Patricia and Peter Shannon Wilson Undergraduate Research Prize

The Opioid Epidemic That’s Killing Ottawa Youth:
Trapped by Stigma, an Unforgiving System, and an Oppressive Socio-Cultural Environment

I grew up in an Ottawa suburb where the opioid crisis was all too familiar. I never understood why my peers used drugs in the first place, particularly those who witnessed, or at least heard whisperings of, fatal overdoses. I’ve always craved to make sense of the world; being in JGI216 gave me the opportunity to contextualize my childhood observations within our society’s social, cultural, and political environments. Highlights throughout my journey include learning to navigate our Library Course Guide, developing information literacy within and between scholarly disciplines, and cultivating a greater appreciation for (and interest in) the research process.

The JGI216 Library Course Guide, developed by Nich Worby, was especially helpful in beginning my research. Gaining a deeper understanding of search engines, modifiers, and scholarly sources, I was able to operationalize this knowledge using the UTLibraries database. In doing so, I identified commonalities in suggestions for reputable subject-specific databases, publishers, and scholarly journals, such as: Factiva, PubMed, Elsevier, SpringerLink, and the British Medical Journal. These became my principal sources in which I conducted my research.

With these tools in-hand, I began researching through databases and discovered ways to narrow my searches according to publisher, date range, and keywords. On SpringerLink, for instance, there is an advanced search option that offers a list of subtopics found in all the sources returned from your initial search input. From here, you have the ability to include/exclude keywords from search results; I found this critical as it allowed me to diverge irrelevant material and target more appropriate sources. Additionally, I ran into a few roadblocks when I found pertinent, but dated, sources of information. Through adding Google Scholar to my search repertoire, I discovered the “cited by” feature – where you can find more recent papers that reference the original work. Digging deeper, I later recognized that most international peer-reviewed journals offer this same feature.

Reading mainstream and scholarly sources, such as newspapers and peer-reviewed journal articles, was conducive for cross-pollinating ideas. Harnessing the unique and interdisciplinary nature of these sources proved effective, first, in juxtaposing a diverse range of perspectives, and second, in synthesizing the varied approaches towards achieving a comprehensive understanding of my research topic.
I first investigated newspaper articles to establish much of my initial information, as they are succinct and typically address a single topic. Amidst the sea of information at my fingertips, I went on the UTLibraries and searched the phrase ‘opioid crisis’; I immediately began an advanced search modification so that my results would prioritize articles containing keywords like ‘youth’, ‘at-risk’, and ‘misuse’. I further tailored the search to only show articles from the Ottawa Citizen, Toronto Star, and the Globe and Mail. Finessing my search words not only streamlined the types of sources, but it simultaneously restricted the geographic region of my data, given the locales served by these papers. There were still hundreds of articles presented, so I once again added a search constraint of articles written within the last eight to ten years, which resulted in my discovery of precise information about the crisis’ peak.

After critically evaluating newspapers, I then consulted internationally peer-reviewed journals to find an array of supporting evidence in scholarly articles that ranged across many disciplines, often times landing in their interstices. This entailed the qualitative inquiry of social and government policies, health statistics, and societal analytics reports. A name I kept coming across in urban health articles was Kora DeBeck. Dr. DeBeck is an Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University, who holds a cross-appointment with the Urban Health Research Institute. One of their rigorous studies – relevant to my research – was a longitudinal project examining drug involvement of at-risk youth. Upon reading the study, there were many statistical terms that I didn’t understand: adjusted hazard ratio, confidence interval, regression analytics, and p-value. I went on a tangent to learn about these variables and their interaction so that I could better interpret and summarize their findings in my term paper. Consequently, I noticed the trend of secondary research being embedded within my research process; I quickly developed a habit of being vigilant in properly evaluating a source’s quality before incorporating it in my own work.

Finding insufficient scholarly information that directly addressed causes for the annual multiplication of opioid-related deaths, I took a step back, and consulted the creative outputs of investigative journalists employed by VICE. One such documentary focused on anonymous drug dealers speaking about the manufacture and distribution processes for a variety of drugs. They presented two methods called ‘cutting’ and ‘pill-pressing’. VICE journalists thus gave me two specific keywords that would later be applied in the modification of my search terms, which combined with spatio-temporal modifiers, produced key information on the crisis’ escalation.

A significant factor in my evaluation of articles was whether they were published in a peer-reviewed journal. I came to learn about the extensive process through the Library Course Guide; this process of starting with an idea, conducting research, and developing it into an original contribution to your respective field elated me. Ultimately, it was the development of the habit of intermixing the breadth of my sources and carefully evaluating their quality, that I discovered my passion for research. I decided to develop this project further, into a scholarly research article, with aims of submitting to an international peer-reviewed journal. I endeavor to continue refining my research skills in anticipation of graduate-level study.