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GWST4390: NGOs and Government Services

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Practicum Report: HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development

As I finish the last term of my Bachelor of Arts degree at Dalhousie University — a degree in sociology and gender and women's studies — I also finish a practicum placement that I had the privilege of undertaking through the course GWST4390: NGOs and Government Services. I completed this placement at a local non-profit organization called HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development (HCCYD), under the supervision of the Interim Executive Director, Lorena Norwood. It was an opportunity for me to apply some of the skills I have developed throughout my degree in a professional setting and learn about the nature of the work at a small, community-centered non-profit organization. In this report, I will outline my experience at HCCYD. First, I will provide a brief description of the organization itself and the work that people at HCCYD do, then I will discuss the projects and tasks I was assigned and completed throughout my time with the organization while also discussing the challenges I faced and the lessons I learned.

HCCYD is a non-profit organization that provides Nova Scotian communities with various resources — such as programming, training, and other supports — to help youth across the province reach their full potential as active community members and community leaders (HCCYD, 2021c). They offer services for organizations so they can better support youth, as well as direct programs for youth themselves that promote leadership and wellbeing (HCCYD, 2021a,

2021d). For example, they offer training and workshops for organizations to help them better understand how to support youth, and free or low-cost programs for youth themselves to attend, such as the “HeART” program — a program that promotes mental wellness through giving youth the chance to express themselves through creative, artistic avenues (HCCYD, 2021a, 2021d). The organization’s mission is to increase the overall capacity in broader communities and systems across the province for meaningful youth engagement, community youth development and youth-led initiatives (HCCYD, 2021b). At HCCYD, they believe that young people have the skills, insight, and passion to be strong community leaders and that together with adults and organizations, they can build a better, more vibrant community for us all (HCCYD, 2021b).

As of the time I am writing this, HCCYD does not have a permanent office space. As well, for most of my placement, Nova Scotia had COVID-19 restrictions in place, so the organization and I wanted to limit in-person interactions. So, I completed the work for my placement remotely. While remote work has the potential of hindering a work experience, for me, that was not the case. Despite completing my work remotely, there were various opportunities for collaboration as well as consistent communication. I had regular meetings with Lorena via video conferencing applications to discuss projects and tasks, as well as to check in. Lorena was available via email to answer any of my questions or help me with any issues I encountered. As well, I was invited to the occasional in-person gathering of HCCYD staff — following COVID-19 safety precautions (e.g., mask-wearing, social distancing) — when a location and time were available to do so. It may have been a remote placement, but the collaboration and communication made it less isolating than it otherwise could have been.

At the beginning of my placement, I told Lorena about some of my professional interests, which include research, writing, editing and communications. She then used this information to

find work that would be meaningful for me and allow me to explore these interests. I ended up working primarily as an editor for the organization. Throughout my time at HCCYD, Lorena would send me various documents — such as research reports, curriculums, or resources for organizations and/or the broader community — for me to edit. In editing these documents, I was looking for various things. Sometimes, I was looking for grammatical and/or spelling errors, and areas where I thought the wording could be stronger. Other times, I was looking critically at the content itself, and offering suggestions where I think a concept could be better explained, a different concept could be included, or noting any deficiencies or gaps in the content.

Working as an editor was, of course, an opportunity for me to explore my interest in editing, but it was also an opportunity for me to explore my other professional interests. I was able to engage critically with professional works of research, see how writing skills can be used in a professional setting, and learn about communications — I was learning how to effectively communicate information about concepts, research findings, curriculum objectives, and other things that I believe are worth communicating.

My main assignment was to work as an editor for a youth outreach worker curriculum that HCCYD is currently developing. I spent most of my hours editing this curriculum and worked on it from January until the end of March. The curriculum is being developed collaboratively between HCCYD and the Government of Nova Scotia's Department of Community Services. It has the objective of teaching youth outreach workers about principles, values, and practices that will help them serve the youth they work with in the best, most effective manner. It consists of modules that each cover an important value, principle, or practice. For example, there are modules that look at topics such as positive spaces and settings

for youth, community collaborations in youth outreach work, relationship building with youth, skill building in youth, and trauma-informed and strengths-based practices.

Each week, Lorena would send me one, two, or three modules that needed editing with a deadline for when she would need them completed. I set aside time each week to edit the modules — fixing grammatical or spelling mistakes, providing suggestions for alternative wording, and providing comments on the content of the modules. While I edited, I was able to email Lorena with any questions I had, and sometimes, we would meet virtually either before I began to discuss the content, or afterwards to discuss my feedback.

Near the end of my placement, I had the opportunity to write a draft of one of the modules. The module I was assigned to write was the introductory module — it explained what a youth outreach program is, who these programs intend to serve and how they intend to serve them. It was an opportunity to apply what I have learned about youth outreach work and exercise my writing skills. With this task, I was able to practice writing for a larger audience — outside of an academic context — and practice communicating important information. While the youth outreach worker curriculum project was an opportunity for me to learn about and develop some of my professional interests, it was also an opportunity for me to learn about the principles, values, and practices of youth outreach work, and outreach work in general. These are principles, values, and practices that I can take with me in future non-profit or community-centered work endeavors. For example, I developed a better understanding of what it means to be trauma-informed and strengths-based in my work and learned about strategies to facilitate more meaningful collaboration with community members and organizations in my work.

While my main project was editing the youth outreach worker curriculum, I also undertook other administrative duties throughout my time at HCCYD. Throughout my

placement, I was able to learn about some of the challenges of non-profit work. As Lorena would tell me, in the world of non-profit, you oftentimes must prepare for disruptions and adjust your schedule as you go, which is especially the case when working in a smaller non-profit organization with little bandwidth. There were times during my placement when the youth outreach worker curriculum project would be put on hold. Because of this, I had to be flexible and ready to shift focus to another task. I appreciated learning about some of the challenges that come with non-profit work, and further, learning how to prepare for and deal with these challenges in an efficient and effective manner.

For example, there was one instance when the youth outreach worker curriculum project was paused while HCCYD waited for external support and guidance. When this happened, I met with Lorena to discuss alternative tasks I could shift my focus towards. I ended up helping Lorena with some administrative duties. I helped prepare letters congratulating the winners of HCCYD's Outstanding Youth Awards (OYA's). This involved drafting the letters, reading them over and formatting them for delivery (e.g., inserting the organization's letterhead logo and formatting the text appropriately). While this task was more administrative in nature, it was also another opportunity for me to practice writing and editing. As well, I was happy to help out HCCYD in any way that I could and learn about the "all-hands-on-deck" nature of non-profit work.

There were also times where it was not a matter of switching focus, but instead, a matter of adjusting my schedule. For example, there were times when a deadline was fast approaching and I would have to complete my work — usually, my editing — sooner than originally anticipated. In moments like these, I would adjust my schedule to ensure the organization received the edits, or other support, that they needed before going onto the next step. This is not to say that the organization was not mindful of my studies or my wellbeing — Lorena always

ensured that I was able to complete my schoolwork with the tasks I was being assigned, and that I was not being overburdened with competing demands.

In conclusion, I would recommend HCCYD as a host organization for a practicum placement if you are passionate about community-centered non-profit work. The people at HCCYD are welcoming and willing to cater the placement to your interests so that it is as meaningful of an experience as it can be. There are ample opportunities to exercise and learn about your professional interests while simultaneously learning about principles, values, and practices that guide meaningful community work. You will be learning from experts in the non-profit field with years of experience and wisdom to share. You may face challenges, but they are challenges that are not insurmountable, nor foreign to non-profit work. If you are passionate about this line of work, this is a great opportunity to learn about the challenges you may face and ways to deal with them. Additionally, it would be a great host organization for anyone who is interested in any aspect of youth work — be it youth research or front-line support.

Additionally, more broadly speaking, I would recommend the course, GWST4390: NGOs and Government Services, to arts, humanities and social science students who are looking to expand their horizons and learn first-hand some of the many ways that the skills and knowledge they are developing in their studies translate in a professional setting. They will be learning how these skills and this knowledge translate in a professional setting of either a non-profit organization or government service that is providing a good or service to the Halifax or Nova Scotia community. It is a fulfilling opportunity led by a course instructor — Dr. Margaret Denike — who is interested in ensuring that every student has a meaningful placement.

References

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