

The Social Purpose Administrator: Creating and Building Community Partnerships for Good

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Panelists:

- **Martin Pochurko**, Vice-President, Finance and Administration - Simon Fraser University
- **Éric Tufts**, Vice-President, Administration and Student Affairs – Université Sainte-Anne
- **Charmaine Lyn**, Senior Director, Office of Community Engagement – Concordia University

Moderator:

- **Coro Strandberg**, McConnell Foundation, Social Purpose Administration Advisor

As part of their collaborative project to stimulate the development of social purpose activities in Canadian post-secondary administration, the McConnell Foundation and the [Canadian Association of University Business Officers](#) (CAUBO) facilitated a dialogue for university administrators on the topic of community engagement at the 2019 CAUBO Annual Conference in Halifax.

Many universities prioritize engaging meaningfully with their broader communities with the objective of increasing the institution's social impact. Collaborating with community organizations, local businesses, local governments and others can help achieve mutually beneficial objectives.

But for administrators, the question is often *where to start?* What role are administrators best positioned to play? The CAUBO Social Purpose dialogue was set up to discuss these questions. It surfaced some of the benefits, challenges, and lessons learned from three administrators with sustained involvement in community collaborations. What follows is a summary of these administrators' learnings, which we hope will benefit other administrators interested in increasing their social impact with community.

For more information on the CAUBO-McConnell Social Purpose Administration Project go [here](#). If you have examples to share of your community impact work, please [add your story to our inventory](#) of best practices in social purpose administration at this link. Or check out the [inventory](#) for more ideas and inspiration.

Panelists' Institutional Context

Concordia University:

Large urban university with two campuses: one in downtown Montréal and the other in the west end of the city. The subway stops beneath the downtown campus and the "city flows through the university."

Simon Fraser University:

Large university with one campus in downtown Vancouver, one on top of Burnaby Mountain, and one in the rapidly growing city of Surrey – diverse communities with a great deal of socioeconomic stratification and ethnic diversity, gentrification and a lot of dynamism culturally and socially. SFU brands itself as “the engaged university.”

Université Sainte-Anne:

Very small campus located in rural towns in Nova Scotia, serving the francophone community. In this context, the campuses operate as the heart of the towns and villages in which they’re located. The university functions as the second largest employer, and an important consumer of goods and services. You are not just in those towns, you *are* those towns! Resultantly, community engagement is inevitable, not a choice.

Reflections on Community Relationships

Nature of Relationship

University/community partnerships have sometimes manifested as extractive, where the university is extracting value (knowledge) from the community relationship for outcomes that benefit institutions or researchers, without necessarily benefiting the community to the same degree. Against this backdrop, the following principles are helpful ways to think about relationships with community:

- Is it mutually beneficial?!
- Is it reciprocal?
- Is it long-term?

Building deep trusting relationships with partners is a form of sustainability. This work takes time and effort. Universities that prioritize social innovation, service learning will need to continually go back to the “well” of community partners. Investing in careful relationship development and management with a longer term vision, as opposed to being thought of transactionally, is a sustainable practice.

We are publicly funded, and publicly purposed universities. Community engagement is a way of being accountable to the public. Strategically, building deep community relationships has the potential to meaningfully move the needle on big social challenges that universities are (or ought to be) tasked with improving: equity, diversity, inclusion, marginalization, indigenization, etc. As well, when it comes to attracting learners, retention of students, attracting and supporting hires, etc. deep community engagement will help you do that work better.

On Instigating Community Partnerships

Université Sainte-Anne

- **Pragmatics:** The university doesn’t have a policy for local suppliers, but generally uses them for pragmatic reasons: the local companies are more well known, and companies from other cities would be travelling from three hours away, at least.
- **Reactive:** Many partnerships exist as a result of organizations approaching the university asking for resources. It’s easier to address issues that may come up if you work with local providers.
- **Proactive:** We are aware of how important it is to foster strong local relationships. When we think about attracting students, we want the esteem of the university to be high in the

community. Furthermore, without being able to access the university's facilities, culture/arts groups could not exist in our small communities. So when considering how challenging it is to recruit professionals such as doctors to locate in rural Nova Scotia, the existence of arts and culture groups make the lifestyle more attractive, so the university's facilities here can be seen to be supporting rural economic development and community wellbeing.

Simon Fraser University

- **Café RFP:** When constructing a residence building on the Downtown Campus, the community spoke up that they didn't want a Starbucks, and a request for proposals resulted in many responses, but all were big companies. This meant we had to hit the ground and find entrepreneurs on our own. This process involved finding an individual, and supporting him to ensure his business model was sound. It is a great success story, as he has since won numerous awards.
- **Food Service:** In the process of changing food service providers on their campuses, they risked displacing all the current staff. So in the Request for Proposals, SFU included a requirement that all the staff would be retained, with their levels of seniority, benefits etc. They communicated to those submitting an RFP that the winning formula wasn't going to be the company that submitted the lowest-cost proposal. Doing so is challenging from a financial point of view, but they considered that there are other metrics that should be considered in these decisions. As a result of standing by their staff, the food service provider now has a very loyal workforce. This is a great example of a financial decision that is incorporating a consideration of "symbolic capital" bound up in relationships.

From Ad Hoc to System-wide Community Engagement

Panelists were asked to offer their perspectives on the necessary conditions for moving from ad hoc to system-wide community engagement, based on their institutional experiences.

Université Sainte-Anne

- **Mandate:** The imperative for building deep community relationships has to come from the top.
- **Alignment:** There needs to be an alignment of objectives between the community and institution.
- **Capacity:** We need money, time, creativity to do things differently.

Simon Fraser University

- **A willingness to confront challenges:** Most meaningful community engagement opportunities start off as ad-hoc, some uncomfortable conversations, someone thinking in a less conventional way, a challenge. (Example: Students at our doors asking us to take the carbon footprint out of our investment portfolio. We've reduced it by 50% and still have a really strong performing endowment)
 - Achieving success with one opportunity makes it is easier to scale other opportunities.
- **A different way of looking at the role of the university:** It's not just about the academic pursuit, it's about value to the community.

Concordia University

- **Leadership (vision):** Need to have a leader who says and demonstrates this is important and communicates it as a vision for the institution.
- **Leadership (operationally):** You need leaders who understand there are new ways to do business, and to encourage leaders within the institution to think differently about it. Someone needs to say to their team “it’s your job to think of this differently because that is in the values of our institution. Go look at things happening in other places. Sit with people you don’t normally sit with.” That kind of leadership opens up new opportunities.
- **An institution that understands its values and lives them:** This is what makes people excited about working and studying at this institution.

Where to Situate the Community Engagement Function

From where should community engagement be led or championed at the school? Whose role is it?

- At SFU it takes place in many roles at many levels – it is distributed across the institution.
- At Concordia, there is an office of Community Engagement. It is helpful to have someone in a specific role (i.e. Charmaine whose title is Senior Director of Community Engagement). This signals to colleagues that someone is thinking about this full time and can provide advice and support. Someone working to align everyone and bring them together for periodic conversations.

Community Engagement Competencies within University Administration

Concordia University

Competencies is an important topic. The university needs to decide to invest in recruiting or developing (or both) staff with community engagement competencies. Not doing so is a serious risk to your institutional reputation, as well as relationships that some colleagues in the university might have been holding already for years. Community engagement is relationship management. We need to be ready to be criticized by community voices, we need those who can skillfully facilitate community input conversations, incorporating their ideas into the university’s plans. Training should be rolled out, or a community engagement office established which would be a service provider/supporter of people’s acquisition of these knowledges and skills. Look to your existing relationships to establish your community engagement approach, before leaping to create new ones.

Simon Fraser University

As administrative leaders, when it comes to community engagement or community relations, we may not have the necessary skill sets, so ask others for help. Administrators often have Type-A personalities that want to push according to strict timelines. But community and university work at different speeds. When working with community, pushing them to go at your timeline, not theirs, is really problematic. So your role - and your way of working - has to evolve to be more collaborative. Community engagement skills for administrators will be more important in the future.

Université Sainte-Anne

People are working at our institution because they have that skill set and sensitivity already. Many times, we already have informal connections because community organizations have a faculty member from the Université de Sainte Anne on their boards.