PERSONAL STATEMENT
Tenure and Promotion Application

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Since arriving at the Faculty of Environmental Studies in the Fall of 2006, I have established a flourishing and successful research program investigating the social determinants of HIV and sexual health among young people and contributed to innovations in community based research. I have taught and mentored students, actively contributed to university life through service on committees across campus, and furthered my field through professional service and engagement.

RESEARCH

The common thread running through my scholarly activities is a unique interest in engaging those communities who are most impacted by health inequalities as full partners in research. I understand “community” broadly, and have worked with communities connected by geography, age, culture, illness experience and shared identity. Specifically, my focus has been on advancing knowledge in the area of HIV prevention and youth sexual health. My research is largely concerned with linking individual vulnerabilities to structural inequalities so that new prevention possibilities can be imagined. I have also increasingly become engaged in methodological innovation to ensure that the research methods I use are participatory, emancipatory, and ethical. This has led me to become more critically engaged in debates about youth leadership, community involvement in research, and ethical research practices.

In 2006, I received a five-year Ontario HIV Treatment Network (OHTN) Scholar Award ($52,000/year). This award is intended to afford new investigators opportunities to develop and demonstrate ability to independently initiate and carry out a program of HIV/AIDS-related research. In applying for my Scholar Award, I outlined a five-year research plan in two primary fields: youth HIV prevention and community-based research methods. This funding has given me the freedom to devote much of my time to research, and the results have been fruitful. I have been successful in garnering over one million dollars in grant funds through peer review research competitions (with nearly half coming from Tri-Council funders). I have received 12 research grants as a Principal Investigator plus nine as a co-applicant, and I have been involved in two successful training grant applications as a co-investigator.

During this same period, I participated in writing four book chapters, and published 15 peer-reviewed journal articles (ten as first author). Two papers focusing on developing new approaches for the ethical review of community based research received editorial commendations; they were noted for their unique contributions to moving the field forward. Nearly all these papers are co-authored with students and/or community partners, representing my commitment to mentoring and facilitating community-campus partnerships. My research teams have also presented numerous papers, workshops and posters at peer-reviewed conferences. I have been asked to present five keynote
and 16 invited addresses at various conferences and meetings. I have also garnered significant media attention through my research, including front page coverage in The Globe and Mail, Ottawa Citizen, Calgary Herald and coverage on The Hour, The Current and many other radio shows. My work has received the attention of policy makers in the education and health policy sectors and I have been invited to participate on several panels, think tanks and expert reviews at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

My research program works through a health and equity lens, employing participatory methods and collaborative approaches to solve complex health challenges in real world environments. I am a pragmatist researcher who works across methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, and arts-based) in partnership with youth, students, and allied practitioners on action research agendas. I am also an inter-disciplinary researcher: my work borrows from various theoretical traditions (critical, emancipatory, post-colonial, and feminist). I regularly collaborate on trans-disciplinary teams with scholars in the fields of psychology, sociology, epidemiology, gender studies, social work, and public health. I believe in the importance of fostering strong community-based partnerships and developing capacity-building opportunities for all those involved, particularly community organizations and members.

The following highlights successful undertakings that demonstrate my commitment to using innovative community-based research as a strategy for policy development, institutional change and social justice.

**Key Individual Projects**

**The Toronto Teen Survey** – The TTS examines barriers and facilitators to teen sexual health care and information access in Toronto. In contrast to many other surveys that have focused on assessing teen sexual health knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, TTS focuses on examining environmental factors that impede or support youth sexual health care access. In June of 2009, my research team released the Toronto Teen Survey (TTS) report and accompanying documentary. We surveyed over 1,200 diverse young people in Toronto, the largest and most diverse sample of its kind ever collected in Canada. We garnered national and international media coverage, and have been consulting with the Ontario Minister of Education to reform sexual health education in schools, as well as with Toronto Public Health to improve local clinical services. This research was done in partnership with Dr. June Larkin (University of Toronto), Dr. Robb Travers (Wilfrid Laurier University), and Planned Parenthood Toronto. I have provided leadership to this research team which has leveraged a $10,000 seed grant to raise over $300,000 from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Ontario HIV Treatment Network.

Not only have our results been recognized, but so has our process. For innovation in engaging youth, the team was awarded the prestigious 2009 Synapse Award by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the TTS team was previously awarded the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives 2008 Community Based Research Award of Merit.
The project has also been profiled by Canadian Institutes of Health Research’s Institute for Population Health as a model in knowledge translation. We are also collaborating with the Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality on a dedicated special peer-reviewed issue showcasing on our project’s results. In this issue, many papers are co-authored by York students.

To further develop our innovative knowledge translation strategy, we were recently awarded additional funding by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. Through this latest grant we are producing 13 community-specific bulletins to advance efforts to improve youth sexual health in those communities.

Supporting student research is an important goal of our work. Through this project, we have hired eight Graduate Assistants (GAs), and provided data for three Master in Environmental Studies (MES) major papers, and one PhD dissertation. We will continue to provide a very rich data set and scholarly opportunities for further MES and PhD work. For more information on the TTS, please see: www.TorontoTeenSurvey.ca.

**Taking Action: Widening the Circle of Aboriginal HIV Prevention** – Aboriginal youth are over-represented in the Canadian HIV epidemic. As Principal Investigator of Taking Action, we are working with six Aboriginal communities across Canada to examine the links between colonialism and HIV risk among Aboriginal youth using arts-based methods. In each community, we have been building Aboriginal youth leadership skills and using culturally-appropriate research strategies to broaden the scope of our understanding of HIV risk and vulnerability among Aboriginal youth. Most recently, we have published in the Canadian Journal of Public Health and a special issue of PIMATISIWIN: A Journal of Indigenous and Aboriginal Community Health. Two MES students have also nested their major projects/papers as part of our project. The study is ongoing. Our work has been highlighted in dozens of Aboriginal-specific media across Canada and we have presented at numerous conferences. Our goal is to use these data and artistic works to develop ‘by youth, for youth’ HIV/AIDS prevention materials that attend to issues of structural inequity. This study was funded by Canadian Institutes of Health Research and was the highest ranked proposal by its peer review committee. It is a collaboration between York, the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network. For more information, please see: http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=18059453599

**The Positive Youth Project** – Youth living with HIV have a wide range of specific service needs, ranging from medical care, financial/housing support and vocational training to social support, substance abuse counselling and mental health resources. Better supporting the needs of HIV-positive youth might directly benefit this vulnerable population. Additionally, it may prove to be an effective model for preventing the further spread of HIV. We sought to engage young people living with HIV to become part of the solution for better health and social service policy planning and delivery. For seven years, I worked with a dedicated group of HIV-positive youth, researchers, clinicians, and community-based service providers to develop local and national strategies and
resources for better meeting the needs of Canadian HIV-positive youth. We trained a core group of six HIV-positive youth from the community to become co-researchers and collected data locally, regionally, and nationally. Our results have been published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* and the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Equally important, we also disseminated four youth-friendly 'zines that showcase project results to community members. Project partners have also launched: [www.livepositive.ca](http://www.livepositive.ca). In collaboration with the Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange, we published a book on how to use this resource to augment rapport with young people.

**International Work** – As South Africa is the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, I have become increasingly engaged in international work. Over the last few years, I have begun collaborating with colleagues at the University of KwaZulu Natal in Durban. We just completed an evaluation of a faith-based HIV intervention that critically examines the opportunities and challenges posed by faith based orientations. We have one manuscript in press and two more under review. We are also collaborating on examining how community arts have influenced the HIV response in South Africa’s urban and rural communities.

**A Snapshot of Community-Based Research in Canada** – To support community-based scholarship, Dr. Beth Savan and I conducted Canada’s first web-based survey of Community and Academic Community-Based Research Practitioners. Results have been presented at the Community University EXPO and *The International Conference on Urban Health* and a comprehensive report was launched in November 2006: ([http://web.uvic.ca/ocbr/assets/pdfs/CBR_snapshot_report_final.pdf](http://web.uvic.ca/ocbr/assets/pdfs/CBR_snapshot_report_final.pdf)*). Results are published in the *Journal of Community Development, Local Environments and Health Education Research*. We are working with local and national granting councils as well as universities on developing policies to better support community-based scholarship. Most recently, I also assisted with a micro-assessment of the Ontario HIV sector, the results of which have been published in two papers in the peer-reviewed *AIDS Care*. I continue to be invited to present results at conferences across Canada.

**Community-Based Research Ethics** – As community-based research becomes a popular new paradigm in health research, new ethical issues emerge. Ethical review forms and guidelines operate overwhelmingly within a biomedical framework that rarely takes into account common community-based research experience. They are primarily focused on the principle of assessing risk to individuals and not to communities, and continue to perpetuate the notion that the domain of ‘knowledge production’ is the sole right of academic researchers. I have been involved in publishing, advocacy, and teaching in this area to encourage researchers and research ethics boards to take a more reflexive stance to assessing communal risk. I have published papers in the *Journals of Urban Health* and *Adolescent Health* that examine the gaps in review board frameworks. I have provided input and expertise related to these issues to Community Campus Partnerships for Health’s seminar series, conferences, and symposia. I have presented several papers at the National Council on Ethics in Human Research (NCHER) conference as well as The Canadian Association of Research Ethics Boards
(CAREB) national meetings on the importance of asking different kinds of questions in the review of community-based research projects. In addition, in October 2009, the Secretary’s Advisory Council on Human Research Protections (SACHRP) invited me to testify on a federal panel in Washington, D.C. on the importance of thinking about community-level harms. I am Co-Principal Investigator with Dr. Robb Travers (Wilfrid Laurier University) on a new Canadian Institutes of Health Research funded study that further investigates and explores the ethical issues that emerge in and are unique to HIV-related community-based research. Our results will have practical implications, ultimately informing the practices of research ethics boards in Canada.

**Community-Based Research Curriculum Development** – While Director of Research at the Wellesley Institute, I co-developed and managed Canada’s only certificate program in community-based research. More than 1,500 people in Toronto attended training workshops over several years. The program was then shared with organizations in Edmonton and Ottawa. An independent evaluation reported a 98% satisfaction rate with the program. Many of the attendees went on to secure seed funding for projects and evaluations within their communities of practice and became involved in larger research projects. I continue to work with many in a mentoring role and draw on these experiences in my writing. In addition, in partnership with a team of American Community Based Research experts, I was one of the key writers of the *Curriculum Training Module for Developing and Sustaining Community-Based Participatory Research*, written for use by the American Association of Schools of Public Health. The curriculum ([http://www.cbprcurriculum.info](http://www.cbprcurriculum.info)) has been used in two summer institutes to train 30 partnership teams in the US and Canada. Most recently, the curriculum has been promoted by the US National Institutes for Health and the Collaborative Institute Training Initiatives (CITI) as a key resource. It has also been favorably peer-reviewed by CES4Health.info, a new web-based mechanism for peer-reviewing, publishing and disseminating products of community-engaged scholarship that are in forms other than journal articles.

**Urban Youth and the Social Determinants of Sexual Health, Research Interested Group (RIG)** – Finally, I have led a RIG through the Centre for Urban health Initiatives (a CIHR initiative), which has served as an organizing hub for a number of my projects and those of affiliated researchers. The goal of the RIG is to bring together researchers, students, policy makers and community members to develop new research projects and collaborations. RIG members now include interdisciplinary researchers from York, Ryerson, Laurier, McGill, the University of Toronto, and a network of community organizations. We annually host eight public seminars and a graduate student symposium. I work closely with other researchers in our unit to provide meaningful research placements for more than ten students per year and to generate new research project ideas. To date, a number of innovative seed grants have evolved from our collaborations including projects focusing on sexual health issues of young people with disabilities, Aboriginal youth and young women. We have been exceptionally successful with more than ten funded projects emerging from RIG collaborations.
TEACHING

My goal in teaching is to foster thoughtful, critical, engaged, independent thinkers and writers. I push my students to ask questions of themselves, each other, and me. I try to create an environment in which respectful debate is encouraged. I make every effort to set clear grading standards, offer intentional feedback, and connect students to supportive services. Most importantly, I see myself as a co-learner and constantly try to grow, adapt, and respond to the diversity of the classroom. I often learn as much from my students as they do from me. I also try to be creative and develop learning environments that will help my students synthesize and apply key course concepts.

In adult learning settings, I see my role largely as a facilitator of dialogue and exchange, and as a steward responsible for creating dynamic and open learning environments. Even in large lecture formats, I strive to be interactive and offer case-based learning opportunities. I often pause and ask students to reflect with their fellow students. I am a firm believer in the importance of engaged discussion and I reward students for participation in my marking schemes. My favourite part about university teaching is the “Aha” moments – when you can see students making new connections for the first time.

While my teaching load has been reduced due to a research course release resulting from my Ontario HIV Treatment Network Scholar Award, I thoroughly enjoy teaching. I am energized by group situations and look forward to the stimulation, interchange, and debate of the classroom, and to watching students develop and expand their intellectual capacities and critical thinking skills.

Since arriving at the Faculty of Environmental Studies, I have had the opportunity of teaching two graduate courses: Qualitative Methods and Gender, Development and Globalization. In preparation for teaching both courses, I spent a lot of time thinking about how to creatively cover the material and significantly redesigned the curricula. I adopted an unorthodox approach to teaching Qualitative Methods and got the attention of the Toronto Mayor’s office and York University daily Yfile.¹ I decided to make the material “come alive” by having the students learn methods by trying them out on an applied project that had the potential to make a difference in the real world. I partnered with the City of Toronto and helped them engage in a qualitative needs assessment of notions of community safety in the Kingston-Galloway neighbourhood. Through this approach, students became actively involved in collaborating on an action research project with community-based organizations. Over the course of a semester, the class collected, analyzed, and interpreted data that led to program and policy changes in the community. Teaching evaluations were positive and many students noted in their written evaluations how much they valued this approach of integrating theory and praxis.

Over the last two years, I have been teaching Gender, Globalization and Development.

¹ See: “York Faculty of Environmental Studies Professor Sarah Flicker set a new standard for integrating research and teaching this fall by structuring her graduate-level qualitative methods course around a community-based research project.” http://www.yorku.ca/yfile/archive/index.asp?Article=7797.
I have infused the course with many new topics and readings, with an eye to ensuring that readings were included from scholars in the Global South. I have tried to incorporate approaches that allow students with various learning styles to flourish (including debates, lectures, small group work, drawing exercises, voting, case studies, presentations, etc). Students seem to really enjoy the interactive approach.

Over the last four years, I have also taken on a full advising load and have seen thirteen MES and two PhD students complete their programs. I continue to advise and supervise nearly 20 graduate students, which is significantly higher than the expected load of 12 at the Faculty of Environmental Studies. Many of my students have become actively engaged in my research programme and have drawn their Major Project/Paper data from our larger projects. This has proved to be an enriching model for all involved. Students appreciate being part of a larger team and contributing their considerable talents to ‘real world’ challenges. In turn, the teams benefit from the enthusiasm, creativity, and scholarship of our students. I try to actively mentor my students in the art of abstract crafting, grant reviewing, presenting at conferences and publishing. I have co-authored papers with my students and regularly bring them with me to community forums and research team meetings. I have also worked with my students on securing funding for their studies. One of my doctoral students received a prestigious Canadian Institutes of Health Research fellowship and three of my master students have received Ontario HIV Treatment Network funding.

SERVICE

The Faculty of Environmental Studies is a small one. At any given time, we have 35 active faculty members who are regularly called upon to participate in administrative duties. I have served on multiple committees internally including: two hiring committees, the Research Awards Committee and the Student Grades and Awards Adjudication Committee. I have attended multiple open houses and recruitment events.

I also serve on several York-wide committees, including the Organized Research Units review committee, the Knowledge Mobilization Advisory Committee, and I represent our Faculty at the Centre for Support of Teaching Advisory Board. I am also on the executive board of two interdisciplinary research centres: the Lamarsh Centre (that focuses on healthy youth development) and the York Institute for Health Research (that focuses on interdisciplinary health research).

Outside the university, I maintain serve on several grant and journal review committees. In particular, I have sat on four review panels at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Institute of Infection and Immunity’s HIV Community Based Research Committee. I also served as the Chair of the Laidlaw Foundation’s Environment and Health Committee, Vice-Chair of Planned Parenthood Toronto’s Board of Directors, an Advisory Committee Member for the AIDS Committee of Toronto Research Committee, and on the Conference Organizing Committee, Community Campus Partnerships for Health. I also sit on the steering committees (and am a co-investigator) on two
Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Strategic Training Initiative Grants: Universities Without Walls (with the Ontario HIV Treatment Network) and ACHIEVE (with the Centre for Research on Inner City Health at St Michael's Hospital).

WHAT NEXT?

I am looking forward to continuing to build my research program. I have become increasingly interested in global Indigenous health issues and would like to find ways of connecting Indigenous youth in South Africa with Aboriginal youth in Canada in their efforts to address the elevated rates of HIV in their communities. I also plan to continue to work locally with various groups of young people to co-create new ways of thinking about sexual health promotion. This fall I will submit a New Investigator Award application to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to further develop this work. In particular, I am interested in how new technologies (e.g. social networking sites, blogging, text messaging) can be used to reach young people. I also hope to continue to develop my work with the Social Determinants of Youth Sexual Health Research Interest Group (RIG) and find ways of growing this network nationally and internationally. To this end, I am currently involved in an MCRI application that would link scholars in South Africa, Australia and Canada.