

More universities seeking coordinated response to sexual violence on campus

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At least five Canadian universities have hired sexual violence prevention coordinators in the last two years, with more to come.

Addressing sexual violence on campus has become a full-time job at several Canadian universities. Since 2015, at least five universities have created and filled jobs with a title such as sexual violence prevention and education coordinator, and three or more institutions have started the hiring process for this role.

“No day is the same,” said Farrah Khan, sexual violence education and support coordinator at Ryerson University. Ms. Khan was hired in November 2015, shortly after the vice-provost, students, established Ryerson’s office of sexual violence support and education. In her role, Ms. Khan facilitates training for staff, faculty and students on topics like how to intervene as a bystander in a dangerous situation, or what to do if someone tells you they’ve been assaulted; she consults with three separate campus advisory committees for feedback on campus programs, services, policies and protocol that relate to sexual violence prevention and response; she collaborates with her colleagues in student affairs and at local organizations to develop outreach programs and resources like the [#IBelieveSurvivors](#) social media campaign and the [We Believe You colouring book](#) (PDF), which features tips and affirmations for survivors of sexual assault and their allies. Her priority in this first year on the job, however, has been to directly support survivors of sexual violence in the Ryerson community.



Ryerson University hired Farrah Khan as its first sexual violence education and support coordinator in 2015.

Letting survivors know what their options are

The support Ms. Khan provides looks different for each person who comes through the door. One client might want help navigating the legal system or to be accompanied to the courthouse, while another may need information on medical treatments. Ms. Khan might walk a student through sharing their story in a media interview in the morning and organize a self-defence workshop for Muslim women after lunch. What matters, said Ms. Khan, is that she’s

“providing support and letting [survivors] know what their options are.”

Although individual employees in units like campus security and counselling services have been addressing sexual violence for many years at Canadian universities, few institutions have had staff dedicated to the issue. (Two exceptions of note are Carleton University, where Carolyn Johnston has been equity advisor and coordinator of sexual assault services for [nearly eight years](#), and the University of Toronto, where Cheryl Champagne has served as sexual assault counsellor and educator for even longer.)

Good to have someone specialized

“Before this role, everyone was doing a little bit off the side of their desks,” said Cari Ionson, sexual violence response and awareness coordinator at Mount Royal University. Ms. Ionson [was hired](#) in January 2016 to assess and bolster the institution’s approach to the problem. “There are specific nuances to sexual violence that need to be understood in order to appropriately respond and educate on it. That’s a good reason to have someone specialized.”

Coordinators contacted for this article had all previously worked in crisis centres for women and most had trained as social workers or counsellors. They spoke of the importance of bringing to their work an approach that is “trauma-informed,” “anti-oppressive” and “survivor-centred” – the latter meaning it is solely up to the survivors to decide the course of action following disclosure. “Having a survivor-centred approach is about ensuring that somebody is safe and that they have support for the difficult and intrusive trauma symptoms they may be experiencing,” said Ms. Ionson at Mount Royal. “We’re taking a position that says we will support survivors because for so long they haven’t been supported, they haven’t been believed. Institutions have covered up incidents and they’ve discouraged reporting.”

Researchers responsible for [The Response to Sexual Violence at Ontario University Campuses](#), a report commissioned by Ontario’s Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services released this past May, were critical, however, of an “unreflective survivor-centric approach.” They identified the approach as potentially contributing to a culture of institutional silence and inaction, and to the siloing of responsibility for sexual violence. Despite this, the researchers recommended that a sexual violence coordinator position at the senior management level be created at all institutions. They concluded that the role provides a clear central resource for survivors navigating the system and that it ensures a consistent and high-priority response to sexual violence.

“If we were to use a term like ‘harm reduction’ we’re not talking really about the issue”

When Carla Navid [was hired](#) as sexual violence education and prevention coordinator at Brandon University in May, she insisted that the vice-president, academic – her supervisor – include “sexual violence” in Ms. Navid’s job title. “I think the language we use is important. If we were to use a term like ‘harm reduction’ we’re not talking really about the issue,” she said. “We begin to lose the idea that we’re actually talking about violence against women in the majority of cases.”

The timing of these appointments is no coincidence: this year, both Ontario and British Columbia introduced legislation requiring postsecondary institutions to have sexual assault policies in place for 2017 (a similar bill is moving forward in Manitoba’s legislature); high-profile sexual assault cases involving ex-CBC radio host [Jian Ghomeshi](#) and entertainer [Bill Cosby](#) have dominated headlines here and abroad; and media have been reporting on campus sexual assault more frequently than in the past.

Just a month before Ms. Navid started her job at Brandon U, the [CBC reported](#) on the institution’s use of a behavioural contract as part of a sexual misconduct investigation in 2015. Among other things, this contract prevented the survivor from telling others about the incident. Brandon U president Gervan Fearon responded to the

coverage by announcing that the institution would accelerate the work of its sexual violence committee, and establish a comprehensive sexual assault response and coordinator position.

“It’s a good thing that these things come out. I know for the people involved it can be stressful but I’m grateful to the students [who spoke up] and the number of moving parts that are making this a national issue,” Ms. Navid said. “This is a hot topic now but is it going to continue to be? That’s why I think we’ve got to make hay while the sun shines and try to bring as much awareness as possible.”