Government Workers, They’re Just Like Us
Joining the team at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada
• Alison Tan

It is no secret why we become co-op students. Those of us that do are attracted to the program because we are itching for some real world experience outside the comfort of academia. The lingering reminder that a stable job will keep us housed, clothed, and fed after graduation is also a major push factor. If you dedicate your time and effort to it, co-op promises to expand your horizons beyond mere academic achievement and put you squarely on the road to employment, whether you have a set career in mind or not. Needless to say, my expectations going into my first co-op term with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) were high and, thankfully, the experience has been more than I could have asked for.

First of all, I can now say with great confidence, that working for the federal government is not as intimidating as some may believe. In contrast to the standard, uptight caricatures we picture in our heads when we hear the word “government”, my time at AAFC’s Burnaby office was spent working with a group of welcoming and supportive people, each with unique personalities of their own. The friendly and inviting working atmosphere meant that it was immediately easy for me to feel like a respected member of the team, which left me unafraid to seek help when needed.

At the start of my term, I was unfamiliar with AAFC, but in a short period of time, I became more acquainted with the work they do to promote international market access for Canadian agriculture and agri-food businesses.
Even before the first month of my one year co-op contract with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) was over, I knew that my co-op experience was going to be different from what I had ever suspected I was getting myself into. As a graduate student in Political Science at SFU, I had been educated in the notion that employment in the federal public service was a disinteresting affair—where able civil servants, both young and old, dutifully fulfilled the mandates of their respective directorates without becoming personally or emotionally invested in the work at hand.

After meeting a host of colleagues and partners a few weeks into my first term, and starting several exciting projects, I knew that working with the Communications team in the BC Regional office of AANDC was an experience that would engross my strengths, challenge my limitations, and inspire care for the work I would be doing.

Prior to AANDC, I had not worked in professional communications. Yet, when I accepted the position, the challenges seemed familiar. I would simply be transferring my technical training from the study of politics, to the articulation of political products to non-academic audiences. Years spent honing effective essay writing skills had already prepared me for the rigours of “selling the message.” As luck would have it, the forethought I relied upon would pale in comparison to the diversity of opportunities that were waiting throughout my year in communications.

Working in the communication department brought me very close to the interests and issues at play with First Nations communities in BC. Being a student from Ontario, I had little background knowledge of the First Nations in this province. It seemed I was double-burdened and playing catch-up. My unit saw it differently. Instead of a student who needed a crash-course in the basics of the business lines, I was instead seen as someone who could bring a flare for fresh ideas and abilities to help creatively engage with the communication needs of First Nations, stakeholders, and internal audiences.

To this end, I was given a myriad of projects that exposed me to the stories First Nations had to share, the confidence to liaise between multiple external organizations; and the corporate knowledge of how to successfully navigate life in bureaucracy. During my first term I was intimately involved in organizing our region’s only province wide First Nations communications conference—which brought First Nations leaders together with tech and media savvy businesses to explore the ins and outs of strategic communications. Taking a change in pace, during my second term I was given the project lead on editing and redesigning a publication dedicated to informing First Nations on upcoming legislative changes to legal procedures. Finally, with these completed, my third (and last) term brought a whole new set of opportunities. I was given ownership of our internal daily newsletter, our monthly report on media analysis, and produced responses to media enquiries and bi-weekly regional reports for our colleagues in the Ottawa headquarters.

Most importantly, under the guidance of my team, I was able to listen to First Nations directly, to hear their words, and to communicate their stories. The experience has been one I would gladly have again. Not only have I learned how to succeed in a professional environment outside of my academic training, but I have also learned how passion and work in the civil service can complement each other to produce an extremely rewarding experience. As I move on from these past three terms with the Communications team at AANDC these lessons will continue to serve my time in co-op at SFU, and my exploration of future career paths within the federal government.
As an Arts student applying for my first co-op term, I was eager to find a co-op job in a government or international setting. Working in the Department of Commerce at the US Consulate was just what I was looking for. While this position is targeted towards Business students, I was drawn to the prospect of working in an office with international ties; I wanted to learn more about US/Canada relations from a different perspective.

I have to admit that I was anxious to start my first day on the job at the Department of Commerce, but my anxiety quickly turned into determination to learn as much as I could about the ABC’s of international business. As an International Studies student, I am familiar with how international business affects social, political, and economic development; however, I did not know how international business and trade development was actually carried out.

The learning curve was steep, which tested me as a self-motivated worker. I was quickly told that my primary duties were to help facilitate trade, open areas of communication between American and Canadian companies, and help organize an international trade symposium. My most demanding project was working with the department’s match making program, where I researched BC markets in hopes of finding the right niche or partner for an American company. I organized meetings with interested American and Canadian parties and prepared for the meetings by researching various markets in BC, opening new channels of communication by contacting Canadian companies, and writing reports based on my research and feedback from various parties. Without a doubt, my communication and networking skills strengthened, giving me more overall confidence.

Another important aspect of this position was to advance my professional network. If you are an introvert like me, you can understand how nervous and apprehensive I felt when I was told that I should mingle among guests at various United States Consulate events. Keep in mind, these guests hold high positions in the Vancouver business community, and some were from Ottawa or Washington, DC! With sweaty palms and a racing pulse, I threw myself into every event I attended and introduced myself as a co-op student working at the US Consulate. I was surprised to discover that people actually wanted to talk to me and ask me about my experience thus far. Meeting a variety of high profile people like business developers, military officials, RCMP officials, and the American Ambassador, David Jacobson, has definitely been one of the highlights of this position. Overcoming a personal challenge like my shy nature has definitely boosted my confidence in meeting and conversing with new people.

My time at the US Consulate has given me a greater understanding of international trade between America and Canada; including agreements, market analysis, industries, and bi-lateral relations. There is no doubt that Canada is America’s largest trading partner, and having witnessed and assisted trade between the two countries has been an unforgettable experience. Not only have I seen growth in my transferrable skills like researching, writing, and analyzing, but I have also seen growth in my work ethic and self-assurance. Co-op has given me the opportunity to further diversify my university experience and has proven to be invaluable work experience with unforgettable memories.
and their products. Throughout the term, I worked with the Marketing and Trade, and Communications branches; this allowed me the opportunity to work with a variety of people and take on different roles on a regular basis.

With journalistic ambitions, I was attracted to this position because of the prospect of putting together a publication from start to finish. Not only did I get the chance to do this, but I was given the opportunity to strengthen my drafting and editing skills in developing promotional materials, media pieces, a monthly trade bulletin, and more. As much as I craved having these non-academic writing assignments, my experience at AAFC did not end there.

Previously daunted by new and unfamiliar software, my day-to-day duties involved regular use of Microsoft Office and Adobe Creative Suite programs; I was forced to conquer my fears quickly and accordingly. I never thought I would be capable of producing decent looking brochures and posters for public viewing, but this is now an accomplishment I can add to my growing repertoire.

Equally beneficial were a sampling of duties that included media pitching, interviewing, and responding to various inquiries. These duties kept me engaged in different forms of communication and gave me a taste of what my future could involve. Small tasks such as daily media monitoring, updating the office’s client information database, and helping out other colleagues in need, were important duties that enhanced my responsibilities and, in turn, my ability to contribute to the office as a whole.

As my first co-op term, I can think of fewer positions better than the one I was privileged to have at AAFC. Surpassing my expectations, which were focused on the prospect of more writing experience, my time here was spent gradually accumulating proficiencies that leave me better equipped for future ventures. More priceless than gaining the valuable technical skills I doubted I would ever achieve, was the experience itself. The privilege of successfully getting my feet wet alongside accomplished and encouraging professionals came as welcome evidence that my career goals lie within the realms of reality.

SFU’s Arts & Social Sciences Co-op and Career Services partnered up once again to present the annual “What Can I Do in Government” event.

Students had the opportunity to connect with federal and provincial public service workers from Ottawa, Victoria, and the Lower Mainland. Representatives from organizations such as the Canada Revenue Agency, the City of Surrey, and Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada were present.

This year the event was held on November 24th at SFU Burnaby in the West Mall Complex Atrium. Despite the snow, it was a great turnout to the sold out event. During the intimate round table sessions, students were able to hear what public service workers have to say about the work, the people, and the opportunities. It was also a treat to be able to approach the table hosts during the networking component at the end of each session.

Did you miss your chance to attend this year? Keep your eyes open for this event next Fall!