In the Field

Reflections on a Co-op in the National Capital Region

My interest in the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program at Western University was born from two factors: I loved working in my hometown's public library, and I wanted to expand my professional experience in the information field by participating in the co-op program. I worked for three years in a public library before attending Western, and I wanted to try something completely different for my co-op. To that end, I accepted an offer for a co-op position in the government with the goals of learning about and exploring as many avenues in the information profession as I could, in case I found something I really loved.

My co-op position title was Junior Analyst at the Department of Canadian Heritage, located in Gatineau, Quebec. The first month was a whirlwind as I was brought up to speed through meetings, readings, and presentations on the modernization initiative the department was undertaking. Essentially, the department's primary service to Canadians—delivering grants and contributions—is transitioning to a digital model. The delivery model is also being re-engineered to produce a smoother user experience for both the department's employees and its clients: Canadians! This is a large project powered by about 40 full-time staff members, and the results will have an impact on every aspect of the department.

I worked with three teams in the project office responsible for delivering the new model: Communications, Business Process Re-Engineering, and Information

Management (IM). At first, it was hard to adjust, because my impression had been that the job would primarily be focused on IM. However, I only spent about 10% of my time on that type of work. Receiving assignments from many different teams was a valuable lesson about how to manage my expectations and quickly adapt to change.

Before I knew it, I felt completely integrated into the Communications team, which was mainly due to our daily team check-ins. As a member of this team, I was designing posters, editing newsletters, and building spreadsheets to track our project's engagement with the department as a whole. During the second half of my co-op, I had the opportunity to take the lead on a Communications project. I developed a survey that was sent to the entire department (about 1,800 employees) and then independently analyzed the results before reporting them to senior management. This involved collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, and I modeled my report on a research proposal that I completed for the MLIS course Research Methods and Statistics.

The work I completed for the Business Process Re-Engineering team was the most technical. Truly fitting to my title of Junior Analyst, most of my time working for this team was spent analyzing and performing calculations on large data sets. I felt comfortable working with these data sets, mostly because of the background in statistics I gained from my undergraduate degree. However, if I did not have this previous experience, I think I could have drawn upon material I learned from the Research Methods and Statistics course to figure it out. I became comfortable with the Excel interface as I learned various functions, but perhaps manipulating and analyzing data is a skill that could be highlighted in our MLIS program. Data is becoming the most valuable type of information for businesses and governments alike.

Finally, I assisted the IM team in a more administrative capacity to ensure the ease of access to files and searchability of records. I also maintained the project's SharePoint site, which fostered collaboration among staff. Through working in these different settings, I realized how versatile an MLIS degree can be.

An inherent part of government work is dutifully seeking validation and input from many teams of managers and colleagues. Since the work done by a department will ultimately serve the public in some way, be it directly or indirectly, it is important to consider a set of viewpoints that is as diverse as the Canadian public. This practice is foundational to our democracy and is incredibly important, but it is often slow and inefficient in application. While I enjoy completing tasks expediently, delivering on assigned tasks and moving on to new ones, I found that a government setting is not always conducive to this work style. Although I recognize the importance of governance structures and red-tape in maintaining a consistent and democratic government, through my time spent navigating these I realized that the public service is not a direction in which I would like to take my career.

My favourite aspect of the co-op placement was that I had the opportunity to improve my knowledge of the French language. I participated in a program at work called "Language Buddies," through which I was paired with someone who was trying to learn English. The two of us would eat lunch together twice a week, with one meeting in French and the next in English. When I first moved to Gatineau, I did not know any French; I worked hard to learn the basics, but I think it would have been more difficult if I had not been completely surrounded by the language. I needed to read and speak French in order to buy my groceries or go to a restaurant. This experience helped me to

see how important the French language and French Canadian culture is to being Canadian, and I am very thankful to have learned some of our country's second official language.

My co-op experience expanded my skillset from the moment it began. Tailoring cover letters and resumes to a variety of professional opportunities, preparing for many interviews (sometimes scheduled back-to-back), learning on the job, making new friends, and learning a new language were all parts of an unforgettable experience. I highly recommend the co-op experience as part of the MLIS degree at Western.

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