
“Tremendous Assets”: Co-op students at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario

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Canadian legislatures provide paid employment for students in a variety of programs that benefit both students and legislatures. Hired as pages, interns, tour guides, summer staff, and in co-op programs, students assist regular staff in providing services to Members, other legislative staff, and the public. Through these programs young people earn money to help finance their education while learning first-hand about the institution at the heart of democratic government in their jurisdiction. This paper looks briefly at co-op programs in selected jurisdictions across the country and explores the Legislative Learner program in Ontario in some depth.¹

Co-op Programs in Canada

Currently six Canadian jurisdictions provide positions for co-op students: British Columbia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and the Parliament of Canada. They provide opportunities for undergraduate students from accredited universities to work full-time in offices such as the Clerk's, Human Resources, or the Legislative Library. Placements usually last four months, reflecting university semesters, and occur whether the respective Legislatures are in session or not. Co-ops provide full-time work that is conducted in concert with permanent staff and also earns co-op credits at universities. While there are many shared features there are some notable differences in the programs offered.

The Senate of Canada offers both co-op and page programs to full-time students in accredited institutions and the Library of Parliament hires co-op students from university library and information science programs for four-month work terms.

New Brunswick has periodically employed students from universities under their co-operative education

programs. For the past five years Newfoundland and Labrador has worked with Memorial University's Department of Political Science to host one co-op student per year who works in Communications/Policy Development with the House of Assembly or in the Legislative Library for a three-month term.

Since 2008, two third- or fourth-year students in Prince Edward Island, usually majoring in political science or history, are recruited by the University of Prince Edward Island for placement at the Legislative Assembly. Students work as members of the Assembly's permanent staff performing various tasks and assuming job duties as assigned. The bulk of their work, however, is responding to research requests from internal staff, MLAs, or listservs. During their placement, students are usually required to complete a larger, independent research project that relates to legislative precedent, history, or celebrations.

Ontario's Legislative Learner Program

For the past 40 years, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario has forged a strong relationship with the University of Waterloo's co-op program. Known as *Legislative Learners* since 2003, these students work one term in an Assembly Office and another in an MPP or caucus office during their time at Queen's Park. They learn about the offices and functions of the Assembly and the legislative process as important events of the day unfold.

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Joel Le Forestier, Jacqueline Pitre and Nolan Wilson completed their first term as Legislative Learners in various Assembly offices in April, 2014. They return in September to work with an MPP or caucus office.

The Legislative Learner program has been very successful for both the Legislative Assembly of Ontario and participating students. Bright and enthusiastic, these students have brought fresh skills to the work of the Assembly. In turn, they have had a unique experience participating in the drama and the routine of offices that support the work of Ontario's legislators and in the intensely political process of an MPP or caucus office.

Selecting the Students

A rigorous recruitment process selects students on the basis of excellent academic records, outstanding commitment to extra-curricular activities, and their interest in the issues that animate Ontario politics and politicians. They are expected to be fast learners and good writers, be very articulate, have an excellent work ethic, be able to work well with other people, show good judgment, and be knowledgeable about Ontario.

The Legislative Learner Program, which is advertised on Waterloo University's Job Mine website in early autumn, generally receives about 150 applications for what are considered to be plum placements for humanities students.

Waterloo University's undergraduate co-op program, the largest of its kind in the world, involves more than 5,000 employers and 17,300 students. The program is highly organized and administered from a purpose-built facility that houses co-op staff and provides excellent interview and waiting rooms. An electronic system tracks interviews and provides alerts for students and interviewers. A team of Assembly staff from Human Resources and the three hiring branches review resumes and interview 10 to 12 students. Although interviews are offered to third-year humanities students with high academic achievement who have completed earlier co-op placements, exceptional second-year students have also been interviewed—and hired. Students who have affiliations with political parties are not eligible for this program.

The interviews, which are held at the University of Waterloo in October, follow a set procedure. All students are asked to attend a session where they are briefed about the kind of work they will be doing in their placements. In recent years, the winter term placements have been in Procedural Services, the Legislative Research Service, and the Parliamentary Protocol and Public Relations Branch; fall term placements have been in a Member's or a caucus office. Scripted questions focus the half-hour interviews that follow and each applicant is asked to indicate a preferred office.

The offer of three positions (and their acceptance) occurs by early November.

Working at Queen's Park

Legislative Learners begin their first term in January in an Assembly Office placement. They swear the same oath of confidentiality as other Assembly staff because they will be providing information services to MPPs and their staff. Most are quickly assimilated into their respective offices and learn that in a fast-paced environment their work has to be accurate and on point. Students travel with committees, attend meetings, and are expected to observe in the House. Special projects have involved creating databases, writing papers, arranging events, contacting people in other Canadian legislatures or governments, helping to schedule witnesses, or posting information to the Assembly's intranet site.

Legislative Learners learn the importance of keeping up with political news and are taught the importance of being non-partisan in the highly political environment of the Legislative Assembly. They are also encouraged to participate in tours, lectures, and other Assembly programs such as the Assembly's Mentorship Program and lunchtime French classes; in short, they are to learn as much as possible about the functions and people of the Assembly and its issues. Their university also requires them to write a paper about their placement. When the term finishes at the end of April, it is followed by a University of Waterloo study term.

Students return to Queen's Park in September to work in MPP or caucus offices. What they learned the previous winter provides a good grounding for what is often an intense deadline-driven four months. This term puts them in a highly partisan environment where they learn about the give and take in a political office. They work directly with MPPs and perform a range of duties that include making deliveries, attending political briefings, writing press releases or statements,

researching issues, and accompanying their MPP to scrums. In more than one case, MPPs have shown their appreciation in the House, describing their co-op students as "tremendous assets" and thanking them for "excellent work" and doing "a fantastic job."

History of the Legislative Learner Program

The Waterloo University/Legislative Assembly of Ontario co-op program began in the 1970s shortly after the Office of the Legislative Assembly was formed. In its early days students worked for three or four terms in Assembly Offices. Co-op students were less integrated into Assembly work and much of their time was spent on their own research. They rotated more frequently and also spent time working in the Ontario Elections Commission and other offices.

In the late 1980s it was decided that the second term at the Legislature would be in a caucus or MPP office. Students requested the change because they felt that their experience in the Legislature would be enhanced by participating in the political environment.

In 1996, the program ceased because of budget constraints. It was reinstated in 2002-03.

Legislative Learner Alumni

During the preparation of this paper, several former Legislative Learners, among them lawyers, civil servants, the Deputy Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, the Poet Laureate of the City of Toronto, and the CEO of a large Ontario healthcare organization, were asked what their time at the Assembly had meant to them. They indicated that the program had given them a sense of empowerment, built their confidence, provided them with unique skills and insights and, as a result, it had been a major influence on their careers. A selection of their comments below, in chronological order, speaks volumes:

1981-82

I remember that I did a lot of running around Queen's Park. I remember the excitement of Budget Day, and how pleased I was to have my very own copy. I remember that sidewalk vendors were unhappy with some tax provisions, and there was a noisy, horn-honking demonstration of their vehicles circling the legislature. I did enjoy working in the Provincial Parliament itself—and running into Roy McMurtry, Susan Fish, Bob Rae, Bill Davis (himself), etc., as I made my way around the back stairwells of the building or handed out papers in Committee rooms. The experience affected my career path decisively.

1981-83

As for memories—the day I learned I had been selected as a Legislative Learner was definitely one of the best of my life. Among the political science students at University of Waterloo, being selected to work at the Legislative Assembly was the very hottest ticket of all the available co-op placements. To be one of the three who got in was amazing to me.

1984-86

Working at the Legislative Assembly was a fork in the road for me; a huge skill- and confidence-building experience. I wrote papers on filibusters and on voting initiatives. In the Clerk's Office my job included posting the Order Paper and Notices and I was available to do research as requested. I was urged to attend in the House and felt very much a part of the office. Later I worked in the Liberal Members Service Bureau where I answered letters and wrote members' statements. I would never have considered a career in the government if I hadn't been at Queen's Park as a student. I learned what government is all about; the difference between the government and the political process.

1985-86

It was very exciting to feel a part of the operations of the Legislative Assembly. A fairly formal and historic building became quite familiar to us. At the same time that the experience demystified such a monolithic institution, it also engendered a different kind of respect for the Assembly's operations because of an astute awareness of the various steps and the detailed work by so many people behind the scenes, especially people passionate about their work and committed to the important functioning of the legislature.

2007-08

When I was working with the Legislative Research Service, my work was acknowledged by the late MPP Peter Kormos, and my name appears in Hansard as a result. The time I spent with the NDP Caucus was full of action. Each morning I was included in the morning strategy meetings, which included MPPs and staff. I was often among reporters in the media scrum that followed Question Period each day.

2007-08

I was immediately impressed by how many MPPs were lawyers by training, and this probably helped put the law on my radar as a career option. Working at the legislature helped give me a sort of bedrock familiarity with the structure of this province's legislation, which was undoubtedly an advantage when I began attending law school.

2008-09

I was able to talk one-on-one with MPPs from all parties during the long bus rides we took, which provided me with a wealth of information about political processes as well as insight into the day-to-day life of an MPP. Deadlines are usually in terms of hours and minutes; long-term projects are a couple of days, at most, with most other matters having to be resolved in a few hours and the most pressing ones in minutes.

2010

I had never been to Queen's Park before, so I remember sitting in on my first Question Period, taking in the ornate details of the Chamber, and getting to see the politicians in action. A few months later, I got to participate in a Model Parliament, and actually got to sit in those green chairs and participate in my own Question Period! I credit my position as a Legislative Learner as the first step in my career. I worked with wonderful people who encouraged me to take in all these new experiences, and shared their knowledge of the political process, the Legislature and all of its history.

2014

During my time with Procedural Services I have had amazing opportunities to become acquainted with the legislative process. It has been an incredible learning experience that I'm sure I will take with me going forward into the rest of my academic career and further into my professional life.

Notes

1. Many people connected with the Ontario program were contacted in the preparation of this paper, including former and current Legislative Learners; Human Resources staff; the program co-ordinator at the University of Waterloo; and several people who supervised or mentored students. Information was also received from other Canadian Legislatures through the APLIC listserv.