

Santa Ono: I'm Santa Ono, the president and vice-chancellor of UBC. On this season of the Blue and Goldcast, I'm speaking with the people who are helping to shape UBC's next century. Each episode, I'll be joined by one of my senior faculty advisors, and we'll hear how they're contributing to our strategic plan. Our world today looks very different than it did in March of 2020, and now more than ever, supporting our students, faculty, and staff is crucial, especially when it comes to mental health. I've been very candid over the last four years about the importance of mental health on and off campuses. Last winter, I asked Kathryn Gretsinger, from the school of journalism, to be my senior presidential advisor on mental health. Over the last year, Kathryn and her team of 80 students, journalists, and academics have been working on a cross-border investigation into mental health issues with 10 journalism schools in Canada and the US.

The initiative's goal was to provide a wide, comprehensive look at mental health among college and university students. Thousands of students were surveyed and 150 in-depth interviews were conducted. Her investigation's findings are just now being released through major media outlets in Canada and the US. The first pieces started to roll out this past November in the Toronto Star as part of their series called Generation Distress. Kathryn is here with me today to share insights from her critically important investigation. Kathryn, thank you so very much for joining us on this Blue and Goldcast. I'm thrilled that you're here and I'm really, really proud of what you're doing, and I think it's having a huge impact around the world. Thank you so much.

Kathryn Gretsinger: Santa, thank you. I don't know that this would have been possible without the support and the independence that I was offered from UBC. I appreciate that very much.

Santa: Let's talk about that. I'm actually really, really happy that it's an independent activity. When I spoke to you, that was the first question you asked me was, "Is it going to be independent?" I said, "Absolutely." Tell me a little bit about why that's important to you.

Kathryn: Well, there's four pillars of journalism ethics. There's truth, and there's independence, and there's accountability, and there's minimizing harm. The pillar about independence really requires us to gather facts and assess them, make decisions about evidence, make editorial judgments, and be able to verify and corroborate facts independently. I didn't want to take on a role that would compromise my independence in any way, even though the issues are very hard to debate. Everybody knows these are issues, but I wanted to be independent and journalistic in my endeavor.

Santa: I'm glad that you're doing that. I insist upon that 150%. I'm thrilled that you continue your work in this very important area. You've been working on this project for a year now. It's amazing how time flies and at a difficult year. Can you tell us a little bit about the scope of this project? I know the answer, but I want the listeners to hear how broad in scope the project is and what's your motivation for getting engaged in this big project.

Kathryn: Well, I was working as part of a journalistic collaboration looking at tainted water in Canada. There were a number of universities involved, and we had a retreat weekend where we were talking about our project. A couple of us started talking about what we're noticing in the classroom and what our concerns are around mental health. We decided to have a little subgroup and start into this, and it happened that Rob Cribb from the Toronto star and who also works at Ryerson and the University of Toronto, said, "You know what? I think we should try to come up with a collaboration." The plan was hatched and we went ahead with Pauline Dakin from King's and David McKay from Carlton. We found students and we had a little Canadian contingent at the same time as a group was coalescing in the United States. Now, it's a collaboration across border, 10 universities, academics, journalists, and students, all working in support of this project.

Santa: Are there any logistical issues with something like that and has COVID impacted your ability to carry out your work?

Kathryn: Such an interesting question. For us, it's actually been okay because, largely, we've distributed surveys. About 8,000 surveys have gone out, we've conducted 150 plus structured interviews and our students have adapted very well and so have the young journalists participating. They're doing those at a distance, Zoom, telephone, that kind of thing. Then we meet on Zoom calls or on the telephone with our cross-border partners and with the media agencies. We've managed. Photographs aren't quite as great as they would be in other days, but we've been okay.

Santa: Does the whole group get together on a huge Zoom call sometimes?

Kathryn: We haven't had the whole group, we've been actually talking about the possibility of perhaps doing that, but we usually meet-- the instructors meet together and the key journalists. Then, we go back to our own teams, but we communicate, we use Slack, we use Zoom to try to stay in touch.

Santa: Post-pandemic, do you think you'd be interested in everybody coming to UBC and just meeting each other and talking about the findings and then next steps?

Kathryn: I think it would be incredible. I think if we could have an opportunity to have this conversation at a high level, I know you've been very outspoken about that since you got here, and well before when you're in Cincinnati, and I know that there is a real appetite to not just talk about it, to look at these broad numbers and think about what action can be taken.

Santa: Is this the time for you to continue to talk about it, or is the project still ongoing? Is there a time, say, several months down the line where it'd be even better for you to talk about everything that you're finding?

Kathryn: I think it would be probably once we have the ability to have people together, we could do that. We're thinking about this first set of stories that have just gone out, touch on very particular things. The follow-up stories are the ones that we're really keen about. You and I have spoken about this before, the need for early intervention, the need for adequate assessment, the need for wait times to be addressed the need for BIPOC students and indigenous students, and students who

are international students to have particular kinds of support. There's lots of follow-up and I think there'll be tons of room for conversation and action going forward.

Santa: Now, for the listener, tell us a little bit about what your main findings have been thus far.

Kathryn: Well, I think one of the key things is how widespread this is. I think we really had a sense, all of us, about these growing and concerning numbers. I don't know that any of us had a sense of the depth of the change. If you layer COVID on top, some of the research that's been done by this very university, academic research that's been done, really identifies particular factors, isolation, loneliness, things like stigma up here, things like people being detached from their home communities and support services. Online supports can go so far, but that's showing some issues. 60% of the respondents to our surveys said that they had to wait weeks or months for their first appointments on campus. 90% of them had to wait that long for a second appointment. We've got to be better. That's the kind of thing that we're concerned about. Things like people seeking help, 62% of them said that the reason why they didn't go earlier to seek help was because of stigma, 62%. Those are the kinds of things that we're looking at. People know that the services are there and now there's good awareness, but it's just acting on that and knitting it into people's actions that were wondering about.

Santa: You say that 62% don't seek help because of stigma. Is it more pronounced in certain groups, ethnic groups, or from among international students or indigenous students? Do you have that information?

Kathryn: Yes, they're here. I can give you the breakdown. Some people, 62%, are concerned about stigma. 53% were concerned about the nature of help being offered, whether or not it would be appropriate to their particular needs. Some of that has to do with their backgrounds and the circumstance that they're in. Some students are worried about missing classes because of having to go and wait and take time out, language barriers, 27% are expressing concern about that. This one is a concerning number to me and I want to follow up with it, fear of repercussion, fear of being forced out of academic programs, out of residences because they were identified as somebody with a mental illness. We need to look at that, I think, and question it and wonder what's going on there.

Santa: Do they fear that because of things that they've seen with other students, or is it just something that's grounded in, say, high school? Why do they think that?

Kathryn: I think that's something that we're going to have to tease out. A couple of the students from UBC, who are now graduates, working journalists, they are looking at stories following up on those sorts of things, saying, "What was in the way? What were the barriers? What were the things that helped? Whether or not there might be some ways to think about bridges or different approaches that might be a little bit more appropriate for people in need."

Santa: Among all those different facts that you've uncovered, what was the most surprising thing that you learned in this large project?

Kathryn: The most surprising, probably just sitting back and considering the scope of it all. The group that we've been working with, and speaking to people from the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, they're saying that this survey is one of the broadest that's ever been conducted, if not the broadest. When you put the numbers all together, and you realize that in every single measure, the numbers are ticking up. Since COVID, the numbers are going up substantially 20%, 30% more. What can be done? Where are the lines between the provincial health departments, the federal health ministry, the universities and colleges community support. Whose job is it to do what? How can we better use whatever resources are there to help serve our young people because they're suffering? They're suffering.

Santa: We have to do something about it. As you've just pointed out, it's going to require all of us to come together. You and I have talked a little bit about developing a national plan to get everybody at the table and to develop a seamless, integrated plan. Have you heard that? Any evidence that people have an appetite for that? Obviously, it's awkward during COVID to do that, are you optimistic that will happen?

Kathryn: That's probably better answered by somebody in your office, but it's a good question. I think everyone we've spoken to is concerned about this. Students, faculty-- Oh my gosh, the stories from faculty, and the work that they're doing to try to support students is astonishing. People in the system, and certainly people in the community groups, knowing that this is underway, and I think a public conversation at a high level would be good and I think that there's a real appetite for change, not just words. I am going to continue to be asking about that and everyone in the project is, and we'll see what happens.

Santa: We have those conversations at the national level at certain organizations like U15 and Universities Canada. There have been some conversations with ministers, but it's really going to take someone with tremendous influence to get everybody together around the table. In the United States, when I was there, President Obama did that. He had White House summits, realizing that it was going to require an integrated plan. He didn't quite get there because he ran out of time, to be honest, but the motivation was there. I really believe it's going to require that influence.

Kathryn: Have you got the Prime Minister's phone number?

Santa: Well, he's a graduate, and he has done a lot of wonderful things, for sure. Certainly, there might be an election coming up, so the amount of time he has is also debatable. I wouldn't want to pin it all on him. He's done a lot of wonderful things, as has his mother, but I do think that it's going to require that an influence, I believe.

Kathryn: The heft, I think that the UofT through the Dalla Lana Center and the new Investigative Journalism Bureau, they're at the table. UBC wants to be at the table. There's people at Carleton and King's, so that's four of the big respected universities in the country. If those people are saying, "Look at the evidence" and then you can support that journalism evidence with all of the academic research that Canadian universities and US universities have done, there's a real case to be made for "I'm looking at this as a group and strategizing and coming up with a new plan."

Santa: There was a wonderful Canada-wide discussion about anti-racism, as you know, that came out of one of our former deans, Wisdom Tettey, at the University of Toronto, at one of their campuses, that might be a good follow up to your work is to have a two-day conversation about this and to invite other leaders from government, from both federal and provincial, as well as community members to really start to map out a framework. Then, once there is a framework, perhaps that can be published in the media because the media is obviously sensitized and understands the gravity of the situation.

We know that isolation is a contributing factor, you've mentioned it, to poor mental health. In the age of COVID, have you come up with ideas through all these interviews about innovative ways that we might overcome the sense of isolation?

Kathryn: It's so interesting that you should ask that today because one of my students is working on a project right now. It's three young women, two from UBC, and one from the UofT, who had this idea about going on social media and creating a space for people to connect and come together. It's FU Let's Talk, is their handle. Basically, they put out this Instagram post, and 2,400 people are participating and sharing their stories. I guess that little story is just an example of people putting themselves out there, starting conversations, I know we're hearing a lot from people who are reaching for phone lines, and some of the online resources that are available.

I think for our students, what we're hearing is they want to be together, they want to be heard, they want to find some way to express what's going on for them. They want strategies and ideas and they want resources that they can get when they need them. That timeliness piece is huge and it's something that we're trying to pay attention to. Scaling that is the challenge and making sure that those resources are available to whoever needs them, whenever they need them.

Santa: What can we learn from all of your findings about how we can be a leader at UBC? Obviously, we have to address issues such as wait time, we have to address the resources that we provide in residence halls, and all those sorts of things. We're also a thought leader, and you've identified things that we have to solve. There's a capacity probably here to incent faculty members and students to focus research, to solve some of these issues that you've identified. Do you think that's something that you'd like to see happen in the near future?

Kathryn: I'm just a journalist, I'm just somebody who's concerned about this and watching it as a citizen and able to ask questions and put information together. We have some of the finest researchers in the world on this campus and they're already doing some of that work. To think about knitting them together, the really interesting thing about this project is it's been interdisciplinary. We've had people from social work and people from journalism and people from psychology, and so on, coming together, to think about all the work that's being done, and to bring people under one tent to talk about these ideas, help support faculty to help their students.

There's already a wonderful community of practice happening, so how can we take that knowledge and wisdom from that group and move it over to the Student Services Center, and then learn from each other and then go on from there? I think if we can have the conversation with as many people as possible, understanding that

nobody has the answer, but we all have some answers and even more importantly, some questions. If we can find a way to put that together, then yes, maybe UBC could take this ball and really run with it.

Santa: I definitely love to talk to you a lot more about that in the days and weeks and months ahead. Thank you so much. I just want to give you the last word, what would you really like to tell the world about the project and what you've learned and what you'd like to see, not only UBC, but all of us embrace to address this serious issue?

Kathryn: I think at universities, sometimes, we live within our disciplines and we come up with a body of knowledge or a framework through which we understand the world. One of the things that I've learned in being at this school is having the position of being a journalist, you're constantly working across discipline and amazing things happen. If we can come together and break out of those silos, and start to problem-solve together. The takeaway for me on a project like this is you have a small amount of money at a few Canadian universities and a big amount of intention.

You put that together with big trust, and you say, "Let's work together. Let's share what we can gather and let's come up with some questions, and then go out and seek some answers." You can actually tell some powerful stories which might start other kinds of conversations, which really is the promise of journalism. Our UBC students, six of them, six young women were incredible. They're now graduates and they are out working in the world. Their commitment to this project was humbling and beautiful and powerful. Working in partnership with other universities really taught me that letting go of a little bit of control and sharing is really the way to go.

Santa: Once again, thank you so much for making time for this very important conversation. Congratulations to you and your team and students and faculty across this network for everything that you've done. You know that I'm there for you and whatever we can do moving into the future to build upon your success. I'm looking forward to that journey together.

Kathryn: Thank you very much. It's just the beginning, so get ready. We'll be agitating and continuing to ask questions. Thank you.

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Santa: Kathryn Gretzinger is my senior presidential adviser on mental health and an associate professor of teaching at our School of Journalism. You can learn more about Kathryn's investigation and its findings as they're published in the Toronto Star, the National Observer, NBC News, and the Associated Press. You can also read more online at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health, Investigative Journalism Board at www.ijb.utoronto.ca/news. That does it for this month's episode. You can find links to our guest's work as well as previous editions of the show at blueandgoldcast.com. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app, like iTunes or Stitcher. Our email is blueandgoldcast@ubc.ca. You can tweet me @ubcprez, that's "prez" with a Z. I'm Santa Ono. Thanks for listening.