

Graduate students take the helm at Elections Alberta office

Job offers long days, lots to learn, and a peek behind the scenes of May 5 vote

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For most of us, a provincial election means talking some politics (or maybe a lot) and making sure you carve out a few minutes to go cast your ballot on election day. But for three graduate students in the Faculty of Arts, this 28-day provincial election campaign means running the Elections Alberta office for the Calgary Hawkwood riding.

“It’s a lot of work,” says Jeremy Hexham, the returning officer for the riding and a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication, Media and Film. He and colleagues Sara Goto, a PhD student in geography, and Chelsea Ogilvie, a master’s student in political science, are putting in pretty long days getting everything organized for the May 5 provincial election.

Elections require a lot of prep work and follow-up

“People don’t realize there are a lot of things that go on behind the scenes to make a voting day happen,” says Hexham. “There’s a little bit of prep beforehand and up to 10 days of post-election stuff, but it’s 28 days of full-time exhausting work to run the election.”

That includes accepting all the nomination forms from the candidates who are running in Hawkwood, organizing advance polls, locating and organizing the schools and community centres where people will vote next week preparing the materials for each polling station as well as hiring and training staff.

Hexham, Goto and Ogilvie are among the hundreds of Albertans who were hired by Elections Alberta to prepare for the election. “In an election you’re actually involved in the democratic process and seeing how it’s done,” says Hexham, who studies political communications and is also the chief returning officer for the Graduate Students Association.

Returning officers must remain neutral

“I’ve worked on about 22 election campaigns — everything from student union elections to federal leadership races — and this is the eighth time I’ve been involved in an election as an official. I really enjoy it.”



Jeremy Hexham, a PhD candidate in the Department of Communications, Media and Film, is working for Elections Alberta as the returning officer for the Calgary Hawkwood riding. Photo by Riley Brandt, University of Calgary

While Hexham's PhD examines how propaganda is used to spread policy ideas, he and the other riding employees must keep their own political propaganda to themselves. Alberta's Election Act states that returning officers are prohibited from engaging in political activity or providing financial support to political entities.

And once the Alberta election is over, Hexham will turn his interest to another one. "On Thursday after the election, I'm going to be home watching the British election on three different devices to see those results come in," he says. "I'm a junkie."



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