

Enhancing the Sheridan student experience through NSERC support of the Sheridan Elder Research Centre (SERC)



Students get a leg up on their courses, get contacts, and get paid!

By Sean McNeely

Long before having written their final exams, or handed in their last assignments, students are on the hunt for summer jobs – eager to find a way to earn money for next year’s tuition and books.

Some turn to jobs that will do little more than earn a paycheck. Their learning from the school year may not be as applied and their creativity not fully engaged. For one group of Sheridan students, this wasn’t enough. They wanted more. They wanted to make money, sure. But they also wanted a life experience that would benefit them personally, academically and professionally.

A summer applied research project at the Sheridan Elder Research Centre (SERC) did that and more for 13 research assistants. Covering four different academic programs (Business, Social Service Worker, Computer Programming and Advertising), the students were hired to work at SERC under a grant provided by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC).

“We had an amazing and productive summer,” said Pat Spadafora, SERC’s founder and Director. “The students were totally engaged and they really formed a bond as a group. Applied research provided the student research assistants with a unique learning opportunity. Their summer work experience had the potential to enhance their curriculum in their second year, as well as their future careers.”

The research project is entitled “*Aging in Place: Optimizing Health Outcomes Through Technology, Design and Social Inclusion*”. The NSERC grant, (this was the first year of a five-year grant) has a dual purpose – to support regional small- and medium-sized businesses, and to build the research capacity of Sheridan students and faculty.

The strong technology theme attracted several technology companies, as well as traditional service providers, eager to understand how they can utilize technology to better respond to the needs and interests of a growing older population. “Population aging and the implications for a wide range of industry sectors is extraordinary,” said Pat. “It’s pretty hard to think of an industry that isn’t impacted by our aging population.”

Each student research assistant tackled their own individual projects and learning objectives while also working collaboratively with other students on applied research projects. “I think we struck a good balance between supporting the research assistants and also letting them run with it,” said Pat.

What impressed Pat was the willingness of the students to embrace different perspectives. “Business students said they started to look at things through the eyes of social services worker students,” she said. “The social services students, working with the business and computer programming students, also said they started to look at things in a different way.”

Sarah Prociw, a second-year student studying in Sheridan’s Social Service Worker – Gerontology Program, was involved in an assessment of services available for adults with early-stage dementia.

Her position allowed her to develop her critical thinking and planning skills, as well as immerse herself in research and survey fundamentals, including creating and implementing a questionnaire, effective data collection and drafting strong summary reports and presentations.

Sarah also enjoyed working with faculty and loved SERC’s “open door policy” approach to students. “We have been shown that our contributions are valued and appreciated, and my team leaders have become mentors,” she said.

“I would recommend this experience to any student who is interested in gaining hands-on experience that will allow them to have a competitive edge over other students graduating from their program,” said Sarah.

Her time at SERC has also boosted her confidence going into her second year, especially when she was able to put her new-found skills to use at her practicum placement at the Ontario Seniors' Secretariat working in the Public Education and Awareness Unit.

“Not only was my research closely connected with my curriculum this year, it also aligned with my passion for working with older adults and my career aspirations,” she said.

Alexi Voelk worked at SERC with an Oakville branding and design company and discovered she far preferred conducting research in the field rather than simply gathering data within an office and analysing it.

“The part I enjoyed most was doing the observational surveys on how well businesses are set up to accommodate older adults,” said Alexi who is now in her second year of Sheridan’s Advertising program.

Her summer job helped her develop great business contacts and gave her the chance to improve her communication skills as she had to continuously be in contact with her industry partner and give numerous presentations.

With her experience at SERC, her confidence grew, as did her insight into professional market research. “The positive environment made it easy to ask questions and find out how to improve areas I was weak in. Working at SERC, I’ve learned a great deal that I will be able to apply to my schooling and, more importantly, to my future career.”

Shahryar Khalid, a Computer Systems Technology Software Development and Network Engineering student worked with a software company as a programmer, making updates to its software and website. His main focus was to integrate Facebook tools into the company’s website, enabling the company to use Facebook as a way to promote its products.

“It was an amazing experience,” said Shahryar. “I’ve never been in an environment where so much support was provided by co-workers and the leaders. I didn’t have a lot of background knowledge of the aging population and this job introduced me to hot topics around this demographic.”

Like Alexi, Shahryar also felt the SERC position provided insight as to what work opportunities lay ahead after graduation. It was

also satisfying to see his work used by the public. “In school we learn how major concepts work, but never get a chance to see how these may be applied as part of a job,” he said.

The experience has also allowed him to excel in his school work this year. “The things I learned this summer are directly related to what I’m learning in school,” he said. In fact, he’s so far ahead, some of the concepts explored during the summer won’t be addressed in his courses until his last term.

Shannon Knelsen also feels she came out ahead. The second year Social Service Worker – Gerontology student examined care giving and the elderly, focusing specifically on ways to make long-distance care giving easier for support providers.

She developed an extensive e-survey for online data collection and reviewed different types of technologies available for care givers and care receivers. She soaked up the team environment and made the most of her opportunities to volunteer at large industry conferences that she would not have otherwise been able to attend.

She also worked closely with Pat to develop an academic article that outlined the applied research experience at SERC in the hope that other colleges will use SERC’s model when training students to be involved in similar applied research initiatives.

“Working for SERC has been one of the most intellectually engaging work experiences I have ever had,” said Shannon. “It provided me with the opportunity to think outside of the box, and be creative on a daily basis.”

Her time at SERC also allowed her to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of the aging population – a field she is very passionate about.

“Professionally, my applied research experience sets me apart from the average student because I’ve been engaging and communicating as a professional examiner in the field of aging,” she said. “Being able to put SERC on my resume is something I believe will put me a step ahead of others, because research is typically something employers are interested in.”

Returning students interested in learning more about next summer’s SERC applied research project should contact Pat Spadafora at pat.spadafora@sheridaninstitute.ca or call her at 905-845-9430, ext. 8615.

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