

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES



Expectations and Acceptance: Student Learning Unhindered by Pandemic

Nathan Penman

Practica were cancelled everywhere, schools were not going to be opening up,” recalls Dr. Margo C. Watt, Program Coordinator and Professor of Forensic Psychology at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX). “That would be the first thing that you’d cut, right? It’s seen as to be impossible—the courts are closed, the prisons are closed, everything’s closed.” Dr. Watt, a registered clinical forensic psychologist, had a difficult decision to make when considering whether to accept new students to the Forensic Psychology program, a rare and unique opportunity provided to undergraduate students. “StFX was still deliberating, so it still wasn’t even clear to me, I didn’t know if we were going to be in class or what the situation was—so many unknowns. I just decided I would take as many students as I thought I could possibly handle because I was so impressed with the applications, and I thought we’ll figure it out.”

The adversity brought by the global pandemic inspired creativity and innovation borne out of the need to provide practicum placements to 25 students—myself included. As a new and junior student to the program, I kept my expectations modest. I thought any potential opportunities

would be afforded to the senior students and that classes would be online. However, despite the realities of the pandemic, we’ve been very fortunate at StFX. Take it from Emma Munro, a junior student in the program who’s hoping to work in forensic and clinical settings, “I’m enjoying the in-person class, and I’m excited about working virtually for different placements. [In class,] we touch on so many little topics we wouldn’t necessarily consider outside of practicum: active listening, leading a conversation, eliciting information—all of the fundamentals for going into practicum placements and future jobs.”

Her contemporary, Olivia Stephenson, pursuing a career in profiling or interrogations, added, “I’m really interested in what makes people commit crimes, that’s why I’m here.” In class, we’ve received training on how to interview people through the Evidence-Based Investigative Interviewing course made by Dr. Joseph Eastwood from Ontario Tech University. Olivia went on to explain, “I think the [Evidence-Based] course is really interesting because I watch a lot of true crime TV, and they always show bits and pieces of interviewing the suspect, but I never knew how much went into the interview.” For me, I



think Olivia's quote exemplifies the first key word I want to highlight, *expectations*. It's safe to say that this year hasn't unfolded as one would have normally expected—but really, how often does it? Since we shifted our expectations of the year to one of optimism and openness, we've made strides in the opportunities we've created with help from our many "Friends of Forensic Psychology" and associates from the fields of criminal justice and mental health.

With typical in-person field trips to courts and prisons not available, and practicum opportunities severely limited, we called on these friends and associates to see if they were willing and able to help. Fortunately, many of them saw the potential in online placements. In the words of senior student, Kierra Maika, pursuing a career in social work, "I feel like I'm getting a lot out of my placement that I still would have gotten had I done it in person. Nothing really changed, my supervisor is fantastic to alter our activities to [be] online, and I feel like I'm not missing out with it. I'm doing two placements right now. First, I'm continuing my first placement with the Ontario Provincial Police in the Victim Response Support Unit by now working on their website. My second is making a COVID coping kit. I'm working with E. L. Adams II, a registered psychologist in Ottawa, and we're using adaptive, evidence-based coping strategies to design a kit for undergraduate students to help them with university life and COVID."

Her classmate, Juliana Khoury, who already completed a Bachelor of Humanities degree with a minor in political science and is hoping to pursue graduate studies in clinical psychology, has a placement with Dr. Aubrey Immelman. "I pivoted with Dr. Watt's help to doing an online placement with a political psychologist in the United States, and we're doing a psychological profile of Justin Trudeau. I was originally going to run a book club in a provincial correctional facility ... but this [new practicum experience] has certainly made up for it."

I'd be remiss if I failed to mention the opposite side of the coin for practicum placements, the supervisors. Christopher Lively has been work-

ing with Marc Sgro, a senior student pursuing a career in the legal field, for a few months now. Chris is a PhD Candidate at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and was among the first cohort of graduates from the Forensic Psychology program at StFX. Chris begins his story by saying, "I started [at StFX] in physics and mathematics. I wasn't in psychology at that time, but I was taking electives in it. I was able to come back for a second degree later on and ... that interaction with the forensic course literally changed the course of my life. It shaped my goals and desires to pursue this type of career." During his time as an undergraduate student in the Forensic Psychology program, Chris was able to do a practicum placement at the Nova Institution for Women teaching guitar to female inmates. After volunteering there, he ended up securing a position at that prison before starting his master's degree program at Memorial University.

Now, in collaboration with Dr. Eastwood and Dr. Brent Snook (Chris' PhD supervisor), Marc and Chris are working on developing stimuli for a project that aims to examine how the behaviour of the police during a suspect's interview impacts a suspect's alibi. Moreover, the goal of the project is to examine how these behaviours and changes in a suspect's alibi affect jurors' and judges' abilities to assess an alibi's credibility. Marc described to me how he found the practicum placement: "We've turned sit-down meetings into Skype meetings. For us, that's worked because I think research can be very flexible—he's not even in the province [of Nova Scotia], and we're still able to communicate and get things back and forth. It's been interesting and I've enjoyed it, and it hasn't changed the experience in a negative way. I'm just happy and fortunate to be getting experience."

As Dr. Watt explained to me, "it's like somebody pressed a pause button, and we all had to stop and figure out how we're going to do things differently. And that's what we're doing." This brings me to the second and final word I want to highlight in this article, *acceptance*. We can't change the realities of the pandemic situation, but our attitudes and openness to changing the way we do things can lead to growth in areas we



would not have explored otherwise. The Forensic Psychology Program at StFX began as a course, became a course with service learning, grew to be a 2-year special concentration offering, and next year will become a direct-entry four-year program. The **expectations** of what students can get out of forensic psychology at StFX has constantly evolved; and even in star-crossed conditions, **acceptance** gives us the ability to hold onto the good and explore the opportunities provided by a twist of fate.



Clockwise from bottom left: Olivia Stephen, David Biddle, Emma Munro , Dafina Kohzani, Allison Hancock, Sarah Shaw, Rachel Jollimore, Brooklyn Johnson, Alaa Salih, Marc Sgro, Juliana Khoury, Bailee Lawton, Nathan Penman, Kier-ra Maica, Jenna MacIntosh, Blade Mann-Dixon, Ella Mulva-hill, Jasonique Moss, Drew MacPherson, Gracie Grieve, Mercedes Hustler

Missing: Emma Valardo, Dylan Wright, Elle Levesque, Daniella Serrao

Photo Credit: Mercedes Hustler and Dr. Margo Watt