

Hospital allows psychiatric patients to remain students

By College Press Service

Troubled college students don't have to interrupt their education while hospitalized at a private psychiatric hospital in upstate New York because they stay in school while working on the psychological issues that brought them there.

The College Service of Saratoga is a joint venture of Skidmore College and Four Winds Saratoga hospital at Saratoga Springs, N.Y. It enables students to keep their student status, complete aborted coursework and remain insured while gaining emotional stability during a bout of mental illness.

In a cottage on a campus-like setting, set apart from the main hospital facility, as many as 15 college students can be found poring over textbooks when not tackling personal issues in psychodrama, group therapy and individual sessions.

"Hospitalization can be a tragedy for students because it takes away their identity as a student and puts them in a sub-group, mental patient, that is devalued," said Dr. Xavier Mastrianni, founder of the program and executive director of Four Winds-Saratoga.

More than 400 students from 150 mostly Northeastern colleges and universities have passed through the seven-year-old program that officials say is unlike any other in the country.

"Being a student is the first identity we have," Mastrianni said. "We're someone's son or daughter, then we are a student. It is critical to maintain that identity."

When mental illness forces a student to enter Four Winds, they receive an academic assessment along with a medical workup. Hospital officials, with the student's

permission, request academic records, have telephone conferences with faculty advisers and counselors and make arrangements for students to continue coursework at neighboring Skidmore College.

Hospital officials often request that the student's college or university grant an incomplete for unfinished coursework rather than a failing grade as if the student was on an emergency medical leave.

"We do all we can to keep the student's academic status," Mastrianni said, noting that when college students lose their insurance benefits and student status they have "lost their ticket to treatment."

Four Winds' student-patients suffer from a variety of mental problems, with 60 percent having some form of depression and 40 percent with a secondary diagnosis of drug and alcohol abuse, Mastrianni said. Students with eating disorders also make up a significant number of the hospital's younger population.

The average length of a Four Winds stay is 30 days, during which students can enroll in a Skidmore course, do independent study as a special student or finish pending coursework by working with a Skidmore faculty member who provides tutorial assistance at the cottage.

Education is one area most of the young people can excel in, Mastrianni said, and Skidmore faculty members have reported that the students from Four Winds are among the brightest they have taught.

Unless the instructor comes to the cottage, Skidmore faculty are unaware that students are from the Four Winds program.

When students are ready to leave Four Winds, about 50 percent take

part in an aftercare program in which they attend school during the day and stay in hospital dorms in the evenings.

Unless students have symptoms that are unusually severe, Mastrianni said he disagrees with counselors who advise troubled students to drop out of school and take it easy.

"It disconnects the person from the social support that they need," he said.

The idea that college is so stressful that students crack under the pressure is false, Mastrianni said, pointing out that half the group at Four Winds-Saratoga had been hospitalized before college and a third had been hospitalized twice before.

"Though counseling services may be undermined, colleges can be very supportive settings," Mastrianni said, pointing out that healthy students thrive on the rigors of academic life rather than finding the pressure unbearable.

Mastrianni became motivated to help struggling college students when a young patient was advised by college officials to take a semester off while she struggled with emotional problems.

"She spent two and a half months in New York City by herself in her parents' apartment," he said. "Her parents were working. She didn't know what to do."

"You are better off re-entering an environment that is more supportive that stressful," Mastrianni said of students returning to the college where they became ill. "There are exceptions when some face great difficulty or they are so far behind, but we find they are usually going in the other direction."



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Brian Comer, an international studies junior, eats at the Pizza Hut in the Russell House.

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