

---

# Experiential Learning in the Constituency Office: Educational Innovation at Ryerson University

---

Patrice Dutil

*In 2013, some senior undergraduate students in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Ryerson University were given the opportunity to be the first class to enroll in an innovative course called the Constituency Office Project. Pairing each student with a Member of Parliament or Member of Provincial Parliament in the Greater Toronto Area, the course allowed students to experience the practical application of political theories they had learned in the classroom. In this article Patrice Dutil outlines the steps taken to set up the course, lists some of its scholastic resources, and shares the feedback he received from the first participants.*

The Ryerson University Department of Politics and Public Administration has developed and implemented an innovative learning experience for its senior students. Working with Members of Parliament and Members of the Provincial Parliament in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the department developed a credit course that includes 80 hours of work in a constituency office, as well as additional research projects. The course has rapidly become a keystone in the department's curriculum – an educational innovation that could set a new standard in political science education across the country.

The purpose of this project is to provide students insights on the applied aspects of what is involved in representing constituents, delivering front-line customer service, and helping the public navigate through government departments. The Constituency Office Project course has so far proven to be a worthy initiative that is reproducible, with some tailoring, across the land. Improvements continue to be made

on how to deliver the experience, but these pioneering efforts have paid off, not least in exposing students to some of the real work of elected officials and in allowing them to discover what has become an important part of Canada's working democracy.

Constituency offices in many areas of Canada already host students, but the initiative mostly comes from social work faculties who wish to give students experience in assisting citizens. (It is worth noting that in some larger cities, urban planning and geography departments also place students in municipal councillors' offices.) The assignment makes sense, but these students also have the general option to complete their internship in any agency devoted to social work. In fact, social work students are not required to take political science as part of their curriculum, so their work in the constituency office is focused entirely on its social work dimension. The internship is typically a requirement to graduate, but it is not a credited course.

For Ryerson Politics students, this senior-level course is an opportunity to gain hands-on experience and to bridge the gap between the theory and skills learned in the classroom and the real work world of parliamentarians and their vitally important constituency staffs. The result has been an important success for the three partners involved. The students have reported immense satisfaction in their course evaluations and earned a credit for their work and

---

*Patrice Dutil is a professor in Ryerson University's Department of Politics and Public Administration and the Yeates School of Graduate Studies. A former Acting Executive Director and Director of Research at the Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC), he is the President of the Champlain Society and was the director of the "Parliament-to-Campus" program of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians from 2008 to 2013.*



Ryerson students were placed in GTA constituency offices belonging to MPs and MPPs from various political parties, including (from left) Bernard Trottier, MP, Glen Murray, MPP, (next page) Carolyn Bennett, MP, Andrew Cash, MP, Jonah Schein, MPP and Ted Opatz, MP.

study, the constituency offices received some help, and Ryerson University has formed a new outreach mechanism to help graduating students bridge the gap between university life and the real world of work.

### How it Works

Though the course is taught exclusively in the Winter term, the process involves the professor from the beginning of the academic year. At that point, the instructor reaches out to the parliamentarians in the GTA to solicit their interest. The response to our first inquiries was overwhelmingly positive with over 50 offices responding affirmatively that they would host a student.

In late October, the department announces to its senior students that the course will proceed as planned. The students must apply and indicate their choice of riding but are strongly encouraged to seek their work experience in their home constituency if possible. They are asked to identify any party preference (this has not proven to be an issue as less than five percent of students declared a partisan bias and were easily accommodated by Toronto's mix of Liberal, New Democrat and Conservative MPs and MPPs). Because Ryerson University attracts students from every corner of the GTA, the matching effort has proven relatively easy, though many students expressed the desire to work in a downtown Toronto constituency office, within easy reach of campus. Only one student was assigned per office, and the match was

done on a first-come, first-served basis for the highly popular downtown ridings. In some cases students asked for ridings that were outside the GTA because they lived in residence but typically returned home for the weekend. This was also accommodated.

In mid-December, after the matching exercise has been completed, the students are called to an orientation session with the instructor. The event features key instructions, reminders and tips, as well as presentations from constituency office professional staff and former students.

---

*The purpose of this project is to provide students insights on the applied aspects of what is involved in representing constituents, delivering front-line customer service, and helping the public navigate through government departments.*

---

The course starts with the Winter term as students report to the constituency office and begin their work assignment. They must work eight hours a week over a 10-week period from the first week of January until the end of March. Though

many students volunteered more hours, the course requirement is 80 hours.

Working alongside office staff, students developed an immediate feel for the connection between the theoretical discussions they have experienced in their studies and the work undertaken by elected representatives. The student could assist in a wide range of tasks, including but not limited to: strategic communications; stakeholder relations; media relations; community outreach; event planning; office administration and budgeting; data management; correspondence; and assisting with case work.





Students must also fulfill academic requirements; there were two assignments in the term. The first required the submitting of a journal which recorded their reflections on the work performed each day. The students were given a reading list consisting of academic articles on constituency offices in Westminster systems and asked to reflect on how the insights offered by the research matched the lived realities.

The research on the work and role of constituency offices is not particularly rich in Canada. The list includes Peter MacLeod's indispensable "How to Organize an Effective Constituency Office" (*Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 2006) and Royce Koop's recent "Party Constituency Associations and the Service, Policy and Symbolic Responsiveness of Canadian Members of Parliament" (*Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 2012) as well as Sue Thomas's "The Effects of Race and Gender on Constituency Service" (*Western Political Quarterly*, 1992) and Pippa Norris's "The Puzzle of Constituency Service" (*The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 1997).

The list also features some classics, such as R. K. Carty's, *Canadian Political Parties in the Constituencies* (Research Studies of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, 1991), Harold D. Clarke et al's "Constituency Service among Canadian Provincial Legislators: Basic Findings and a Test of Three Hypotheses" (*Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 1975), C.E.S. Franks's study, "Members and Constituency Roles in the Canadian Federal System" (*Regional and Federal Studies*, 2007), Eagle Munroe's "The Political Ecology of Representation in English Canada: MPs and their Constituencies" (*American Review of Canadian Studies*, 1998) and John Halligan et al's, "Constituency Service among Sub-national Legislators in Australia and Canada" (*Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 1988) to name a few.

Given the strong multicultural dimension of the Ryerson University student body, the class was also exposed to some notable constituency research from around the world.

In examining the British experience, for example, students were asked to consider Ron Johnston and Charles Pattie's, "MPs Expenditure and General Election Campaigns: Do Incumbents Benefit from Contacting their Constituents?" (*Political Studies*, 2009) and Charles Pattie's "Still Talking, But is Anyone Listening? The Changing Face of Constituency Campaigning in Britain, 1997-2005" (*Party Politics*, 2009) while they worked.

The impact of constituency work in other European countries was also considered in Eimear O'Leary's, "The Constituency Orientation of Modern TDs" (*Irish Political Studies*, 2011), Audrey Aube et al's "Belgian Affairs and constituent preferences for 'good constituency members'" (*Acta Politica*, 2012), as well as in Yasushi Hazama's "Constituency Service in Turkey: A Survey on MPs" (*European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 2005) and Donley Studlar and Ian McAllister's, "Constituency Activity and Representational Roles among Australian Legislators" (*The Journal of Politics*, 1996).

The readings also serve to orient the students in their final assignment, a research paper related to an aspect of the work of the constituency office in which they were interns.

### The Final Research Paper

The final paper of about 25 pages in which students documented an aspect of constituency office work was a key deliverable. Subjects varied widely, but capture the broad range of interest that was engendered in the minds of the students.

Quite a few papers stood out in terms of investigating how small constituency offices managed service to a



clientele that varied enormously in terms of ethnicity, language, experience and familiarity with Canadian affairs. A number of students analyzed the Member of Parliament's private bills and documented how these initiatives were (or were not!) tied to the riding's concerns. Many students in the downtown Toronto area saw firsthand how immigration issues dominated the time and energy of the office staff and examined various aspects of this challenge. One student focused on the "blockages" in Immigration Canada, while the other documented the "troubleshooter" practices of one office that was particularly adept at tackling what appeared to be lost causes.

Many students were deeply impressed by the outreach strategies, analyzing how harried members of parliament make the most of weekend time to connect with constituents of all sorts. One particularly observant student compared the "branding" practices of constituency offices as they worked within the rules of the Government of Canada that aim to make constituency offices partisan-neutral outreaches designed to serve all of Canada's residents, regardless of how they voted. Many students examined the motivations and histories of the staff they worked with. One student memorably conducted a poll to document the degree to which the riding's inhabitants were actually aware that there even existed a constituency office!

The students were reunited at a class seminar at the end of the term and each delivered a short verbal presentation on their research. A former MPP attended

part of the seminar and shared his own insights on the work of constituency offices and their links with the politics of the ridings.

### Assessment

The project has been a success on many levels. One student was hired by her constituency office upon graduation. Many have decided to continue to volunteer, and all have expressed how impressed they were with this part of Canadian democracy they were completely unfamiliar with. As one student put it, "this experience has taught me as much as several other courses combined because actually being there and participating in cases gave me a clear view of life and career in government." Another student noted that the experience "shaped my views on politics. Instead of focusing on the actions of government from the top,

I will be more aware of the effects of policies on the ground." As one student put it, "I don't think it shaped my views on politics in general; I think it gave me a real perspective on the work an MP does and how time consuming it can be."

---

***"This experience has taught me as much as several other courses combined because actually being there and participating in cases gave me a clear view of life and career in government."***  
*~ comment from a student course evaluation*

---

There were hits and misses. One student excitedly wrote that he had met the prime minister at an event after only a few weeks on the job, something he could not have imagined before. The students who had an opportunity to accompany the Member of Parliament at events really appreciated the experience. There were some disappointments, nevertheless. Many students reported that the office was not very busy and that their talents did not find

---

as many outlets as they would have expected. One student spoke for a few when he put it baldly: “the office didn’t know what to do with me.” We think this problem can be resolved with better communication with the staff in the constituency office.

### **Keys to Success**

---

In a placement situation, success depends to some degree on the host/office but mostly on the students. They were encouraged to:

1. Think politically—and to remember that they were there as political scientists, not social workers. They were encouraged to think about what they could do to help the MPP or MP improve his/her connection to the community or understanding of the politics of the riding.

2. Volunteer for outreach. There is *always* something to do in efforts to get a politician better known in a community. Students were encouraged to volunteer to create lists of contacts, posters, brochures, mail-outs (householders), website improvements, etc. Because many offices have a designated “outreach coordinator,” this was a key fit.

3. Volunteer to do research on local issues and write briefing notes. This is on the assumption that “there is always something going on.” More “intelligence” has never hurt anyone and, as students of politics, they have been trained to track issues.

4. Be a reflective practitioner. The idea is to be mindful of the context (physical, political, personal) of the Constituency Office. How do political ideas translate themselves through the actions of the staff, and of the elected member for the riding?

5. Keep the daily journal up-to-date by taking a few minutes at the end of the shift to note key activities and reflections in light of the scholarly material presented in the course.

Asked whether they would recommend taking this course to their friends, the response was a unanimous “yes”. Many recommended that the course be doubled in length to encompass the two terms of the academic year, but many equally complained that the course was too demanding in terms of time and effort. Innovation in teaching politics can be demonstrated, but some things do not change.