

GWST4390/POLI4390: Practicum in Public Policy, NGOs, and Government Services

Written Report

Executive Office of the Nova Scotia Judiciary

Nova Scotia Courts

January-April 2026 Term

Submitted by Leah Murphy

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This semester, I completed my practicum with the Nova Scotia courts at the Executive Office of the Nova Scotia Judiciary, under the supervision of Jennifer Stairs (Director of Operations) and Andrew Preeper (Director of Strategic Communications). As a graduating Law, Justice, and Society student, as well as an incoming law student, I felt this placement not only offered me invaluable learning opportunities but also mentorship and guidance I felt extremely grateful to receive.

My experience at the Executive Office can be explained through four components: the Executive Office's mandate, experiential/observational learning opportunities, task-oriented work, and my other personal experiences. I hope these will offer interested students a fulsome overview of my experience and allow them to gauge whether they are interested in pursuing their placement at the Executive Office.

Mandate of the Executive Office of the Nova Scotia Judiciary

Before beginning my placement, my supervisor, Jennifer, sent me a helpful document detailing the mandate and background of the Executive Office. It outlines that the organization provides planning, policy, research, and communications support to all levels of the Judiciary. The Executive Office is the only office of its kind in Canada.

In practice, these responsibilities include all sorts of administrative tasks required for the courts to function smoothly. For example, my supervisor Andrew creates and sends out court dockets for each day, manages audio record keeping from courtrooms, plans live streaming of proceedings, liaises with media, updates the Nova Scotia courts website, and is involved in record management projects. He also organizes student opportunities at the courts, such as court observation or tours for groups of students. In addition, other positions at the office include Judicial IT security personnel and Judicial Librarians.

As a practicum student, the short-term duration of my placement meant that it was unfeasible for me to get the security clearance necessary to engage with the full range of work undertaken by the office. While I was primarily involved with helping with administrative work, I thoroughly enjoyed this; however, if you are a student interested in IT, security work, or records management it is perhaps unlikely that you will be able to engage with this element of the Executive Office as a practicum student.

Shadowing

One of the main experiential opportunities was shadowing. My supervisors at the Executive Office have close relationships with many of the Judges and Justices in Halifax, and I was given several invaluable opportunities to discuss law, law school, cases, and more with them. For example, early on in my placement, I was given the opportunity to meet with Michael Wood, the Chief Justice of Nova Scotia, who gave me advice for entering the legal field, answered many of my questions from experience, and even helped me to understand parts of court processes I had difficulty conceptualizing.

Throughout my placement, I had so many opportunities to learn from Judges and Justices that I cannot outline them all here. However, one of the opportunities I appreciated most was when I was invited to observe a Charter Challenge in Halifax Provincial Court. Before the hearing, the presiding Judge sent me all of the materials (ITOs, briefs, case law etc.) to review. We met in her office before the hearing to go over them, where she allowed me to ask all of my questions to fully understand the case before observing it. A few weeks later, she invited me back to talk over her decision, which she explained to me in detail. This unique opportunity was also accompanied by getting to see areas of the courthouse that are restricted to the public.

I was also able to shadow my supervisors directly, including sitting in on a meeting they had with the Department of Justice concerning a joint project on records management. The project, being the digitization of court records, came with many layers of change management the meeting aimed to address. This shadowing experience allowed me to see first-hand how much work goes in behind the scenes in government projects in order to bring them to fruition.

Observational Learning

My second mode of observational learning was through direct court observation. I observed many hours of court, changing my understanding of how the legal system operates in practice. To my surprise, the day-to-day processes are very different from how I imagined them: for example, I saw first-hand how many facets are behind a case, from pre-trial detention hearings, to pre-trial hearings, charter challenges, status updates, trials, decision, sentencing, and more. It was much less straight forward than I imagined. I observed all kinds of court proceedings and saw procedures such as witness testimony for the first time. As a graduating student, I was very excited about the large amount of observational opportunity, as it allowed me to fit the pieces of law I have learned so far into how they operate in real life. I selected this practicum, in large part, because I wanted to gain this practical understanding to better position myself for summer jobs in law school. In this way, I feel that I took a lot away from this facet of my practicum experience.

Tasks and Assignments

The other portion of my hours were completed through assignments from my supervisor. These were a wide wide-ranging.

Firstly, I was tasked with investigating and locating class-action lawsuit decisions in order to update the class-action registry on the Nova Scotia court website. I learned how to

navigate updating a website, which I had never done before! This task involved research, tracking down the decisions and verifying the documents I found were ready to be added to the website database. As my work pertained directly to the courts and its website, I was provided a laptop by the Executive Office to complete this on.

Secondly, a conference for Judicial employees across Canada is being planned for this spring. After creating an RSVP sheet, one of my on-going responsibilities was to monitor my email for responses and update a large spreadsheet to track attendees. I really enjoyed this type of repetitive, task-oriented work. I appreciated knowing that I would be able to log some time each week from my home by updating my spreadsheet and making sure all attendees were accounted for.

Thirdly, I was tasked with creating an AI ethics resource sheet to provide to the Court Technology Committee. This committee was going through a process of updating technology guidelines for the judiciary. I carried out research on the guidelines of other jurisdictions, both within and outside Canada, compiling what I thought was most relevant into a document for the committee's consideration.

Finally, another ongoing project has been my research on social media patterns across court social media profiles to help determine the best way for the Nova Scotia Courts to boost their online engagement. I explored the social media activity of other courts in Canada, compiling trends, suggestions, and strategies for the Nova Scotia Court's social media. I produced a report on my findings to share with my supervisor.

The office is physically small; I did not complete work *in* the office. When I worked on site, it was largely for the observational/shadowing opportunities I have outlined. My tasks and assignments were completed on my work laptop remotely. The nature of these tasks was not in

the office, directly helping my supervisor but rather were research, synthesis, and organization which I completed independently and emailed to my supervisors for their use.

Special Opportunities

During my placement, I was also fortunate to engage in several unique, fun opportunities at the courthouse. For example, I accompanied a march break camp designed for Black and Indigenous high school students interested in law when they had their day at the Supreme Court. Following a pizza party, several guest speakers came by, from whom I gained an introduction to organizations such as Victim Services, Nova Scotia Restorative Justice, and a Crown Attorney Office. It was a lot of fun to spend the day with younger students who are also interested in law; I felt very happy to share what I had learned both in my placement and in my degree and do my best to answer questions they asked me.

Personal Experiences

Work Environment/Structure

I enjoyed the balance I experienced in this placement: on a typical week, a portion of my hours would be fulfilled in person, and a portion done remotely. It was not a typical 9:00-5:00 as I am aware some placements were. If you are a student looking for this style, then this placement may not be for you. However, I personally appreciated the flexibility. As court proceedings are unpredictable, I would sometimes spend a full day watching a trial to complete my hours, but other times the bulk would be completed by working on my tasks because matters did not run very long. This style may work well for students with a class schedule that does not give them a full day off.

In addition, the remote work made it much easier to fill my hours in periods where school was especially busy; I had no trouble logging some hours by working on tasks such as filling in my spreadsheet on days where I was in the library working on assignments.

Supervisors

My supervisors at this placement were amazing. They were both incredibly responsive, kind, approachable, and went out of their way to find opportunities for me (ie. Arranging meetings with Judges, flagging court matters aligning with my areas of legal interest). They also both provided me with their work-cellphone contacts, and were never difficult to reach. Any questions I had for them were quickly answered. The nature of this placement was also ideal for me, as, if my supervisors were extraordinarily busy, the office is located in the courthouse where there is always a matter going on that I can learn from. I did not ever have issues in filling my hours at this placement.

Much of the supervision took the form where my supervisors would organize an opportunity which I would independently attend, or would send me an email detailing the assignment which I would independently complete. In hopes that I am clearly articulating this: much of my tasks were done on their *behalf* instead of directly helping them with a task alongside them.

Learning Outcomes

My learning outcomes were exactly what I hoped they would be. I entered the placement *thinking* I had a relatively accurate understanding of how the legal system operated in practice – this was not the case. There were so many complexities and administrative facets I observed that were entirely new to me. The legal professionals I have met were welcoming, informative, encouraging, and approachable. Every question I had was met with a thorough, thoughtful answer.

One facet of my court observation experience I especially appreciated is that I was able to observe several matters in their entirety throughout the duration of my placement. On Thursdays, the day I had no classes scheduled, I would attend Crown Side court and many times would see the same matters as they reappeared. Following cases allowed me to gain a holistic understanding of court processes which I would not have otherwise encountered.

I also gained skills in necessary administrative areas such as Microsoft Excel. I exercised organization, time management (one of the biggest skills I gained from this course), attentiveness to deadlines, and independent work.

These takeaways have made me feel equipped to pursue law-related summer placements when I begin law school. My new insights to the inner workings of the legal system and development of necessary administrative skills has not only given me compelling experience to add to my resume, but confidence that I am prepared to succeed in a legal work environment.

Recommendation

I very much recommend this placement to any student interested in law. Whether you are an LJSO student looking to apply what you have learned and understand how it operates in practice, or a student from another discipline who wants to pursue a career and law, I believe this placement would be of interest to anyone looking to engage with the legal system.

This placement may not be for you if you: prefer a 9:00-5:00 set up, are looking for an exclusively task/research oriented placement, want to work entirely remotely, want to work directly with those in conflict with the law, or are not interested in the prospect of shadowing/observation. However, if you are looking for: a balanced and diverse way to complete your hours, to understand more about the legal system in practice, to learn from esteemed legal professionals, and/or gain experience in administrative work, then this placement may be an ideal fit for you.