Building Social Infrastructure: The role of VPs External

What is social infrastructure?

"Social infrastructure" is the set of organizational arrangements and deliberate investments in society's systems, relationships, and structures that enable society to create a resilient, just, equitable and sustainable world; it includes social, economic, environmental and cultural assets.

Educational institutions can use the idea of social infrastructure as a way to organize and communicate their efforts to create positive social change and sustainable economic prosperity.

The role of VPs External Relations varies across institutions—some are responsible for alumni, ceremonies and events, regional campuses, fundraising, or advancement. Whatever the specifics, the common thread is building relationships across the institution, and building support for the social goals of the communities where the institution resides. 'Social goals' is broader than just social services—initiatives in community health, governance, and economic development are often part of the mandate.

For example: Niagara College's Applied Health Institute at their Welland Campus makes a distinct contribution to community health with applied learning programs

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that offer dental, mental health and aging services for the local population. Through the Institute, students have real-world learning opportunities and the community has extra supports to offset stresses on an over-burdened health-care system.

The VP External's office played a key role in developing the vision for the Institute by listening to feedback from community members and front-line health care workers (some of them students and alumni) about the challenges they face in their work. The College's investment in the Institute, and the network of relationships that have grown around it, are an example of how VPs External can contribute to building social infrastructure with institutional assets.

Once the President has communicated a strategic vision and objectives for the institution, the VP External is often responsible to quickly say "how do we move relationships forward to support this"—activating the myriad personal touch points across the institution that help people see themselves in the story and take action. As a leader in the institution, it's the VP External's role to be a community connector and find new and valuable opportunities for their institutions to increase their impact.

Framing the opportunity

Canada's advanced education institutions have historically played an important role in shaping Canada's broad economic, governance and social systems. These systems are currently producing less-than-optimal outcomes, like climate change, rising income inequality, resource scarcity, and ecological degradation. Overcoming these issues to achieve sustainable, shared, social and economic prosperity will be a complex, interdisciplinary, and multi-sectoral effort—one that includes changing the state of social infrastructure. Advanced education institutions, by virtue of their influence, expertise, and other assets and resources, are well-positioned to support this change.

Our advanced education institutions play an important role as trusted conveners—bringing diverse communities together to learn and participate in respectful conversations on topics of importance. At Simon Fraser University (SFU), dozens of public events are hosted every year at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue on topics including the economy, civic policy, climate solutions, intercultural dialogue, and international peace building. The SFU Public Square program holds an annual community summit in collaboration with faculties and community, this year on the topic of "confronting the disinformation age". It is one way that the university convenes people around current and relevant topics.

The opportunity for VPs External is to:

- identify new relationships that can make a big difference for the community and the institution

- move key relationships forward once priorities are set

- promote the understanding of strong community relationships as valuable institutional assets in their own right

Where to begin?

Discover institutional relationships to develop further

VP External Greg Medulun at Niagara College recommends "digging into the obvious touch points" where social infrastructure provides meaningful experiences for a variety of stakeholders. For example, looking at student experiences in the community, both through their studies and personally, is a window to see the bigger picture for the institution's role. Other obvious touch-points might be through research or alumni networks. Medulun states that it's easy to feel like "there's so much going on, but it's undefined." Illuminating the different people and networks connected to the institution through the lens of student experience can help the institution to prioritize relationship development goals.

Build infrastructure to support institutional relations in steps

At SFU, VP External Joanne Curry has been leading a major strategic initiative on strengthening relationships with local First Nations governments that builds on faculty and research relationships that have developed over years.

The entry point to the work was the VP External's responsibility for government relations—and working with First Nations governments as they would other government bodies in Canada. .

The first focus of the strategy was internal, to support students from First Nations communities within the institution. The next step was to "set eyes outside" and build the infrastructure to respond to First Nations community needs consistently and reliably, and provide capacity to manage the volume of requests going back and forth. Some of the local First Nations are inundated with requests for endorsement, support, relationships, and research partnerships. Curry's office helps track requests so that, for example,

SFU archaeologists are not in a community without that community's knowledge. VPs External, because of their unique vantage point and role, can put systems and processes in place that make everyone else's job in creating social infrastructure easier and more effective.

Have eyes in the community

Niagara College has over 50,000 alumni from 130 different programs employed in the local community. The VP External's office can leverage that wealth of connections to contribute back to the College in more ways than traditional donation drives. By coordinating alumni outreach through different faculty deans, the College can get first-hand feedback about the challenges that people in industry are facing. The Health Institute at the Welland campus is just one program that was born out of an identified need for additional health and wellness training, and developed into a valuable community asset. As with SFU, the VP External is creating points of connection for community and institutional dialogue and synergy.

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Benefits and opportunities

In the role of VP External (or in any administrative role), there can be a detachment from students. Medulun states "we're in the business of people making," and that "if you don't find a way to connect to 'your main product,' your work loses value."

Connecting to students and connecting their experiences to needs in the community makes great contributions to social infrastructure building and makes the VP External role that much more interesting and rewarding.

At SFU, Curry has successfully built community relationships with a community engagement seed fund for faculty and graduate students. The seed fund has been around for 4 years, disbursing $100,000 per year to support community-engaged work, deepen partnerships, and address critical issues.

Engaging undergraduates can be more challenging, as students often only get involved in community projects in their 3rd or 4th year and then leave; this is challenging in terms of continuity. To overcome this, Curry partners with student services to identify and provide smaller grants to student projects, and Student Services provides oversight and support.

Overcoming barriers

Answering the "so what."

The diversity and complexity of relationships and outcomes in social infrastructure building presents a communication challenge for senior leaders faced with answering the big question—"so what?"—to get buy-in for new projects and partnerships. At Niagara College, Medulun notes that determining the most effective themes or framing is not a top-down exercise. Medulun has empowered about half a dozen decision makers including faculty, senior admin in Human Resources, and Student Alliance members to test whether the notion of "a complete student" translates well in different situations. For example, to encourage relationship building, the VP External may build on the work of the VP Academic by putting soft skills into curriculum and programs from admission to graduation.

He emphasizes that these ideas need time to germinate, and people inside and outside the College who are tasked with building relationships need time to reflect on how infrastructure building can be a useful or meaningful frame for them.

What happens when grants end?

A related barrier to sustaining strong external relationships is the time-limited nature of some grant funding, notably for community-engaged research projects. The VP External can help sustain goodwill and trust in community-institution relationships that could be eroded by a 'hard stop.' The VP External's office can guide researchers in how to plan for this transition with the community members, and can potentially be a source of continuity and even help match external groups with other researchers or philanthropic funding sources.

About McConnell and RECODE

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is a pan-Canadian foundation that works toward building a society that is inclusive, reconciled, sustainable and resilient—and that advances progress toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. RECODE, an initiative of the McConnell Foundation, is a call to 21st century postsecondary education that enhances community wellbeing.

As a funder, capacity builder and convener, RECODE supports the capacity of schools to weave social innovation tools and practices into the very fabric of campus and community culture.