Introduction

This summer, I completed an internship with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) in Gatineau, QC. Along with 10 other graduate students from across Canada, I was hired to assist the Evaluation, Performance Measurement and Review Branch (EPMRB) and the Policy and Strategic Development unit (PSD) to do a large scale assessment of the department’s performance measurement indicators. EPMRB and PSD work together to assess all programs and ensure they meet the requirements of the Treasury Board Secretariat and, equally important, the needs of First Nation, Metis and Inuit communities.

This project spanned the entire four months of the internship, but was not our only placement. Each intern worked several days of the week in another branch of the department, with a goal of gaining a more holistic perspective of the department that would inform our performance measurement recommendations. My placement was with the Regional Operations Sector (RO), which is responsible for the seven regions south of the 60th parallel, and the regional offices in each region. This office plays an important role in translating policies from headquarters, where they are developed, to the various regions where they are implemented. This is an important role because policies are often written with one intent and then interpreted differently by those implementing them. RO takes on the responsibility of ensuring that policies are written with implementation considerations in mind, and that they are put into practice as intended.

Within RO, I had the opportunity to work with two different branches. My primary role was with the Planning and Business Integration unit (PBI). PBI is responsible for corporate strategy within the regional offices. I had the opportunity to assist them in developing an implementation strategy for their newly-developed 5 year strategic plan. I also had the opportunity to gain a different perspective of RO
by working with the Governance branch. This branch was undertaking various initiatives to bring a more client-centric and culturally appropriate approach to the relationship between AANDC and First Nations.

The following report will discuss the work I did with each of these three branches and the essential role that performance measurement, corporate strategy and cultural competency play in this department’s success. The report will also convey the important perspectives, skills and lessons I learned from this work.

**Evaluation & Performance Measurement**

My primary role during my internship was working on the Evaluation Unit’s summer intern project. For the first time, a department-wide assessment of every program’s performance measurement frameworks and strategies was completed. The Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) requires every department to report their programs’ intents and targets. These must be made available publicly. The intern project sought to improve departmental performance reporting, as well as improve its comprehension for the “average Canadian”. AANDC’s programs are divided into four Strategic Outcomes, based on their purpose. These categories are Land and Economy, the North, Social Programs and the Government. I was assigned to the programs under the Land and Economy outcome. These focus on economic development and infrastructure provision, generally on reserve.

There were several stages to this project. First, we performed an environmental scan on departmental performance. We read through internal and external evaluations and audits, TBS comments, parliamentary reports, and completed a media scan. This provided a strong foundation of evidence for assessments of each logic model, indicator, expected result, data collection method and target for the programs. The assessment challenged our analytical skills; they were based as much on our own ideas and judgments as on the available evidence.
We presented our preliminary findings and assessments to the leads and/or directors of each program. The program representatives provided feedback and insight into the logic of the current framework. From there, we were able to revise our assessments and produce a set of recommendations for the new performance measurement frameworks. These recommendations were intended to make the language more accessible to the public, to ensure that expected results were neither too high level nor too low level, and align indicators with expected results.

Following our initial assessments, we met individually with representatives from each program to discuss our recommendations as they wrote their new submissions for the Treasury Board. This was a challenging exercise in developing political acuity. Navigating the relationships and constructs of the department was, in many ways, a trial by fire. I learned important lessons about the ways in which branches of the department interact with one another and the complexity of the influences on and between various players. Building positive relationships with the program representatives while criticizing their programs was a delicate but imperative task for this project. Phrasing suggestions in the wrong way could result in a barrier between the two sides of the table. If programs dismissed our recommendations or intent, our project would end; we had no ability to enforce these changes. Not all our changes were made, but we were able to negotiate and modify many of our recommendations to achieve a stronger performance measurement framework that satisfied both groups. This improved my interpersonal and leadership skills, and illustrated how important these skills are for a future career in this field.

We then turned to the performance measurement strategies. These are similar to the performance measurement framework (PMF), but are internal to the department. They describe the program from a lower-level perspective and have many more indicators to assess performance. They also include a risk assessment of the program. We performed a similar assessment to that of the PMFs. This was significant because the performance measurement strategies will be published online for the
first time this year. We determined which strategies needed only minor changes to be made public, and which ones needed significant improvement. Due to the time constraints of our internship, we were not able to meet with representatives from each program to discuss these assessments. Instead, our findings were given to appropriate staff members in the department to review and revise the strategies. This gave them insight into which programs to focus on and which did not need revisions.

**Planning and Business Integration**

With PBI, I was part of a team implementing the new 5-Year Strategic Plan. This is an initiative across all regions to improve organizational wellness (meaning both a healthy environment for staff and efficient, productive office procedures), service delivery and relationships with Aboriginal groups. Practically, this meant developing a set of indicators and a dashboard to test our progress. Additionally, we worked with a small team of consultants to set the foundations for a healthier workplace. A healthy workplace is defined as one in which employees are treated with respect and fairness, and have a positive work environment in which they do not experience discrimination or high levels of stress. In such a workplace, employees know their rights; they know how to file grievances; they trust in the process to make a difference. This workplace has strong leadership and employees are engaged.

The list of indicators proved to be the most difficult aspect of this work. The first issue we faced was that we were limited to data already being collected due to resource constraints and a duty to reduce the reporting burden on First Nations. Our inability to suggest new data to collect meant that many of our ideas for indicators were not usable. The second issue we faced was that many of the activities under the Strategic Plan were difficult to quantify. For example, it is difficult to measure “strengthening stakeholder relations”. This required creativity in developing indicators.

An important step to solving this situation was taking the Strategic Priorities and Activities and fitting them together in a logic model. Having a logic model provided clarity and direction – not only for
the implementation of the Strategic Plan, but for assessing which priorities required indicators and which were too high level to test.

This project gave me valuable insight into the constraints placed on policy makers to design and implement new policies. It is incredibly easy to criticize government decisions and practices from the outside; placing these decisions and practices in context provides a better understanding of how and why policy makers determine their best options. This was an especially appropriate understanding for me to gain, given my work with EPMRB. I was able to better understand the context of the indicators and expected results of other programs that I was assessing.

**Governance Policy**

I assisted the Governance Branch with an initiative to imbed the department’s Indigenous Community Development Framework in departmental programs. This framework was designed to bring a holistic, strength-based, culturally competent, ground-up approach to all departmental programming. This means that the programs will slowly be re-structured to reflect and build on Aboriginal culture, values and desires for their own communities. Aboriginal peoples will dictate their own development. This is an incredibly important initiative to remove structural paternalism¹ from programming and re-frame community development in terms of Aboriginal needs and perspectives.

Initially, there was interest in using the framework to develop indicators that would allow the department to assess an Aboriginal community’s capacity level. Categorizing First Nations by capacity had the potential to inform the department’s approach to their relationship with the community. I assisted with producing a review of internal documents to write a concise report and slide deck on the

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¹ Currently, many policies are determined by the government on behalf of Aboriginal groups. Aboriginal people have not, historically, had a strong say in determining what their communities need and what they would like to see achieved. Although policy makers attempt to act in the best interest of Aboriginal groups, they often do not have an intimate understanding of their culture and history which leads to a division between the goals of federal policy and the goals of Aboriginal groups. This is embedded in the long history of the department and employees are attempting to rectify this divide.
history and goals of the framework’s development. Knowing the context of the framework’s
development was important to appropriately implement it. The slide deck helps anyone who is a part of
this initiative is able to understand the context.

Through this assignment, I had the opportunity to see how the framework was viewed by both
those who developed it, and by those implementing it into their programming. These two groups often
interpreted the framework differently, even suggesting opposing purposes. There was a divide between
those who wrote the policy and those using it.

In order to gain a stronger understanding of the original intent of the framework, I reached out
to one of the individuals responsible for developing it. She was able to provide me with the context and
logic of the framework. She advised that its intent was to view each Nation individually along a
spectrum, not to categorize them. Her recommendation was not to use the framework.

Taking this advice into account, we found an alternate tool in the department that could be
used for assessment: the Community Assets Framework. This looks at 7 categories of resources for
communities and has the potential to provide a holistic understanding of the community’s capacity. I
was tasked with researching best practices and academic theory around each of these categories.
Although the project is still preliminary, it was a rare chance to research ideas outside of the typical
constraints of the department. I was able to seek out ideal indicators and understandings. Although
eventually these will face the constraints of the department (such as what data can feasibly collected or
our relationship with the First Nations), starting with a foundation of idealism will positively influence
the direction of the final product. We can focus on what data would best inform research and policy,
rather than limiting the discussion to what data is currently collected or what is easiest to collect.

My work with the Governance Branch showed me the importance of cultural competency in a
tangible way. Cultural competency means that the policies engage positively across cultural differences.
Aboriginal culture is different than mainstream Canadian culture and must be recognized as such.
AANDC’s work differs from other departments in that all policies must reflect First Nations, Inuit and Metis cultures and perspectives in order to be appropriate, relevant and effective. Learning to keep this at the forefront of programs and policies was an important perspective to gain in my internship. Policy development cannot be isolated within a government office; it must reflect the needs and desires of the citizens it affects. Working directly with community members is necessary to develop and implement strong policy in any context, but especially in the case of Aboriginal policy, which has long been influenced by our country’s colonial roots.

Staff vs. Operations

My shared placement between AANDC Headquarters and Regional Operations gave me a unique perspective on the difference between staff and operations within the federal government. AANDC is in a different policy position than many other departments because, as one staff member explained, most of the department’s programs are delivered by the recipients. There are two levels of implementation: regions and third party deliverers. This leaves a significant implementation gap.

Good policy development must take the realities of implementation into account. Consultation is needed but this is not always feasible. The length and level of involvement of the consultation process are dependent on how political the policy is and how quickly it is expected to be finalized. If a policy is a highly-touted platform of a governing party, it is likely to be enacted with little consultation. Sometimes, it also “depends on the personalities involved”, according to a staff member I spoke to.

Regional Operations came into existence with the intent of closing that gap. The staff there are involved both in the beginning of policy creation, as well as the implementation process. RO acts as a conduit between the department (which designs and funds programs), and the program deliverers. Part of its mandate is to be an implementation channel. RO endeavours to coordinate between design and delivery to ensure quality and consistency in programming. Employees working in RO try to
communicate from the regions to HQ what policies and ideas are working and which need to be revised. They have insight into what can be feasibly implemented. Optimally, RO staff should have experience in both HQ and the regions to be able to understand both perspectives.

The success of program delivery at AANDC is strongly dependent on the department’s relationship with the deliverers (i.e., First Nations). This necessitates a partnered approach. The department’s responsibility is to ensure that First Nations have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and the capacity to deliver the programs. Regional Operations is tasked with managing this relationship in an effort to successfully deliver programs.

Although there are some tensions between RO and HQ regarding how policies should be designed or implemented, there are far fewer issues than there were before its existence. HQ views the relationship as a positive improvement, both for staff and recipients. The biggest tension noted, of which I saw numerous instances, was the issue of standardization. From HQ’s perspective, consistency across all recipients and programs is preferred. They want to standardize processes, criteria and delivery. Regional employees, on the other hand, strongly favour an approach that tailors policy based on regional variation. They believe that a one-size-fits-all approach to processes, criteria and delivery is ill-suited to the large degree of variation in conditions and cultures across the country. There are clearly merits to both sides of this policy debate, and it is the responsibility of Regional Operations to attempt to balance these two approaches.

Communication between headquarters, where policy is written, and the regional offices, where it is implemented, should be open. Most importantly, it must be two-way communication. Working in RO, I heard frequent comments that suggested issues of this nature on both sides. Those who implement policies must be consulted in designing effective policy, and those who write policies must be clearer in its intent and practical application.
In order to be successful in this sector of AANDC, it is important to have experience in both HQ and on the ground. Policies are often developed based on an abstract set of policy objectives with an idealized implementation setting. When policy implementation proves different than the intention, HQ may view regions as non-compliant. Operations, however, need more practical policies that are grounded in reality; they can view policies as designed to “thwart” them. In reality, both sides of the debate are valid. For example, treaties are (and must be) very legalistic and rigid. Their interpretation, however, is very grayscale, given the wide degree of variance and nuance found in reality.

Acknowledging the difference between staff and operations is important. These two areas of policy professionals have different perspectives and different roles. If the differences between these two groups are not recognized, they cannot be reconciled. Balancing policy writing with implementation requires open communication and a willingness to cooperate. They cannot cooperate if they do not acknowledge different perspectives and needs.

Lessons from SPPG

In my coursework at the School of Public Policy, there were a few lessons that were particularly relevant to my internship. The new Program Evaluation course is the most prominent example. In Program Evaluation, we worked in teams to build logic models that displayed how a program would lead to its intended results. I was able to understand how to do this, and also why it was important: laying out the cause and effects of a program ensures that the logic is sound and that the policy’s activities and expected results do, in fact, correlate. As part of my work with EPMRB, I assessed logic models for 5 different programs to determine if the activities and expected results showed sound logic. This was also an opportunity to assess how high-level the results of the program were. Had I not practiced creating logic models, this task would have been confusing and challenging to carry out. Later in the summer, my supervisor at RO asked me to build a logic model for the activities and outcomes of the strategic plan.
This was an exciting opportunity to put my experience into practice. Building a logic model was much more challenging in the workplace than the classroom because it had real-life effects in how we would look at the strategic plan.

I also learned in great detail about indicators in my SPPG coursework, both in the course Program Evaluation and in Quantitative Analysis. The primary tasks in my internship were to assess the quality of indicators (in EPMRB) and to produce a list of potential indicators (for RO). Knowing how to assess the accuracy, logic and relevance of an indicator was a valuable skill, as was knowing where to look for a new one. I felt confident in my ability to challenge indicators because of the critical thinking taught in our quantitative coursework. Professors challenged us to examine statistics from new angles that showed the holes in straightforward correlations. This allowed me to see that simple correlations may be erroneous or not the best fit.

Outside of our courses, SPPG offered several extra-curricular learning opportunities. I often found these to be far more informative than my courses. In particular, the session held on learning to write a briefing note was very helpful. Learning the format, writing style and how to write one in a very short time span is a relevant skill to have. Participating in The Ford+SPPG Conference taught me valuable skills in quickly producing and presenting a slide deck. The intensity of that event gave me confidence to speak while under pressure in my internship, such as when giving a presentation to senior management or to large audiences.

Overall, SPPG gave me a strong impression of the various influences on policy: individuals, institutions and ideologies. This helped me to understand the context in which my assessments fell and increased the usefulness of my recommendations. I was able to better understand how and why certain decisions were made and why often idealistic suggestions are not possible. Policy decisions cannot be removed from their context. Understanding the political ideologies at play, the influence of various
public servants and the constraints of the system enabled me to offer practical suggestions and understand why more obvious indicators (for example) were not selected.

The Public Policy Atlas Career Tips page also proved to be helpful in professional development. In particular, the working intelligent and leadership sections were beneficial. Learning skills like time and stress management, decision making, problem solving and being a strong leader often seem like intangible talents. It is difficult to learn them except through experience, and they are rarely taught directly in the classroom. However, they are necessary skills to develop in order to be successful, and it is important to begin developing them early in your career, as they require years to hone.

**Conclusion**

The various projects I worked on were each, in their own way, both challenging and rewarding. Through this internship, I have begun to gain the necessary skills for pursuing a career in public policy within the federal public service. Some of the lessons I learned, such as the importance of cultural competency, were fairly specific to this department. Other lessons were broad-based and will be relevant to policy work in any department or level of government. This is especially true for the divide between staff and operations, and the importance of performance measurement. I look forward to carrying these insights back to the classroom. I am certain they will enable me to derive greater value from lectures and readings in the coming year.