

WinR Addiction Advocacy Research Student Internship/Faculty Fellowship Program

Community Advisory Board Interview

We recently sat down with Corey Kuebler for a quick Q+A to learn more about their work in mental health, how their lived experience facilitates that work, and their take on wellness and self-care.

Corey is a member of the Community Advisory Board for the [WinR Addiction Advocacy Research Student Internship/Faculty Fellowship Program](#), offering valuable guidance, expertise, and support to our WinR interns and fellows.



Q. Corey, thank you for taking the time to sit down and share your experiences with us today. Can you start by telling us a little about your work with the Intensive Recovery Treatment Support (IRTS) program?

A. I have the honor of assisting participants reenter their communities after leaving New Jersey state prisons with an opioid use disorder. The work I do varies widely. I assist with finding participants treatment such as detox, or medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD). I work with participants to find mental health support. Participants will call with requests for linkage to shelters for housing or food pantries/soup kitchens for sustenance. My conversations with participants are also about their successes – reconnecting with their children or finding employment, for example – and the sense of well-being that comes from their commitment to their self-defined recovery goals. I am very fortunate that I work closely alongside Peer Health Navigators, Registered Nurses, and a Program Coordinator to deliver the highest quality services we can. Our teamwork makes anything possible and saves me infinite amounts of stress.

Q. You're clearly doing a lot of important work and have been for some time now. What inspired you to pursue these roles in the mental health field?

A. This work snuck up on me through a job at a for-profit substance use treatment provider in New Brunswick. I started working there part-time in 2015, and then full-time in 2016 after finishing my undergraduate degree in English. The more time I spent with the people we were serving, the more I listened to their stories, and the more we laughed, I knew I had found a place where I could be of service. Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care (UBHC) was my next employer where I started as a Peer Health Navigator for IRTS. My perception of what social work could be and its impacts has expanded astronomically as I watched UBHC secure grants for the county-based Support Team for Addiction Recovery (STAR) program and more, with peer services as the guiding force.

Q. You've shared that you are an individual in long-term recovery. How do you feel that your lived experiences have influenced your work supporting other? What strengths does your lived experience bring to your work?

A. My lived experiences' biggest impact on my work is a compassion for participants who have acute challenges in their recovery. I have made (and sometimes still do make!) countless decisions that were (and are!) against my best interest. The privileges of my socioeconomic background, my whiteness, and my parents' education level were among the protective factors that buoyed me. When I see a participant challenged by similar decisions and difficulties – which are consistently of much higher magnitude than any of what I went through – or living in ways that ambivalently express how they want to change, I can feel a 'me too.' That identification, whether or not I share it aloud, helps me avoid judgment or oversimplifying the complexity of the recovery process. I still remember the multi-year stretch of my own suicidal ideations and substance use, and how confusing that time period was for the people who cared about me. I am fortunate that IRTS truly values harm reduction and a person-centered approach – we are always able to be supportive in our professional roles, regardless of a participant's current challenges. These principles help us as providers become protective factors for the people we serve.

Q. Thank you for sharing that, Corey. You've made a great case for peer support and individuals with lived experience in the mental health field. What advice would you offer to someone with a lived experience looking to enter the Mental Health field?

A. I don't really give advice, per se, but I highly recommend an intentional self-care regimen built on peace and joy. Speaking for myself, some of what I see and listen to in this work can activate strong feelings of worry, sadness, identification, and feelings of "I have to save the world!" I hypothesize that I may be more susceptible to these feelings because of my lived experience. So, when (yes – when!) compassion fatigue finds me, I am vulnerable to such feelings overwhelming me and exhausting my ability to serve. I forget that I can take a day off because I fortunately have a fantastic team of support. I forget that this work isn't about me "saving the world," or, on days more shallow but no less selfish, getting compliments on my annual employee review. The Self-Care regimen that helps me stay energized and humbled is always changing: it's been hiking; PTSD treatment; Twelve Step meetings; skateboarding; painting; learning recipes from my heritage to further deconstruct my whiteness; writing; reading; and so much more on any given day, hour, or minute.

Q. You make a great point – it's important that care providers attend to their own wellness to be in the best position to support others. It's wonderful to see all the different ways you practice self-care. What about the greater mental health community? As an individual with a lived experience working in mental health what would you want other providers to know?

WinR Addiction Advocacy Research Student Internship/Faculty Fellowship Program

Community Advisory Board Interview

A. Person-centered approaches and harm reduction principles to both program development and behavioral services are evidence-based. Please listen to us. Please believe us.

Q. Corey, what you've shared really speaks to your passion and conviction for the direct services you provide, but you also serve in many other capacities including on the Community Advisory Board (CAB) for the WinR program. How would you describe your role on the CAB and how do you think your lived experiences have shaped how you approach the role?

A. I hope I am bringing new perspectives, resources, research ideas, and humor to the WinR CAB meetings. I also hope I am consistently putting voice to person-centered and participatory research principles. My lived experience is an access point to humility; my experience is best explained by me. The same applies to the communities and people we're partnering with to revolutionize what research can be. The people we work alongside are the experts on themselves and their infinitely nuanced worlds, and we as researchers and service professionals are obligated to listen to their needs, and how they want those needs met. I firmly believe that this approach to healing and social change, when applied consistently over time and led by marginalized groups, will dismantle the white supremacist, heteronormative power structures that have resulted in centuries of violence, oppression, and colonialism.

Q. Your perspectives, ideas, and humor are sure to help shape the future of the program. But, let's talk about your future. You're currently pursuing your MSW and MPH in a dual-degree program – can you share some of your plans with us?

A. My dream future is partnering with participants to develop a community-based program centered on the mental health and substance use needs of gender diverse groups (LGBTQ2S+), particularly for BIPOC folx and folx that have experienced incarceration. But is that what participants would want to build? I still have to ask! I am enamored when I think of delivering clinical services and conducting research within that type of participatory reality. Before then, I will follow the guidance of my mentors within UBHC, Rutgers' School of Public Health, and Rutgers' School of Social Work to hone my clinical and research skills. I am very grateful for the supportive management at Rutgers UBHC as I pursue these goals. I would be clueless without my mentors and their generosity with their time and energy.

Q. It's been such a joy learning more from and about you. Thank you for sharing, Corey. As we wrap up, is there anything I haven't asked about that you'd like to share?

A. As my definitions of Self-Care evolve, I would like to elaborate on two ideas that have brought me much more peace and calm and elevated my ability to engage in anti-oppression work. I also want to be clear that my friends and mentors have instilled these ideas in me with admirable patience – I did not invent them. The first is

WinR Addiction Advocacy Research Student Internship/Faculty Fellowship Program

Community Advisory Board Interview

deconstructing my whiteness through more deeply exploring my family history and cultural heritage. I am intentionally engaging with Lebanese and Italian film, learning Levantine Arabic and Italian, and eating the recipes of my ancestors to look beyond that flatness of whiteness which leads to cultural erasure; disidentification with marginalized groups and their history; and further oppression.

The second is re-indigenizing my day-to-day experience. If you're like me, you noticed how hard it is to find art that centers Indigenous creators and Indigenous experience. I assembled the below list to counteract that void I encountered – please note that the content warnings (c/w) are reflections of mental health and other challenges, such as violence, that Indigenous people experience at disproportionately high rates. Each example centers, stars, and/or was made by Indigenous folx.

- Empire of Dirt (2013) – Movie on Tubi (free with ads!) – A mother and daughter story weaves through intergenerational legacies.
- Mekko (2015) – Movie on Tubi (free with ads!) – Story of a man's return from incarceration and his reckoning with the tragic event that led him there in the first place.
- Fire Song (2015) – c/w for suicide and sexual violence – Movie on Tubi (free with ads!) – A teenager experiences family challenges that include his sister's suicide, as well as his issues around finances, higher education, and his sexuality.
- Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature (2011) – Poems, fiction, and essays that center queerness in the Indigenous experience.
- Reservation Dogs – c/w for suicide – Show on Hulu – So much humor and depth among these four friends that scheme to leave their Oklahoma reservation.

Corey Kuebler is a genderqueer/non-binary, trans femme person in long-term recovery, social worker, and artist. Their lived experiences bring an important perspective to their work as a Habilitation Counselor and Case Manager. Corey also brings a unique point of view as a member of the Community Advisory Board for the Wellness in Recovery Addiction Advocacy Research Fellowship Program (WinR) where they provide guidance and expertise to the program's team.

This interview was conducted by Stuart Luther.

Disclaimer: The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the Center of Alcohol & Substance Use Studies.