colleges Unite to Support Eating Disorder Recovery

The bad news about eating disorders on campus: A certain northern California university has received recent negative media attention due to a reported inability to provide consistent and coordinated care for students with eating disorders. The good news: A shining example of how to do the job well is only six hours away down south in Claremont.

Claremont, California, is home to a unique consortium of seven colleges that are all part of one university system. The Claremont Colleges, as they are officially known, include Pomona College, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont Graduate University, Scripps, Harvey Mudd College, Pitzer College, and Keck Graduate Institute. And that’s not the only thing that’s unique in Claremont.

Unlike many colleges and universities where mental health services and student health services seem to reside on different planets, The Claremont Colleges provide a unified service for students with eating disorders - the Eating Disorder Task Force. By taking on the responsibility of communication, The Claremont Colleges’ Eating Disorder Task Force allows students with eating issues to focus on their recoveries and school priorities, rather than navigating through interdepartmental confusion.

The task force is made up of representatives from Monsour Counseling and Psychological Services (MCAPS), Student Health Services (SHS), and Health Education Outreach (HEO). Providers from the three services collaborate on an individual, case-by-case basis as well as meet as a consultation group to
discuss student needs and concerns. Once a month, the task force meets with representatives from the Student Disability Resource Center, the Athletic Department, and other departments to ensure that no student falls through the cracks.

A Claremont student with eating issues can take many paths to receiving services, depending on which department identifies the need. For example, students have found their way to the task force through doctors and nurses at SHS, after confiding in a dean, when seeking counseling at MCAPS, or by asking for nutrition advice at HEO. Other paths to assistance are through the Student Disability Resource Center, the Athletic Department, or simply by self-referral.

Regardless of how the young adult finds his or her way to the task force, each student is provided with a physical exam and ongoing medical monitoring at SHS, diagnostic testing and counseling at MCAPS, and temporary nutrition counseling at HEO. If the student's needs exceed what is available on campus, the task force members assist students in making appointments with off-campus providers. When needed, the task force also can help coordinate an extended support system which may include parents, deans, and other on- or off-campus services.

In addition to professional help and support for students starting out in treatment, the task force is also a resource to students who are stable in their eating disorder recoveries. Elisa Hernandez, MCAPS Psychologist and Task Force member, leads an ongoing weekly eating disorder support and therapy group called Nourish, as well as a four-session “Body Image Boot Camp” workshop series. The task force also ensures that recovery-oriented safe spaces are available on the Claremont campuses. HEO, the Mental Health Alliance, and the Body Positive Club all provide places for students in recovery to gather or to find a quiet place to “just be.”

For students flirting with the idea of getting help who are not ready to approach the task force or one of its branches in person, The Claremont Colleges website offers a variety of online resources, including self-tests and informational links.

While the task force provides care to students with identified eating disorders and those stable in recovery, it also fulfills a concurrent mission of educating the larger Claremont community on eating disorders and how to help fellow students. The task force offers ongoing trainings for resident advisors, student leaders, athletic trainers and coaches, staff and faculty, and student affairs personnel. Recently the task force developed an “Eating Disorder Decision Tree” to help members of the community determine what steps to take when they have eating-related concerns.

An example of student comments during the Self-Care Festival at The Claremont Colleges’ Eating Disorder Awareness Week events. Photo courtesy of Whitney Tavone
Although working behind the scenes every day of the year, The Claremont Colleges’ Awareness Week is in February each year. In 2015, the task force sponsored educational presentations and more to raise awareness of eating disorders and body image issues. The “Self-Care Festival” included yoga classes, free chair massages, eating disorder screenings, body positive canvas paintings, a “Love Your Selfie” photo booth, and information from six eating disorder treatment centers. The task force also arranged a place in each campus dining hall where students could post positive notes for themselves and each other. As a whole, the Eating Disorders Awareness Week events helped foster a positive and non-shaming attitude toward eating issues on campus.

The Claremont Colleges’ Eating Disorder Task Force demonstrates what a commitment to eating disorder treatment and awareness looks like in action. Whitney Tawney, The Claremont Colleges’ HEO Dietitian, describes being part of the Eating Disorder Task Force as “an amazing experience.” She adds, “I feel so lucky to be part of a team where everyone is just as passionate as I am about helping students with eating disorders to get back their lives and fully participate in the college experience. Being part of this team gives me the confidence and support I need to do my job well, knowing that I am not the only piece of the puzzle for a student in recovery.”

Jessica Setnick, MS, RD, CEDRD is a Senior Fellow for Remuda Ranch’s Eating Disorder Treatment Program. She is a frequent speaker on college campuses and is working on her latest book, Managing Eating Disorders on Campus. She welcomes information about what your campus is doing to help students in eating disorder recovery at Jessica@UnderstandingNutrition.com.