

Internships are an Important Tool for Building Community Connections

My name is Sirena Van Schaik, and I am a third-year Western student pursuing an honours specialization in gender, sexuality, and women's studies with a minor in creative writing. Over the 2024/25 school year, I had the opportunity to pursue an internship as a research assistant with Dr. Roula Hawa, who is the undergraduate chair for the Family Studies and Human Development program through the Brescia School of Food and Nutritional Sciences at Western University.

Going into the internship, there was no uneasiness about the role or the expectations that would be placed on me. I had the honour of working with Dr. Hawa in the summer of 2024 during a work study as her research assistant and she was more than happy to extend that work into the internship course over the school year. While there could be apprehension going into the role of research assistant, the process went smoothly as I was aware the work that I was doing. In fact, the majority of the work was simply a continuation of work I was completing over the summer. However, there was a very important outcome that the internship was offering to me and that was through networking and building community connections, even in the academic community at Western. Dr. Hawa feels that community partnerships are integral to research studies and the future success of projects and her students and is always active in insuring those connections.

Furthermore, I was excited to continue working on the projects that I had already spent time working on. Dr. Hawa's work is expansive, which allowed me the opportunity to pursue a number of research subjects. All of the areas of study are ones that I am interested in as an academic and a feminist. While her work is not linked to the faculty of Arts and Humanities, it is intersectional in scope and the internship allowed me to build on the skills I've obtained during

my GSWS coursework. As a research assistant, I found the challenge of shifting between different projects to be exciting. My job focused on correlating research, writing manuscripts, conference proposals, conference proceedings papers, and updating a website for one of programs that Dr. Hawa leads.

I loved being able to work on my own while still seeing the results of the work I was doing in valuable ways through being listed as a co-author on manuscripts and the conference proceedings paper. And that was a delightful surprise when working with Dr. Hawa. She believes in assigning credit where her interns earn it through hard work.

In addition, Dr. Hawa builds on connections for her research assistants both within her own department, in the community and beyond. In fact, it was an amazing opportunity when I was asked by Dr. Hawa to assist on a research project centered in Uganda, which gave me the ability to network and connect with global communities.

While I did work remotely, utilizing Zoom, Discord, and WhatsApp to connect with the various teams and team members, there was an opportunity to network with home economics educators when Dr. Hawa extended the offer to co-present at the Canadian Symposium on Home Economics Education on one of the projects I worked on with her and another research assistant.

The internship allowed me to build on my interpersonal skills, my writing abilities as an academic, skills around presenting and I continued to learn and grow professionally and personally. The highlight of the internship was in the opportunity to co-present at the symposium along with co-creating and co-writing the conference proposal, symposium PowerPoint presentation, and conference proceedings paper. It was an area of work that I have not delved into through my personal career, and only in a limited capacity as a student, and provided me

with valuable experience and growing confidence. I hope that the experience at the symposium will lead to other opportunities to present at future conferences and symposium.

Overall, the internship really taught me that I needed to get out of my comfort zone, especially when it comes to networking and building my connections with others both in my field and in the community. While the internship was remote, it was integral to laying a foundation for future projects with Dr. Hawa, the international team centered in Uganda, and with organizations within London. It can be very easy for me to avoid networking as it is often outside my comfort zone, but by building those connections, I am able to continue pursuing topics of research that are important to me. I know that the connections I've made with the internship will continue on afterwards.

Finally, Dr. Hawa emphasized, through her work and guidance, the importance of connecting with community partners, and this is something that I will take with me as I pursue my own research studies when I enter graduate school.

Canadian Symposium on Home Economics Education <https://www.ca-symposium.com/ontario-2025>