

Presidents’ Roundtable on the Value of Community Engagement

May 20, 2020 | Aide-Mémoire

On May 20, 2020 Simon Fraser University, the University of St. Michael’s College and the McConnell Foundation hosted a Presidents’ Roundtable on the Value of Community Engagement. This Roundtable marked the three-year anniversary of the inaugural 2017 Roundtable on *Building Social Infrastructure in Canadian Post-Secondary*. For additional background, see the 2017 Roundtable [aide-mémoire](#) and the [Discussion Paper](#) that was commissioned for the discussion.

The May 2020 Roundtable was designed as a conversation between university presidents on the role of universities as anchor institutions. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the event transitioned to virtual, and the conversation pivoted to explore universities’ responses to the crisis and their role in building an equitable recovery. Supporting community economic development particularly with disadvantaged populations, responding to climate change, and addressing reconciliation were themes interwoven throughout the discussions.

The pandemic was described as a ‘pivotal moment’ and a ‘rehearsal’ - only one of many upcoming crises (pandemics, economic recessions, climate related disruptions) which universities and society will have to face. Participants discussed the need to make decisions today that will help with preparations for tomorrow. Embedding social infrastructure and reconciliation principles are promising pathways for being better able to respond to future crises and codesign a future Canada.

Over the last three years, social impact in Canadian post-secondary has deepened and the breadth of initiatives has grown. Some of this work is documented in the [2020 Milestone Report](#), created for the 2020 Roundtable.

HIGHLIGHTS

Reflections on the Evolving Role of Universities

Foundational to the university sector’s capacity to respond rapidly and effectively to COVID-19 were the multitude of strong university/community relationships. For some presidents, the social impact lens has shaped everything they did in responding to the pandemic or “awoke” the university to its sense of social mission. The rapid response to COVID-19 was seen by some as a ‘jumping off point’ for future community engagement, and evidence that increased social impact is possible.

- **Social License:** The pandemic affirmed universities' role as drivers of social impact. They rapidly deployed expertise, assets and capital on the 'front lines' (research, food, housing, space, knowledge). Some of this work was enabled by increased interest from municipal and regional governments, economic councils etc. looking to universities for support.
- Schools are shifting out of **crisis management**, and into **strategic response**; with an eye toward **rebuilding for increased social impact**. There was a shared interest in exploring opportunities to keep social purpose at the forefront of the work.
- **Universities as Economic and Community Well-Being Anchors:** The crisis demonstrated the role that universities play in supporting communities. As large employers and drivers of local economies, universities play a significant role in supporting their regions during a crisis. Presidents noted that a university's community engagement role could help uplift and strengthen universities facing institutional threats (such as budget cuts, loss of revenue, reduced international student enrollment, crisis of legitimacy, etc).

Reflections on Partnerships and Relationships

- **Internal Community Engagement and Supports:** Having a healthy internal culture that is supportive of community engagement is likely to enhance the institution's capacity to do this well.

Within the university's community (students, staff, faculty), individuals from marginalized populations have a unique and necessary perspective on the role universities can play in mitigating persistent challenges facing vulnerable communities. Their voices need to be raised and incorporated respectfully into decision-making.

- **Working with Government and the Philanthropic Sector:** Universities are well-positioned to convene diverse stakeholders, and to influence policy. As Canada reimagines and rebuilds communities and local economies, knowledge transfer and convening hold significant potential for community engagement.

Potential partners include community and private foundations, the charitable sector, governments, colleges and international post-secondary social impact networks. Recognizing that COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated the inequalities in Canadian society, it would be beneficial to ensure that any policy proposal is inclusive and representative of traditionally underrepresented populations.

Reflections on the Future

- **A Pivotal Moment - Universities of the Future: "Never let a crisis go to waste"** There is a unique opportunity to shape a national conversation on what a new, more equitable and resilient Canada looks like, as well as the role that universities play in building that future. In addition to contributing to social impact, participants predicted that there will be ever-increasing expectations for universities to equip and upskill the next generation to succeed in the new future.
- **A Resilient Sector:** Canada's 96 universities have responded to this crisis in varied and unique ways that are reflective of their geography, size, capacities, communities, and

relationships. Taken together, the sector response has been very strong. The community engagement activities undertaken by Canada's universities built social capital and will serve to shape Canada's reputation on the global stage.

NEXT STEPS

Having highlighted the progress made since 2017 - the conversation has shifted from the theoretical to the practical - participants were interested in further exploring the following:

Collaboration

- Ongoing need and desire for shared learnings, conversations and collaborations, potentially via communities of practices and working groups.
- Developing a collaborative approach to engaging and supporting Indigenous students and their communities;
- Identifying clusters of local universities who are more connected and responsive to local conditions and opportunities.

Policy

- Working with government on 'economic recovery and the role of university' in a local, national and global context;
- Developing social impact principles and guidelines for Universities Canada members;
- Mobilizing the university sector's convening and advocacy power to promote a low carbon and equitable future;
- Integrating social impact practices and goals into institutional strategic plans.

Engagement

- Engaging students / leaders of tomorrow in the rebuilding and recovery phase;
- Mobilizing the university sector to foster hope in times of crisis;
- Further opening opportunities for communities to access our knowledge and for universities to learn from communities;
- Responding with programs to support displaced workers;
- Seeking out and identifying opportunities for collective action and messaging, including with the college sector, government partners and corporate communities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Social Infrastructure Strategic Planning Guidelines](#): For Presidents and Planning Teams
- [COVID-19 Decision Making](#): A Social Impact Tool for Higher Education

May 20th Roundtable Participants List

Andrea Dicks	Community Foundations of Canada	President and CEO
Andrew Petter	Simon Fraser University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Annette Trimbee	University of Winnipeg	President and Vice Chancellor
Asima Vezina	Algoma University	President and Vice Chancellor
Chad Lubelsky	McConnell Foundation	Program Director
Coro Strandberg	McConnell Foundation	Social Purpose Advisor
Dr. David Sylvester	University of St. Michael's College	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Deb Saucier	Vancouver Island University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Effie Slapnicar	University of St. Michael's College	Bursar & Chief Administrative Officer
Dr. Geoff Payne	University of Northern British Columbia	Interim President
Dr. Gervan Fearon	Brock University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Gillian Siddall	Emily Carr University	President and Vice Chancellor
Jean-Marc Mangin	Philanthropic Foundations of Canada	President and CEO
Dr. Joanne Curry	Simon Fraser University	VP External Relations
Dr. Joy Johnson	Simon Fraser University	Incoming President & Current VP Research and International
Kelly Hodgins	McConnell Foundation	Program Officer
Kevin McCort	Vancouver Foundation	President and CEO
Dr. Mike DeGagné	Nipissing University	President and Vice Chancellor
Nathalie Laporte	Canadian Association for University Business Officers	Executive Director
Paul Davidson	Universities Canada	President and CEO
Paula Sahyoun	McConnell Foundation	Social Innovation Fellow
Philip Landon	Universities Canada	VP & Chief Operating Officer

Dr. Robert Summerby-Murray	Saint Mary's University	President and Vice Chancellor
Dr. Santa Jeremy Ono	University of British Columbia	President and Vice Chancellor
Shauna Sylvester	Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue	Executive Director
Dr. Sophie D'Amours	Université de Laval	Rectrice
Stephen Huddart	McConnell Foundation	President and CEO
Dr. Tim Rahilly	Mount Royal University	President and Vice Chancellor
Dr. Vianne Timmons	Memorial University of Newfoundland	President and Vice-Chancellor

Post-Roundtable Debrief Calls Participants List

Dr. Alan Shepard	Western University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. David Barnard	University of Manitoba	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. David Farrar	McMaster University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Graham Carr	Concordia University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Mohamed Lachemi	Ryerson University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Moira McPherson	Lakehead University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Patrick Deane	Queen's University	Principal and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Rhonda Lenton	York University	President and Vice-Chancellor
Dr. Sara Diamond	Ontario College of Art and Design University	President and Vice-Chancellor

