A Job with Purpose

Jimmy Hatzell discovered that through his work in information technology, he could inspire others in recovery.

As a college student, Jimmy Hatzell imagined a post-graduation life working in cyber security, safeguarding companies from outside threats. Today, he is employed in his dream job, saving something more important — lives.

In recovery for three years, Hatzell is director of technology at Life of Purpose in Boca Raton, Florida, which offers academically focused substance abuse treatment to people who want to attend college or resume their studies. While he is making sure the systems are operating, he also serves as a role model for others overcoming addiction, showing them that they, too, can be resilient and forge new, substance-free lives.

Hatzell marks the start of his new life on August 1, 2013 — his first day of sobriety. In his youth, he had misused substances as young as 14; by the time he was a sophomore at Pennsylvania State University, he had received so many citations for underage drinking that the Office of Student Conduct recommended him to the Collegiate Recovery Community (CRC).

Although he wasn’t ready for a life of recovery immediately, his life began to change when he met coordinator Jason Whitney and students at the CRC. “It was my first experience realizing that people were sober on campus, were happy, and pursuing their dreams,” he says. “Jason’s story was inspiring: He found recovery at 19 while in college and seemed to be living a pretty awesome life.”

Eventually, Hatzell summoned the courage to enter a treatment center. When he called Whitney to tell him the news, the counselor told him, “The best days at Penn State are ahead of you.” At the time, Hatzell thought, there is no way that could be true. Time would prove him wrong.

Realizing that school was his lifeline to creating a productive future, Hatzell was determined to keep on track with his academics. He enlisted the assistance of Whitney and his advisor and enrolled in 12 credits of online classes while still in treatment. “We scheduled all my classes on a payphone,” he says with a laugh. “That was probably a Penn State first.”

He armed himself with honesty. He would embrace — not hide — his story. When he emailed his professors to apologize for missing the first two weeks of his online classes, he explained it was because he was in rehab and was not allowed on the computer. The CRC stood behind him, working behind the scenes to help him return to Penn State and thrive there.

Out of treatment, Hatzell poured his energy into classwork, initially living at home in a dry house. He dutifully followed his recovery plan — partial hospitalization, outpatient treatment, peer-to-peer support meetings, and sessions with a drug counselor — and saw his life improve rapidly. “I got a
part-time job, ran a marathon with less than two months of training, and made dean's list for the first time in my life," he says.

He stayed in contact with the CRC members. "It was this instant community; we meshed," he says. "We would hang out, hike, and go to football games." When he was four months sober, he returned to campus, moving in with another student in recovery.

Although his life appeared on the upswing, Hatzell was facing a frightening prospect: being sentenced to prison. Before he entered treatment, he had been arrested for selling a few grams of marijuana on campus and was awaiting sentencing. For 18 months, he appeared in court monthly to learn his status. "When I walked into the courtroom, I never knew if I would be going back to my class that afternoon, or to jail," he says. "It was hard to concentrate on school, but the CRC kept me motivated."

Ultimately, the court ruled that the original minimum mandatory sentence of two years in state prison that the district attorney had requested was unconstitutional. Hatzell pled guilty and waited one month for the judge to impose her sentence.

Meanwhile, his felony charges were hampering his ability to secure an internship. He watched as friends went to work with large consulting firms and the federal government. Undaunted, he started his own company, performing computer consulting and helping a cell tower start-up take off. "Every time it looked like it was over or that it wasn't worth it, things seemed to work out," he says. "I made a great job for myself and thought that when I graduate I'll be fine. I can work for myself."

Then, at a recovery conference, he met Andrew Burki, Founder and CEO of Life of Purpose, who was also in recovery. Burki offered him a consulting job and friendship as he awaited the judge's sentence.

"When I went to court for that final hearing, I had 25 letters of support from professors, staff members, students, friends, and family. A professor and student testified on my behalf," Hatzell says. He pled guilty to the felonies and received four years of probation but, to his relief, no prison time.

Despite these challenges, Hatzell graduated on time, with two degrees: Information Science and Technology: Integration and Application and Security and Risk Analysis: Internet and Cyber Security. And he got another break: Burki offered him a job at Life of Purpose as director of technology.

A week later, he moved to Boca Raton and found himself performing vital tasks in the new company — from managing the medical records and information systems to internet marketing. Fast-forward a year later, and Life of Purpose now has locations in Florida and
Texas and is primed to launch one in New Jersey, with Hatzell at the helm as chief technology officer of the entire company.

Beyond his career success, Hatzell says his favorite part of the job is interacting with the clients and inspiring them to return to school. “Our goal is to refer clients to CRCs,” he says. “Last year, from one 25-bed facility, we helped 200 students enroll in college — that’s amazing.”

Recovery Campus spoke to Hatzell about his unique perspective on recovery and the role he thinks that colleges and business professionals should play in providing opportunities to help people who want to change their lives.

_How are treatment centers in a unique position to employ people in recovery?_

All treatment centers should recruit from CRCs for any position — not just therapists. It’s starting to happen, and it’s a beautiful thing.

Candidates who have been a part of a CRC outperform their peers and have overcome adversity to come out on top. They can be great role models and provide peer support. I am fortunate that I get to play this unique role at Life of Purpose. I hang out with clients in my off-hours. We play Frisbee every Tuesday night. We face off in paintball. And I’ve supported a few through crises. I’m not on the clinical team, but I have been where the clients are now and can show them that they can face their challenges. They can attend college, graduate, and get a job they love.

**What advice do you have for a person in recovery who wants to resume his or her college education?**

Going back to school doesn’t necessarily mean you return exactly as you left off. Many people might not want to jump right back to the 15- to 18-credit course load in the same place where they just wiped out. During my first semester back, I took 12 credits online while living at home. Students also can start at a community college, explore online classes, or register as a part-time student and participate in the CRC. Find your own way and move at your own pace. If you return and try to catch up, you’ll stress and wear yourself out.

Regardless of how you re-enter, this one thing is true: Find a CRC. Students who participate in CRCs do better.

**So many times, students in recovery hit walls in which they are told they cannot accomplish something because of their past. How have you managed obstacles?**

Oh, wow. There were hundreds of times between my arrest and when I graduated that I was told something wasn’t possible. I was told I couldn’t go...
Back to school, couldn’t take so many classes, couldn’t stay sober and live on campus, couldn’t stay out of jail. I ignored it all.

Students in CRCs do the impossible every single day. I watch students clean up their transcripts, go from failing out to returning a few years later and making the dean’s list, and landing their dream job. They must understand that they will be told “no” sometimes. However, they can achieve things that people don’t think they can. Like me, they need to take chances and prove the naysayers wrong.

You mentioned in a blog post that colleges should do more than just acknowledge that they have students in recovery. What do schools need to understand?

Being a college student in recovery is an all-or-nothing deal. They need full support from their institution. Often, a few students will start a club, which is awesome, but a university should not be satisfied with just a student organization. It should be a programmatic entity of the school, part of the offices, such as student affairs or student conduct. Students need dedicated staff members to guide them in recovery, a space to study that is free from daily college life and American teenage culture, which involves drugs and alcohol, and constant contact with people living the same lifestyle who can build each other up.

Students in recovery excel when they are given support services. If it weren’t for the CRC, I would not be attending school or not have graduated, or I would be in jail right now.

How can students and their universities combat stigma?

Students in recovery are in danger of feeling like an outsider, like they don’t belong there and are just showing up for classes. They need to feel that they are a part of the university.

When I was a student, I always worried, “When are they going to find out that I’m a fraud?” With the CRC, I was allowed to feel like a student. I participated in group projects and hung out with friends until 3 a.m. at a party on Friday nights, just like everyone else at Penn State — only without alcohol or drugs.

Recently, I returned to Penn State for the Blue-White Game. There was the usual parking lot full of people partying, but in the same lot there also was a tailgate filled with students in recovery. How amazing is that? On the surface, this might seem like an abstinence-hostile
environment, but tailgating is part of the Penn State culture. You toss around a Frisbee in the grass, eat a burger, and hang out with friends. This is what makes you feel like a student. It’s important to integrate the culture of recovery into the culture of the school.

Why do people in recovery make excellent students — and employees?

Students in recovery coming back to an institution that recognizes and supports them not only catch up to their peers quickly, but they surpass them. The same is true in the workplace. We have had to overcome challenges, so we know what it’s like to work hard.

What role do alumni and parents play in establishing and maintaining a CRC on campus?

They play a crucial role. If we are going to promote a culture where collegiate recovery is at every school, it’ll take more than the students, who graduate every year.

I’m currently working with the Penn State alumni group Lions in Recovery to build up a robust network to support the CRC. I see first-hand how alumni and parents can make things happen. For example, it could take months for four students to get a meeting with the president. But if four mothers and four alumni call, they can get an appointment faster.

If your school does not have a CRC, I encourage alumni and parents to call the offices of student conduct, student affairs and programming, and the counseling center to ask why. If enough parents and alumni call, the schools will start making changes.

If the school has a CRC, alumni and parents can donate earmarked gifts to support the organization. They can also pay for a lunch or tailgate, or sponsor a student who wants to attend a conference on recovery, or participate in an event like a recovery ski-a-thon. The important thing is that a wide community gets involved to make the school’s recovery effort thrive.