

## **Substance Use Disorder: A Criminalized Illness**

The story about my research starts back in 2015, with a wrecked car. At the time I had no idea that I would ever go to college, let alone apply for scholarships and awards, but it is at this moment that my life diverged and set me on the path I am today. I was in the midst of active addiction to heroin and pain medication. On the day in question I got high and thought I could drive home. I lost control of my car, but through some miracle I managed to not physically hurt anyone, just totaling my borrowed vehicle after hitting a pole. As I waited for the police and EMS to arrive, I knew I needed help and begged responding officers to help me.

Last semester I was enrolled in Dr. Tassoni's English 111. The class had us explore a problem in our community and write a ten page research paper on the issue. This assignment got me thinking about my recovery story. Over the year-long journey through Veterans Treatment Court and the VA Substance use disorder program, I made many good friends, people who were just as motivated and serious about obtaining sobriety as I was. Of my four closest friends, two have succumbed to their addiction and have passed away, one has returned to what he calls "managed" use and I have started working in Peer Support and addiction recovery. In the course of my work I now see clients that went through the program with me. I do not consider myself stronger or better than any of the people I went through recovery with. Why was I able to be successful and others have not been able to? With this thought in mind it was easy to decide what topic I wanted to research.

Originally I had an impression of what I wanted to research and write about, but not a fleshed out thesis statement. I have personal experience with addiction issues, so it was important that I established what was common across the board of all the people who are affected by addiction, and not something that was unique to my experience. I wanted to delve into, study, and hypothesize about some of the reasons people struggle in their sobriety. I thought I would discuss the problems with drug offenses being automatically a felony. Felonies are like a scarlet letter that hampers people at every turn.

True, people should be held accountable, however, right now in Ohio the possession of even a grain of certain drugs, like heroin, is a felony. Felonies are forever, and it can make it difficult for people to obtain and maintain sobriety and to transform their lives. A felony means there are restrictions to jobs, professional licensures, the ability to vote, and housing, to name just a few restrictions. There are laws that prevent housing discrimination, but there are loopholes that allow discrimination against people with a criminal record. How can we expect people to get sober and become contributing members of society when their ability to meet their basic needs are disenfranchised?

I first needed to have the proper materials to research. I did not have a laptop at the beginning of the semester. I thought I would use paper and pen and type up papers at the library. The library had chrome books that I could check out for 5-days at a time, so I was able to more easily access resources and work on my research. I then thought it would be valuable to learn how to evaluate credible sources. The library's website had multiple "Information Literacy Modules," that I worked through. I believe that some professors can assign it, but I found the modules under the research and support tab. It was under instruction support, but in this age of "fake news", I thought it was an important skill I should make sure I developed. I already had a bias in my research, so I needed to make sure I wasn't keeping research that just supported my bias and throwing out information that went against it. I needed to make sure I was appropriately validating my findings.

While Google Scholar and the Articles and More search functions were key aspects to my research, I also looked farther afield and searched on the internet. The Library libguides on how to spot fake news, and evaluate research and sources were important to make sure the facts and figures or antidotes were true and reliable. My initial round of research the key words I used returned results that were too broad for my purpose or did not get to the crux of the matter. With Dr. Tassoni and the Librarian chat functions I was able to work on refining my key word to discover more manageable and focused results.

As I researched and found more information, my topic expanded and took and changed shape. I was able to avail myself of the Howe Writing Center. While they were able to help with editing for grammar and spelling errors, more importantly they were able to help me coalesce my research. I had found so many compelling issues, from the harms of the pay to stay programs, mandatory work programs that pay less than \$1 per hour, to the racial and economic disparity in the application of the law. All of these things play a role in the problems with the criminal justice system, the recidivism rates and the reasons people relapse. However, for space and clarity I could not discuss everything. The tutors at the writing center helped me evaluate my thesis and what parts of my paper were superfluous to the topic at hand.

At the beginning of the semester, I thought a ten page paper was unbelievably long. After working with the library, this paper didn't even scrape the surface. I can see myself circling back and delving deeper into this topic in the future.