

If you Build it, They Will Come: New Special Concentration in Forensic Psychology Offered at StFX

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ABSTRACT

In its simplest form, psychology is the study of the human mind and behaviour. At many undergraduate universities, students can learn about a variety of sub-fields within the discipline of psychology, including Forensic Psychology. St. Francis Xavier University (StFX) is now offering psychology students a way to receive hands-on training in the domain of Forensic Psychology through the launch of their new “Special Concentration in Forensic Psychology.” This 2-year offering provides students with the opportunity for specialized academic training and hands-on experiences by participating in practicum placements at forensically-relevant sites (e.g., correctional facilities, parole offices), while completing courses relevant to their regular 4-year Bachelor of Arts degree. Each March, students host an annual “Forensic Psychology Day @ X” conference, where criminal justice and correctional professionals come to StFX to share their wisdom and experience with current students. A call for applications for prospective students is issued and due every March.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans sa forme la plus simple, la psychologie est l'étude de l'esprit et du comportement humains. Dans de nombreuses universités de premier cycle, les élèves peuvent s'initier à différents sous-domaines de la psychologie, dont la psychologie judiciaire. Avec le lancement de sa nouvelle concentration en psychologie judiciaire, l'Université St. Francis Xavier offre désormais aux étudiants en psychologie la possibilité de recevoir une formation pratique dans ce domaine. Cette formation de deux ans offre aux étudiants l'occasion de suivre une formation universitaire spécialisée et d'acquérir de l'expérience pratique en faisant un stage dans des milieux où s'exercent des activités médico-légales (p. ex., établissements correctionnels,

bureaux de libération conditionnelle), tout en suivant les cours pertinents dans le cadre de leur programme de baccalauréat ès arts général de quatre ans. Chaque année, en mars, les étudiants organisent la « Forensic Psychology Day @ X », une journée où des professionnels de la justice pénale et du milieu correctionnel viennent à l'Université St. Francis Xavier pour partager avec les étudiants inscrits au programme leur sagesse et leur expérience. En mars de chaque année, l'université procède au recrutement des étudiants potentiels.



The discipline of Psychology is a popular field of study for many undergraduates. In fact, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in psychology between 1950 and 2006 increased over 900% (approximately 10,000 in 1950 to over 90,000 in 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2010 as cited in Halonen, 2011). Moreover, the American Psychological Association (APA; 2014) reports that approximately 15 million students partake in an introductory psychology course each year. Without a doubt, there are a variety of reasons as to why Psychology is an attractive area of study for students (e.g., to better understand themselves or others, an interest in research). Simply defined, Psychology is “the study of the mind and behaviour” (VandenBos & APA, 2007, p. 753; Canadian Psychological Association, 2014). One subfield of psychology where this definition might be very intriguing to students is in courses dedicated to Forensic Psychology. This domain examines topics at the interface of psychology and law (Grisso & Brigham, 2013). Since its inception in the latter part of the 19th century when James McKeen Cattell (1895) began to explore eyewitness testimony and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing studied pre-trial publicity (1897, as cited in Bartol & Bartol,



The first nine students admitted to the “Special Concentration in Forensic Psychology.” Front left to right: Valerie Lemay, Alli Copp, Catherine Gallagher, Brenna Gavel, and Brianna Boyle. Back left to right: Stewart Barclay, Justine Lucas, Angelina MacLellan, Dr. Margo Watt (Program Coordinator), and Chris Lively. (Photo credit: Shelley Cameron-McCarron).

1999), Forensic Psychology continued to explode in the 1960s and 1970s with Milgram’s (1963) study of obedience, and Zimbardo’s (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973) study of role acquisition in prisons. More recently, interest in Forensic Psychology has been fuelled by the popularity of shows such as *Law and Order*, *Criminal Minds*, *Prison Break*, *Dexter*, and *Orange is the New Black*, but students who study Forensic Psychology soon learn that there is much more to the subject than Hollywood dramas might suggest. A new offering at an Atlantic Canadian University now provides students with practical opportunity to learn and see the reality of this exciting area of Psychology.

The Department of Psychology at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX) launched a 2-year “Special Concentration in Forensic Psychology” in September 2013. This is a unique offering for undergraduates and is intended to enhance their marketable skills and eligibility for graduate and professional schools. The Special Concentration evolved over time from its

origins in a single Forensic Psychology course. This original course (e.g., Psychology 380) was initially designed by Dr. Margo Watt, a clinical forensic psychologist, who felt strongly about the importance of providing students with experiential learning. While classroom training of skills is essential, gaining more practical (hands-on) experiences can be invaluable. Participating in practical training experiences can make the material covered in classroom come to life. Moreover, research shows that practical learning experiences can foster understanding of material that might remain elusive in the classroom (e.g., Riskowski, Todd, Wee, Dark, & Harbor, 2009). The Forensic Psychology course at StFX resembles Forensic Psychology courses offered at other Atlantic undergraduate institutions, with topics including: history of the relationship between psychology and law; Canadian criminal law; assessment, treatment, and rehabilitation of offenders; eyewitness testimony; deception detection; jury decision making; and topics related to policing. In other ways, however, the StFX’s

course is quite unique. Perhaps, the component that is most unique, as compared to other Atlantic universities, and most attractive to students is the field trips. Students who are fortunate enough to get into the class soon find themselves travelling to many of the federal correctional facilities in the Atlantic Region, visiting the East Coast Forensic Hospital, as well as provincial and supreme courts to observe trial proceedings.

Students in the Forensic Psychology course also are treated to a number of guest speakers who come to share their wisdom and experience. For example, an RCMP officer shares with the class the inside story of police stress. Another RCMP officer explains the operations of the polygraph while administering it to one of the students. A forensic hospital psychologist explains the difference between an assessment of fitness to stand trial and criminal responsibility. A correctional psychologist explains the theory and mechanics of forensic risk assessment. Indeed, StFX students who have completed the Forensic Psychology course often indicate that this particular class was one of their favourite and most memorable due to the course material, field trip component, guest speakers, and the yearly Forensic Psychology conference.

Each March, students in the Forensic Psychology course play host to the annual “Forensic Psychology Day @ X” conference (previously known as “CSC@X Day”). The conference invites professionals from the criminal justice and correctional fields to come and share their wisdom and experiences with the Forensic Psychology students, the campus community, and the general public. Previous conference speakers have included some of the aforementioned guest speakers in the Forensic Psychology course, as well as parole officers, a prison warden, a deputy sheriff, and a behavioural counsellor. Almost every year, conference participants have had the pleasure of hearing an offender talk about his or her life and learning inside correctional facilities. Delegates of the conference often present on a variety of relevant topics including, mental health initiatives in the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), psychological counselling, drug treatment programs, complex case studies, and women offenders. One of the biggest highlights of the conference is a panel of graduated StFX alumni who have established careers in related forensic settings, and return to discuss with current students the ways in which they went from StFX to their current employment position.

Seeing the interest and response to the Forensic Psychology course grow so much, and realizing that no other such program existed at any other Canadian undergraduate university, Dr. Watt believed that the development of a 2-year specialized concentration in forensic psychology studies and practice was the next logical step. In these times, when universities in Atlantic Canada struggle to maintain enrolments in the face of declining populations, programs such as the Special Concentration can help universities like StFX to attract and retain students. Interest in this offering has been growing with students both local to StFX and from other post-secondary institutions. In fact, the Special Concentration’s coordinator has received inquiries from some high school students who desire to begin their university studies at StFX in order to participate in this one-of-a-kind opportunity. For students who desire to continue with graduate or professional studies, it is anticipated that participating in this program will set the alumni apart from graduates at other universities. Receiving practical hands-on experience at the undergraduate level, especially in a forensic setting, is rare and typically not offered at other institutions. Moreover, for students who elect to use their degree in more general employment, the psychology training received in the Special Concentration will serve them well in working with people.

The Special Concentration allows students to complete their regular Bachelor of Arts (BA) studies, while gaining a specific focus in forensically-relevant courses (e.g., forensic psychology, abnormal psychology, human sexuality, clinical psychology, drugs and behaviour). Typically, students apply for entry to the Concentration at the end of their sophomore year; however, the Special Concentration Selection Committee welcomes undergraduate student applicants from all levels. In other words, students may also apply for entry in their junior or senior years. After completing the within-concentration requirements, and fulfilling all of the university’s academic program requisites, students will receive their regular 4-year BA degree with a specialization in Forensic Psychology. Students in the Special Concentration meet weekly to prepare for their practicum placements (e.g., learning about types of clientele and diverse work environments), ethics, and other professional issues as related to the placement sites. Students also have the opportunity to give presentations about a relevant forensic topic and their practicum experiences.

One of the main aspects of Special Concentration is the two 40-hour practica placements that students

must complete; one practicum in each year of the program. Placement sites might include correctional facilities, parole offices, the mental health court, or with children's aid services. Current students in the Special Concentration have participated in practicum placements at a number of sites including, federal prisons (e.g., Nova Institution for Women, Truro NS; Springhill Institution for Men, Springhill NS); the Nova Scotia Youth Facility, Waterville NS; the IWK Youth Forensic Services, Halifax NS; Addiction Services, Antigonish NS, and Pictou NS; and the Elizabeth Fry Society, Sydney NS. It should be noted that placement sites are not limited to locations within Nova Scotia. In fact, students in the Forensic Psychology course have completed service learning placements in Prince Edward Island, Ontario, British Columbia, and Bermuda. Indeed, students are encouraged to seek out placements in their home communities.

The inaugural Special Concentration students were challenged to consider ways in which they could provide a service to their respective placement sites. Certainly, the students responded and a number of different services manifested. For instance, a student doing a placement with the Elizabeth Fry Society created a reference information package for women entering halfway houses with mental illness. Another student assisted with the leisure and canine programs at a women's correctional facility, while some others helped out with recreational activities at an Addiction Service Detox Centre. Furthermore, two students are assisted with co-facilitating a workshop about suicide awareness and prevention at a male correctional reception site, and another student provided basic guitar instruction to women offenders (see Lively & Watt, 2014). Current students rave about the practicum experiences, saying that these practical opportunities have provided an educational insight into areas or groups of people that are often misunderstood, fostered a desire to educate others about correctional populations, and in some cases, have also helped solidify a chosen career related to forensic psychology. In fact, this inaugural group have created poster presentations about their practicum experiences and learning outcomes, and presented talks about their respective placements to a group of interested students and faculty members. The posters are currently on display within the Psychology Department at StFX. Indeed, the inaugural "Special Concentration in Forensic Psychology" class has created some buzz within the department, around the university, and has even garnered local media atten-

tion (e.g., Cameron-McCarron, 2013; Hiltz, 2013).

A call for applications is sent out every March and prospective students should contact the "Special Concentration in Forensic Psychology" coordinator, Dr. Margo Watt (mwatt@stfx.ca), or visit the Special Concentration's website (http://sites.stfx.ca/forensic_psychology/) for more information about the admission criteria and application process. For additional details about upcoming "Forensic Psychology Day @ X" conferences, please also contact Dr. Margo Watt.

Undergraduate psychology programs in Canada strive to help students develop skills in critical thinking, oral and written communication, statistical analyses, and research methodology. In addition to the above skills, students who participate in the Special Concentration also have the privilege of gaining first-hand experience of seeing the classroom theory played out in real-life; a rare opportunity at the undergraduate level.



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