The Role of VPs Research in Building Social Infrastructure

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. VPs of Research, and others who are responsible for directing their institution's strategic direction, investments, and partnerships for research, will find some new and valuable opportunities here for their institutions to increase their impact and build social infrastructure for Canadian communities.

How can you effectively build relationships between the institution and communities to the benefit and best interests of both?

For example: King's University College contributed administrative support and existing research by faculty members to the creation of a poverty research centre that supports effective public policy and nonprofit interventions. The network and relationships around the centre, and the direct investment in the Centre, are examples of building social infrastructure.

It can be complicated to share academic research funding with non-academic institutions, e.g. non-profits or community groups, but it is possible for them to be co-applicants to tri-council grants. Supporting this kind of application, by making the time to create a CV or other paperwork on behalf of community partners (and by other means), is another example of building social infrastructure through the institution's existing capacity to apply for and receive funding.

RECODE: Building Social Infrastructure Series

Framing the opportunity

Canada's advanced educational 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 educational institutions, by virtue of their influence, expertise, and other assets and resources, are well-positioned to support this change.

Our advanced education institutions are the place where society expects new knowledge to come from and as such, they are uniquely positioned to accelerate and scale their societal contributions to enable a transition to a just and sustainable world.

The challenge for VPs research is how to effectively build relationships between the institution and communities to the benefit and best interests of both.

VPs research can play a leadership role in their institution in asserting:

- Whose knowledge "counts"
- Who is to be involved in knowledge creation
- How knowledge is to be applied to the complex issues and challenges that communities want and need to address

Where to begin?

Find out who is already doing this at your institution

Educational institutions are places of dialogue, in the classroom and beyond. The process of accelerating the institution's research relationships with the community starts with a series of conversations with the faculty, staff and students who are already involved in projects or research that build social infrastructure, whether or not they necessarily describe it that way. This can be done directly, or through and appointed person or task force.

Research is traditionally structured along disciplinary lines. Anthropology, economics, physics, etc.—these are the lines along which knowledge is created in the institution. Convening a wider conversation around

'social infrastructure' can encourage interdisciplinary collaborations that encourage new and innovative approaches, and uncover new opportunities. These early conversations help VPs research see where there are existing strengths and capacities to build on.

Set the direction

It makes a big difference to have language around social infrastructure in the institution's mission and vision statements, or in a specific research mandate about mobilizing and brokering research resources to tackle societal issues in collaboration with community partners. Faculty and staff pay attention to these statements, and align themselves to them.

> What are the rating criteria for community engaged research, and how does it contribute to decisions for tenure and promotion?

Given the globalized nature of research, the focus does not have to be exclusively local; the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a ready research agenda and a handy set of benchmarks for social change efforts. The SDGs have been a powerful rallying call and there are many roles that research and higher education can play in achieving them.

Understand the needs and find alignment

Convene a colloquium or seminar to get people together, share the vision and strategy, celebrate the work already happening, and ask what supports or resources are needed to further the impact of social infrastructure research and projects. Consider hosting such an event offsite, or in collaboration with a community partner, so that community members don't have to "come to you" to participate.

Share stories and data

You will need to discuss the value of this work with others. Promote and enable public access to research data, evidence and scientific knowledge to address social issues, including collating, publishing and disseminating evidence of successful social interventions and continuous scientific monitoring of societal changes by means of scientific research; mobilize and analyze data to contribute to generating solutions.

Overcoming barriers

Raising funds for this work can sometimes be challenging. Canada has a federal foundation for innovation supporting scientific infrastructure, but no formal, central funding body for social infrastructure. Advocating to the granting councils and federal government is important. VPs Research can lead participation in group lobbying through Universities Canada, Colleges and Institutes Canada, and other provincial initiatives.

Where there is potential to strengthen the "public good" contribution of research, SSHRC's funding will often support it, but the related barrier is recognition for researchers—in terms of consideration for tenure and promotion, and in terms of training for students and next leaders. There may be internal resistance from people tied to "traditional" views of research that is 'owned' in the disciplines.

VPs should ask their faculty deans: "what is the rating criteria for community engaged research, and how does it contribute to decisions for tenure and promotion"? The public call for postsecondary institutions to be more useful to community and society has broadened what is acceptable; however this remains a challenge.

Expanding the parameters for recognition of service is a more flexible area to honour non-traditional experience in the academy. Engaging and supporting community engaged scholars keeps these community members "in the driver's seat".

Realizing benefits

Many faculty researchers have access to dedicated funds—through SSHRC, NSRC, etc.—for collaboration and partnerships. Research for social innovation, in collaboration with community, opens up faculty researcher to additional funding. Community partnerships also create interesting opportunities for students—to ask broader questions, and get outside of traditional research paradigms.

In particular for institutions that have named rebuilding and reconciling their relationship with Canada's indigenous peoples as a priority, a research mandate centred around social infrastructure provides a platform to do "nothing about us, without us". In this way, and others, looking at social infrastructure outcomes provides an additional, useful lens to assess how much research contributes to community needs.

The more that research is meaningful and relevant to community needs, and that researchers successfully develop reciprocal relationships, the more that community members will appreciate the value of the institution and contribute their time, energy, finances, and goodwill. This will also make the institution stronger and more relevant.

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 post-secondary 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.