

Taking root: How Canada's first student recovery community is growing at UBC

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For years, third-year PhD student Sara Fudjack struggled with alcohol use.

Fudjack’s drinking began in college the same way it often does for other students: at parties or bars or clubs, where alcohol was a common crutch for young people looking to socialize. But she had trouble stopping — something her peers didn’t understand.

“I remember telling one friend and they just laughed at me and they were like, ‘Just drink less,’” she said.

“And in my mind, I’m like, ‘Oh, yeah, why didn’t I think of that?’ sort of sarcastically, but [it’s] just really a feeling of people not understanding that I would have given anything to drink like they were,” she said. “I literally physically couldn’t do it.”

She tried counselling and peer support programs in graduate school. But she didn’t fit in with her support group, whose membership was older and in a different phase of life.

“It was like, what’s worse: drinking myself to a point of danger or not having any friends?”

Eventually, she found a support group for female-identifying people that helped her restart and stay in recovery.

So when Fudjack first learned about student recovery community — a dedicated space on campus for students in recovery from addiction — after attending a seminar at the University of Texas at Austin’s Center for Students in Recovery in 2016, her jaw dropped.

“I read a little bit of the literature that was out [about student recovery community] and it got me a little bit emotional, to be honest,” she said.

Behind that emotion was a touch of frustration. Why hadn’t she found this sooner?

The student recovery community in the United States dates back to the 1970s. Today, there are 138 programs across the country for students struggling with alcohol, opioids, stimulants or any other substance.

In Canada, however, it’s a different story.

There were zero across the country, until Fudjack spearheaded the Student Recovery Community at UBC (SRC UBC) establishment in fall 2019. But despite already serving over 30 students and receiving start-up funding from the university, the nascent group is still trying to carve out space in a campus — and society — where problems around substance use are often scorned and ignored.

Planting roots

Canadian student recovery communities are rare. But post-secondary students struggling with substance use are not.

The 2017 Canadian Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey found that the drinking of 29 per cent of adults age 20 to 24 exceeded the chronic risk's guideline and 24 per cent exceeded the acute risk's guideline, meaning roughly a quarter of undergraduate-aged students tend to abuse alcohol.

Around 10 per cent reported that their illegal drug use has impacted their physical, social, academic or economic well-being.

Besides that, specific data on student substance use at UBC is very limited.

But Dr. Heather Robertson, executive director of UBC Student Health & Wellbeing, says there's little doubt the problem is widespread.

"We know it's a very high time of risk," she acknowledged.

Dr. Michael Krausz, a professor in UBC's department of psychiatry specializing in addiction, notes the binge-drinking culture and increased level of stress at university are risks that could push students towards substance abuse or dependence.

"If you are totally stressed out and anxious, you may have problems [sleeping] and then you start drinking or taking benzodiazepines in the evening to calm down," he said.

"It may help for a short period of time, but then it develops a dynamic on its own so at some point, you are unable to calm down without [the substance]. Then you may slide into dependence, which means you need to drink [or use] in order to avoid withdrawal symptoms."

He also stressed the "clear link" between mental health issues and substance use disorder.

"Young people getting drunk and ending up in emergency rooms — most of the time, they have a much bigger load to carry," said Krausz.

But the campus had very limited services specifically for addressing substance dependence when Fudjack arrived in 2017. VICE, an AMS volunteer service that focuses on providing education and mentorship on alcohol, drugs and technology use, had only begun in January of that year. As she searched for a dedicated space for students with lived experiences with addiction and recovery, she found none — at the university and across the country.

"There's a huge gap in services for students in recovery at UBC," she said.

"And then I broadened the scope to what's going on in the province and then what's going on across Canada and really discovered that there are no student recovery communities in all of Canada."

In 2018, Fudjack received a \$3,000 AMS Impact Grant to study the experiences of UBC students in recovery and presented her proposal of creating a student recovery community to the university. After finding a receptive audience in President Santa Ono, she began working with Robertson to build the initiative, allowing it to receive ongoing administrative and medical oversight from Student Health & Wellbeing.

A year later, SRC UBC held its first weekly peer support meeting in September 2019.

In each meeting, a small group of students would sit in a circle for an hour to discuss a particular topic around recovery. Most would share their name and experiences, while others could simply listen.

Matt, a student in recovery whose name has been changed to protect his privacy, remembers his first SRC UBC meeting as being remarkably open.

“We used most of that hour talking about what was going on for us and people shared really heavy stuff that was going on for them right off the bat, without me shaking their hand or getting to know them at all,” he said.

Beside this core feature, the community also offers drop-ins and one-on-one meetings, as well as online consultations via email and Instagram message.

And for all these interactions, Fudjack — who is now the community’s program manager — stressed that instead of focusing on only abstinence or harm reduction, SRC UBC allows space for all recovery approaches.

“If you identify as being in recovery, then we have a spot for you,” she said.

Growing together

Matt knows exactly how important it is to have a community when dealing with addiction.

A fourth-year English literature student, he struggled with cannabis use throughout his first year at UBC Okanagan. But the situation got worse in his second year, when Matt used cannabis to cope with the fallout of ending a difficult relationship.

“I was [also] much more alone and I was off-campus, so ... it was a pretty rapid decline,” he said.

After multiple unsuccessful interventions, Matt moved back to Vancouver and began a 12-step treatment program, an abstinence-based recovery approach usually rooted in religion.

But he says he made the most progress when building relationships with others who were staying at the facility.

“It was just like learning how to have fun with people who weren’t using drugs, which was the biggest thing that I needed,” he said.

At Douglas College, Matt went straight from class to an evening recovery meeting that rented space in the college. When he transferred to UBC Vancouver in fall 2016, he would still commute there because he didn’t have options on campus.

Eventually, he found SRC UBC.

“I’ve talked about this with other people since then and they’ve like shared similar sentiments — just knowing that it’s there finally, and that I have somewhere I can go to talk to people who are students and who are trying to work through their addiction is super therapeutic,” Matt said.

The community at UBC also helps students in recovery navigate the stigma and triggers that exist on campus.

Trevor Gray, the community’s program coordinator and a fourth-year social work student, sees these aspects “perpetuated in little ways.”

“I think oftentimes, it’s expressed in the way that these people who are dealing with addictions as people outside of universities, outside of the classrooms where they kind of neglect the fact that addiction affects everybody regardless of what you’re doing in your life,” he said.

Or it could simply be the start of the weekend. On campus, many social events — from Pit Nights to fraternity parties to club mixers — hinge on substance use.

“What we’ve found with students in recovery is like the start of the weekend can be a particularly triggering time,” Fudjack said. “... One student who came [for a meeting] last Friday said that it’s actually really grounding and helps put himself in a good perspective and mental place going into the weekend.”

But despite its services, the group still lacks a dedicated space on campus to call home. Last term, Fudjack said they had to jump around to many different buildings for their weekly meetings.

“The room has been one of our biggest struggles, I’ll be honest with you,” she said. “The research shows that a very key ingredient to student recovery communities is that you have a dedicated space so people can get really comfortable with the space.”

Sitting in a swivel chair in a fluorescent-lit Orchard Commons classroom, Fudjack envisioned comfortable couches and soft lighting instead. Gesturing at a corner, she could barely hide her excitement about the idea of filling the space with books about recovery

and its many pathways. At another corner, there would be a food and drink station to store all the resources, snacks and a coffee maker that she has been lugging around in two big duffel bags for the recovery community meetings.

She also hopes there would be a separate office for more private meetings and eventually space for an addiction recovery counsellor.

“So just a place where people really feel that it’s safe and comfortable to gather ... [and] maybe not even talk necessarily about anything super heavy, but just to be able to be together,” Fudjack said, “and then be able to talk about super heavy stuff when needed.”

Closing gaps

In many ways, it’s not enough to just start a general student recovery community.

A [2018 report](#) from the BC Centre for Substance Use (BCCSU) identified the “lack of gender-specific, age-appropriate, and culturally-safe services for women, [2SLGBTQIA+] individuals, youth and Indigenous peoples” as a major barrier for starting and staying in recovery.

The SRC UBC is aware of this challenge.

Fudjack says the team aims to not only attract “white male [students] who have some socio-economic privilege,” which she said is also a big topic of discussion for other student recovery communities in the United States. Instead, there is interest to include Indigenous pathways of recovery as well as creating female-identified and Queer-specific groups.

“I think that the diversity of the community very much reflects the diversity of UBC as a whole,” she said.

At a larger level, the community is also intentional about its inclusion of all recovery approaches.

“There are harm reduction approaches, there are abstinence approaches, there’s everything in between. All of these options should be available for the right purpose, for the right time,” said Dr. Carson McPherson, BCCSU’s senior advisor on recovery initiatives.

“The reality is for someone who is no longer alive because we don’t have harm reduction approaches available to them, we can never find that person recovering.”

McPherson, Fudjack and Gray all stressed the need to think about recovery as a “continuum.” The SRC UBC leaders added that harm reduction services have been instrumental to their recovery processes, especially at their start.

“I always struggle when I hear people separate [abstinence and harm reduction] because they oftentimes go hand in hand and there’s no right or wrong,” Gray said. “They’re just all part of the continuum of supporting people at various stages of their journey.”

More importantly for Fudjack and Gray, this goes to a larger understanding that recovery is an ongoing journey rather than an endpoint — a shift in thinking that they hope would mean more care for students in recovery.

“If we think about treatment, a lot of times there’s like a celebration or like a graduation at the end of treatment,” Fudjack said, “and perhaps that messaging is flawed because ... their families and the community go, ‘Oh, perhaps it’s over’ ... when in fact, that’s when the hard work begins.”

Branching out

Ultimately, there’s an understanding from all groups about the need for more services dedicated to addiction and recovery on campus.

In particular, Krausz believes there should be continuous support for a program like the student recovery community, preventive measures such as including information about this issue in high school and university curriculum as well as connections to specialized care.

According to Robertson, UBC Student Health & Wellbeing is “continuously looking” for long-term funding and space for SRC UBC. The university is also working to improve its education and prevention programs, as well as spreading the information on the topic through Jump Start and Residence Life.

“It’s about having conversations that bring the topic [out] of the closet and not associating shame with it — really meeting the person where they’re at and then working from there,” she said.

Similarly, AMS VICE is doing its own outreach and collaboration to raise awareness about balanced substance use, according to Coordinator Ashley Steele. She added that VICE is also working with SRC UBC on cross-referrals and social media campaigns to create that spectrum of care together.

In the meantime, Gray and Fudjack are optimistic about their community’s growth. Even as they know the work can still bring stigma and triggers in quiet ways.

“There are times when I have left [meetings] and I have felt a lot of shame and questioned like, ‘Why am I doing this? Why am I putting myself out there in these situations that are really hard for me?’” Fudjack said. “I’m being vulnerable about an identity that a lot of

people like judge and look down upon, and so sometimes it does catch up to me. But when I get that one email from a student who says, 'This has made a difference in my life,' that's what reminds me why I'm doing it.

"... I think one day, it would be amazing if being in recovery was just as normal as being 22 and in university."