

The following information is an excerpt from the Letter of Intent submitted to the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation in response to the RECODE Request for Proposals of Spring 2014.

Ryerson University

Rising High: Improving Kid's Mental Health and Wellbeing!

The Faculty of Community Services (FCS) at Ryerson University is committed to championing a transformation process of 21st century post-secondary education. Within this process of transformation, the priority is on shifting from a 'banking' process of knowledge, characterized by a hierarchical transference of expertise from instructors to students, to a 'landscape of learning and innovation', characterized by learning opportunities that deepen the interconnections between student learning, community involvement and faculty engagement.

Aspirations and Vision

We envision a learning environment within our Faculty that transcends the isolation of academic institutions within their communities and instead mobilizes research, knowledge and skills in a collaborative effort on the part of faculty members, students and communities to create bold, sustainable and systemic change that will improve the lives of people. We aspire to embed the spirit of innovation in our teaching, our research, our partnerships and our structure – in short, our institutional culture. We see entrepreneurship as a mindset applicable not only to the world of profit-making and business, but also to the everyday realities of peoples and communities facing adversity. We aspire not only to become, but also to become *recognized* by our communities as a space of collaboration, innovation and dialogue; we want to be a driver of change in deeply embedded social injustices, systemic problems, and community wellbeing. Perhaps most importantly, we want to provide experiences to our students that allow them to see themselves as changemakers.

Activities, Programs & Structures

While remaining actively involved in the broader university initiative to transform our campus and our institutional culture, FCS is committed to push harder and further with respect to social innovation in the areas of intense interest and preoccupation of the nine Schools within the Faculty. To this end, our focus in the context of this *Letter of Interest* is **child and youth wellbeing** in the 21st century. As described below, we aspire to change our institutional (faculty-level) culture by actively pursuing a three-pronged initiative related to child and youth wellbeing that invites, and indeed relies on, the full participation of all nine of our Schools¹, as well as the evolving and increasingly embedded partnerships of FCS with the Faculty of Arts and the Ted Rogers School of Management. We believe that working together with a defined focus on improving child and youth wellbeing is an opportunity to change our work culture and activities. In collaboration, we have an opportunity to contribute to a focused goal, as well as explore together how inter-disciplinary work moves beyond the classroom to achieve social impact.

¹ Child and Youth Care, Social Work, Urban & Regional Planning, Nursing, Early Childhood Studies, Occupational Health & Safety, Nutritional Sciences, Midwifery and Disabilities Studies.

FCS will develop a transformative learning and social action zone (the **Community Transformation Café**) focused on improving child and youth mental health and wellbeing across scale while expanding opportunities and support for students to develop and test their own approaches to change in the systems that affect them directly.

Many of our faculty members are currently engaged in work related to child and youth wellbeing. This project will initially focus in two areas: (1) better outcomes for children and youth in socio-economically marginalized high rise communities in the Greater Toronto Area; and (2) how communities establish an understanding of social impact together and take a collective approach to moving the needle on a social issue.

The Toronto High-Rise Project - In Toronto alone, nearly 750,000 individuals are living in marginalized high-rise communities. Our plan is to develop a game-changing, fully integrated social innovation strategy to address the quality of life, and in particular child and youth wellbeing, within high rise communities across Canada. Several high-rise communities around the GTA have already self-organized in order to improve wellbeing for the community as a whole. These initiatives are making a significant difference in the everyday life of community members. The FCS initiative proposed here will add value to such initiatives by integrating a university context that brings students, faculty, as well as research and evaluation capacity to the setting of the high-rise. In addition to developing a specific high rise improvement project, this FCS initiative would also serve to provide space for dialogue, shared learning and collaboration with existing initiatives across Toronto.

High-rise communities are microcosms of social problems in urban areas. Cities across Canada feature such micro-communities, which in the GTA often have populations numbering in the thousands, and feature virtually every social grouping of peoples facing adversity, including newcomers, members of the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, people impacted by mental health concerns, families living in poverty, and First Nations families. High-rise communities are characterized by large child and youth populations. Research has indicated that these child and youth populations are facing especially strong adversity in terms of their well-being and longer-term prospects for positive citizenship and civic engagement.

High-rise communities present a milieu conducive to the development of a landscape of learning and innovation both within post-secondary institutions and the community itself. Through partnerships with the high-rise communities, property management companies, social service organizations, and the research and social action capacities of faculty members and the diverse Schools of FCS, the Toronto High Rise Initiative will yield opportunities for student-driven and community-supported projects related to the reduction of violence in these communities, vandalism prevention programs, learning and school support programs for children and youth, therapeutic activity programs for children and youth, parenting initiatives, and community building initiatives across cultures, including LGBTQ and disability cultures. Each of these projects provides opportunities for mixed learning communities, inclusive of students, faculty, community members, social service organizations and even private sector property management companies. Fundamentally, the high-rise context provides an opportunity for building healthier, socially active communities focused on

producing better child and youth wellbeing outcomes while at the same time providing for a learning-in-action context for students².

The Systems Shift Project - Canadian children currently sit almost at the bottom of OECD countries on rankings of child wellbeing (Unicef), and a number of organizations are currently focusing on the need to establish frameworks that enable collective focus and measurement of efforts to improve wellbeing. Shifting diverse social systems, such as those that support children and youth, requires highly collaborative efforts that are often hampered by the lack of common tables that can produce agreement on the outcomes that matter most. New collective impact processes (FSG, Tamarack) help us to focus across the landscape of formal service and community organization to a shared understanding of what creates improvement.

As the high-rise project offers the opportunities for students to learn, participate and invent approaches to improve conditions for children and youth in single communities, this part of the project engages students and faculty in the broader social innovation conversations about how we name and measure the impact of programs designed to improve child and youth mental health and wellbeing. By moving across scale in a single social issue, the Faculty will be able to focus currently disconnected initiatives to create a rich and inventive environment that contributes to the real world work in the service and community sectors.

At the macro scale, a number of organizations are currently engaged in establishing wellbeing frameworks in the child and youth sector in community, provincially and nationally. The organizations engaged in this work and partnered with the Faculty of Community Services in this project include the Ontario Trillium Foundation: seeking to measure granting impact across the nonprofit sector, Unicef: establishing its Observatory project, Children's Mental Health Ontario: in the midst of mandated system's transformation and the National Alliance of Children and Youth (NACY): building a national alliance of diverse networks engaged with children and youth. Each of these organizations have expressed a willingness to be initial partners in the establishment of a learning community, recognizing that connecting their work to that of others in the early stages provides opportunity for alignment and speeds the development of the shared landscape.

At the community level, in addition to the High-rise project, the Chair of Social Innovation is currently supporting three innovative community-based child and youth serving organizations or networks as they develop ways to understand their own social impact and contribution to child and youth wellbeing. These organizations include Sketch: a growing organization that uses community based in the arts to support homeless youth or those at risk of homelessness, the Gerrard Street Resources Centre, an organization affiliated with the University that provides child care and related services, but has also offered leadership in the early years systems transformation in Ontario and an emerging table of youth services providers affiliated with the NW Toronto LHIN. The first two incubated projects have indicated a formal desire to be "pilots" in the project. The last is in hiatus for the summer, but has recently agreed to work with the Chair in a collective impact process.

² It must be noted here that our approach to social innovation is informed first and foremost by a commitment to an ethic of empowerment; we understand that communities define their own status, must maintain ownership of any possible solutions, and ultimately remain in charge of their everyday milieu; we therefore aspire to promote horizontal landscapes of learning and doing instead of institutionally imposed experimentation in the lives of communities.

Each pilot project presents unique challenges in a developing social impact perspective. The outcome of this work will build on the work of Innoweave's Bridgespan modules, working with Innoweave consultants to modify the processes to smaller and highly creative community based organizations. These community-based programs are representative of many small innovating nonprofit organizations (estimated to be 23% of the nonprofit sector by the Ontario government) that serve children and youth. These organizations are seldom understood to be part of a "system" of support for mental health or wellbeing, yet their work is vital to inclusion, building resilience, self-confidence and other components of mental health

In this part of the zone work, the faculty and student projects will support a "backbone" process that engages community organizations working on social impact, collective impact and social outcome determination processes to share their work and learn together. Working across scale from community impact to broad scale social impact will enable community participants, faculty and students to learn together and contribute toward the emergence of related ways of thinking about the work – connected directly to their context. It also directly engages participants in considering a broader "system" that supports child and youth wellbeing and mental health that includes universities, social services, high-rise communities and innovating community-developed programs that engage in activities from soccer to the arts to social support.

Specifically the work will include the development of a practical learning community that links the university to innovation in community sites. We will engage students in the support and incubation of social impact development processes in pilot organizations and others as they emerge; we will encourage and support related student-driven enterprises and we will curate a learning community engaging student and faculty researchers in the broader community discussion of how social impact frameworks support systems change that results in improved child and youth wellbeing and mental health in communities. Regular learning gatherings will enable both provincial and national scale and community metrics initiatives to share their work and learn from each other, as the students and faculty support and learn along side. Toward the end of the project we will host an interdisciplinary conference focused on learning and approaches to articulating and measuring social impact on child and youth mental health and wellbeing.

By curating the landscape of conversation and exchange on child and youth wellbeing that includes faculty, students and community we will create fertile ground for the emergence of co-created projects engaging students as youth to lead in shaping initiatives that support improvement in community and in the university. Backed by the enormous research capacity of FCS, such initiatives can then be supported by evaluation and social impact measurement

Changing Student Experiences and Investing in Social Innovation

FCS has already taken some steps to transform the academic ecology of learning within its Schools. A cross-faculty, inter-professional 'minor program in social innovation' is being developed to allow students to engage the culture, mindset and excitement of social innovation in an academically rigorous manner. The minor is itself structured in institutionally innovative ways, allowing students to self-direct their course selections in order to target the

concrete knowledge and learning needs aligned with their specific social change interests. This minor is being developed in partnership with the Ted Rogers School of Management.

The endowed John C. Eaton Chair of Social Innovation (Marilyn Struthers), based in the School of Child & Youth Care, is working actively to develop inter-professional and cross-sector partnerships within the Faculty, across Ryerson University and between the University and the Community. Distinguished Visiting Faculty and Social Innovator Rick Young, also based in the School of Child & Youth Care, is providing guidance and inspiration for the on-going and ever-accelerating commitment to social innovation as a culture of 21st century post-secondary education. Over the course of the past academic year, multiple workshops, symposiums, 'brown bag lunch learning events, and other gathering took place within FCS and across the University related to social innovation and entrepreneurship.

A major initiative of the Faculty has been the development of a web site dedicated to Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Managed by the Chair of Social Innovation, Marilyn Struthers, this web site collects and disseminates all of the latest news, information, and activity related to social innovation locally, nationally and globally: www.changetheworld.ca.

A course featuring a collaborative and co-teaching framework between the Ted Rogers School of Management and the Schools of Child & Youth Care and Disability Studies was offered to undergraduate FCS students and graduate MBA students together this past winter, and included a 'field trip' to the Ashoka University Exchange Conference held in Providence, RI in February 2014.

Finally, FCS initiated the process of obtaining the Changemaker Campus designation from Ashoka for Ryerson University, a first in Canada.

The implementation of this transformational 21st century social innovation learning landscape for post-secondary education rests on three pillars of action frameworks: first, the development of collaborative partnerships involving private and public sector stakeholders, high-rise communities, multi-disciplinary academic partnerships across academic units and faculties, and social service organizations within the community. Second, the re-design of academic curriculum through radical and bold re-drawing of disciplinary maps and institutional processes in order to facilitate a social innovation culture and mindset amongst students and faculty; and third, the development of a social impact orientation through what FCS has termed the **Community Transformation Café**, a designated space for faculty, students and communities to engage in bold dialogue and learning geared toward undertaking and achieving social impact initiatives. As part of this space, we envision the development of a **Mentoring Roster**, designed to connect students with social innovators from social organizations across the GTA.

These three pillars of action frameworks correspond to the goals and objectives of RECODE. Together these three pillars serve to transform the post-secondary education context for the 21st century, by integrating learning, research, and social action into a fully integrated social innovation framework aiming toward social impact. Moreover, the goals and ambitions of FCS are complementary and enriching of Ryerson University's goals to develop a social innovation and entrepreneurship ecology across the campus. While the goals of FCS can stand on their own, in combination with Ryerson University's RECODE application focused on the development of an innovation ecology, FCS is poised to fundamentally transform the way we

think about and organize the role of academic intuitions in the context of student development, community action, and social impact on the social child and youth serving systems where many of our student will eventually work. We believe that if we invest now in their understanding of their capacity to innovate and focus on the disciplines of understanding social impact, we better prepare them to be the system's innovators of the future.