Western Faculty Profile: Dr. Beverly Leipter

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Dr. Beverly Leipter had an unusual path into academia: she started as a public health nurse in rural Saskatchewan. After practicing for 10 years, she combined her experiences from having grown up on a farm with what she had seen in the community and went to the University of British Columbia to do a Master of Science in Nursing degree to explore how public health nursing is valued. She then moved to the University of Northern British Columbia as a professor and did research that studied Northern women's health. At the time, there was little research available on rural women's health and it was needed to inform policy to improve health care in rural areas. She also completed a PhD in nursing at the University of Alberta, giving Northern women a voice about their health issues, protective factors and barriers to healthcare.

Dr. Leipter's responsibilities as a professor vary depending on the day: she teaches an undergraduate rural health course and doctoral level qualitative research course, writes grants, writes

and reviews research articles and mentors students. Unlike in a biology lab, where there are wet labs, experiments and simulations, in nursing and health sciences research, graduate students do research with real people. For undergraduate students looking to get involved, courses with research components are great options. For example, an undergraduate student worked with Dr. Leipter on a project involving photovoice. With photovoice, participants are given cameras and asked to photograph scenes/objects related to a particular topic. The undergraduate student was able to gather aging people from her own rural community for a focus group to see how photovoice could be used to study healthcare issues affecting the aging population.

That's one big difference between, say, a biology lab and health sciences research: "We do research with real people in the real world, whether they're nurses looking at nursing practice or rural people in their communities," Dr. Leipter describes

the nature of her field. As such, a lot of research questions come from personal experiences and realizing that a perspective that you grew up with hasn't been documented or studied. For Dr. Leipert, her dissertation was one of the first pieces of research on rural Northern women's health, which was significant because of its novelty and necessity for policy and practice.

Dr. Leipert's research allows her to discover how various factors affect health in rural communities—and some of them might surprise you. One of her studies addressed the significance of curling for health in rural areas. Sometimes, it's the only form of recreation available to rural women. From interviewing women and looking at photos they took in a photovoice study, Dr. Leipert found that curling is important for both physical, social, and community health: it's inclusive, trans-generational, and a great venue for women to make friends. This has potential implications about how funding should be allocated: rural ice rinks are struggling financially and communities need help keeping rinks open during the day for older people and at night for people who work during the day. Although an ice rink might seem insignificant at first, a more careful analysis reveals that it's integral to building rural communities and promoting health within them.

In the future, Dr. Leipert believes that health research should focus on aging, because seniors are the fastest growing group. Rural communities are aging communities: they tend to be made up of older people, because younger people leave to get an education and rural communities do not have jobs to bring them back. This raises concerns about who will provide home care when seniors, especially in rural communities, are unable to care for themselves and how public health nurses can be supported to do more. Furthermore, there has been an overemphasis in research focusing on treatment and there is now a need to focus

on health promotion and illness and injury prevention: helping make sure seniors don't need to go to the hospital in the first place rather than overemphasizing finding solutions after they have arrived.

When asked about what makes a good researcher, Dr. Leipert offered the following advice: "For research you have to have an inquisitive mind and ask questions about your world. I do a lot of critical research, which means you question what is taken for granted: you don't just accept what is, you ask why and how come and who's missing and why are those people at the table and these people like rural women not?" She also emphasized the importance of persistence in pursuing funding for research in light of cutbacks to funding in Canada and having mentors who can show you what research is about and help you get involved.