THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

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Dear Cheryl:

As I mentioned to all the universities receiving McConnell grants for CSL, I am going to share some reflections about what is going well and where we need to ask ourselves tough questions. These comments are offered in the spirit of "critical friendship": we are inspired by the pioneering work that CACSL and the universities are doing but we want people to focus on the mountain peak ahead even as they are trying to find their footing in the early stages of their ascent.

I finished my talk at London by suggesting that it is important for CSL practitioners, particularly when they are feeling buffeted by a range of stakeholders, to ask themselves three questions: *What good? For what people? At what cost?* The Foundation initiated this project with a number of goals in mind:

> Community service learning builds on "engagement" as a centerpiece of our strategic thinking by linking the academy, students and communities through structured, curriculum-based experiential learning. Engagement, as a process of moving people from awareness to informed action, is a principal outcome of a successful service-learning program. Engagement also operates to transcend traditional boundaries between three sectors, namely students, universities and community organizations: we are especially interested in capacity building for community organizations and in supporting the relationship between universities and the larger communities in which they are located.

> We believe that considerable value can be added to service-learning by encouraging balanced strategies that support community-based organizations as well as the teaching function of the universities themselves. This requires community input at the design stage, shared information on best practices, a strategy for sharing knowledge at the

community level, and better information on the impact of service-learning on community organizations themselves.[1]

Unpacking these messages, the Foundation hopes that the CSL projects will have the following impacts:

- **Students** will become active global citizens, measured by a range of qualities such as life-long engagement as volunteers and donors, a sustained curiosity and respect for diversity, belief in the public good and an ongoing exercise of their rights and responsibilities in the political process, participation in the economic and social life of their community.
- **Universities** will become centers that stimulate innovative approaches to address the complex issues facing the local community. This entails a significant shift in the culture of academia: increased commitment to community service and learning to partner with community agencies on a more equal footing.
- **Community agencies** will become more effective in their work. This entails becoming more strategic in their approach to community issues and openness to the intellectual assets offered by partnerships with universities.

(Community service learning) may be the biggest thing to hit undergraduate education in the last decade"

- University Affairs (February 2004)

From our dialogue in London and from the reports that the Foundation has received, it is clear that CSL has really taken root on many campuses across the country. There is impressive growth in the number of students participating, courses eligible and faculty involved in one form or another of CSL. As one of you remarked, almost wistfully, the days of having a low profile and being able to do whatever you want are long gone;[2] CSL is on the radar screen from a pedagogical, administrative, financial and branding perspective. There are variations in your situations but generally speaking it appears that you will meet or surpass your targets over the course of the grant. In the language of a logic model for the initiative, this impressive growth is an important indicator about the universities' capacity to achieve the outputs. Moreover, you are collectively collating a significant number of tools, training modules and tips about the design and management of CSL programs which, when taken together, constitute an impressive body of knowledge.

Does this increased activity, in and of itself, lead to the impact that we desire – transforming students into engaged citizens and fundamentally changing university – community relations?

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[1] From RFP letter from the Foundation to universities, 2004.
[2] Some CSL staff wonder if CSL may be best served by staying at the margins of the university; being embraced by the university administration may be the kiss of death for innovation.

I worked for Canada World Youth for over 20 years and during that period we evaluated the impact of intense seven month community-service learning projects on approximately 25,000 young people.[3] Longitudinal impact assessments undertaken by CAC International indicated that for these programs to be transformational, they needed to touch people at three inter-related levels – head, heart and hands.   The research indicated that young people became active citizens as a result of increasing **knowledge** about specific domains, the development of **skills** (technical, organizational, communication, learning) that enabled them to participate effectively in group settings, at the workplace, in community organizations etc. and the nurturing of **values** (a sense of belonging, respect for diversity, solidarity, appreciation for the environment, spirituality) that inspired young people to *feel* that they are part of a community.

There were two other common traits of the most successful programs:
- The most significant transformation occurred when people were pushed out of their comfort zone – physical, psychological and pedagogical;
- Developing relationships of trust with people from a range of backgrounds is often cited; changing mindsets and behaviour patterns take time.

When university-based CSL works, it accomplishes many of the same objectives:
- **Head (knowledge):** Young people experience new ways of learning from different kinds of sources. As a student of agricultural economics, I participated in a CSL program in which I was placed with a hog farmer active in the formation of the marketing board. It was an eye opening and humbling experience to learn more from this farmer with 5 years of schooling than from any of my professors at university. I have long since forgotten anything useful about hog farming but the experience transformed my assumptions about information, knowledge and wisdom and where one might find or create them.
- **Hands (skills):** Of all the skills that young people can develop during a CSL experience, perhaps the most important are cross-cultural skills. Not only is Canada becoming more culturally diverse but there are strong forces (fragmentation of markets, communication niches, political decentralization) accentuating the differences among generations, classes and regions. More and more young people identify with virtual communities of like-minded people whom they interact with on the net. In this context, being able to act as cultural bridgers who can facilitate dialogue and collective action among diverse groups (e.g. environmental activists, energy companies and consumers) are precious skills in a democracy.
- **Heart (values):** Having absorbed the ethos of the university as the well-spring of expertise, students often begin a CSL experience thinking they are going to help community sector organizations improve their practice by applying the theory that they have learned in the classroom. They quickly realize that they are privileged to learn from practitioners and the "clients", their fellow citizens. At its best CSL provides students with an intense sense

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[3] Of these 25,000 only about 5,000 were enrolled in academic courses; the remainder, however, were involved in non-curricular CSL.

of belonging – learning powerful truths about themselves as they share the joys and frustrations of building community.

Let's apply this lens of transformative education to the current CSL initiatives funded by the Foundation.

Students get involved in CSL for a variety of reasons – to complete their degree, to enrich the classroom learning with different perspectives and a different learning style, to become more employable, to get involved in community issues that matter to them, to learn skills from community practitioners and to experience a sense of belonging to community.

Many of the universities involved with this initiative have submitted testimonials from students. It is remarkable how similar the success stories are in some respects:

- **Holistic change**: Invariably, the student begins or ends the story by declaring that the experience has "changed my life"; it is not simply about completing a degree or getting a job but about touching some emotional chord deep inside that complements skills or knowledge acquisition. The emotional resonance or values component "is the part that was missing from my classroom experience".
- **No pain, no gain**: Many of the stories recount journeys of real doubt ("At the beginning there was a level of patience and stamina in doing the work that I could not handle"), fear ("It was so different than just talking about the justice system, the first few times I would have a knot in my stomach when I arrived "), personal reflection ("Spending time in seniors' centers made me think about my own family and how we treat our grandparents") and humility ("what does a young white woman like me have to teach these people?"). Working through these crises of confidence and embracing these challenges as learning opportunities rather than as obstacles, seems to be a common element of the most successful CSL experiences. Many of these students had a tutor or a work placement supervisor who mentored them through the process of critical reflection involved in this type of experiential learning.
- **In it for the long haul**: For those who really embraced the experience, they have remained involved with the community issue or the people whom they have met long after their formal commitment has ended.

Areas for Improvement
To what extent are these powerful transformative experiences the norm for CSL students?

Many of you have commented that there is enormous pressure from university administrators to expand CSL programs as quickly as possible.   It serves institutional objectives to be able to brand the university as a "leader in CSL", to

be recognized by Maclean's Magazine for the high percentage of students in CSL and to use this comparative advantage to recruit more students.

In order to expand your CSL programs by several hundred students per year is there a risk that you are forced to focus on "quick and dirty" placements that fit neatly into a 2 hours per week x 10 weeks x 1 semester formula? This cookie cutter approach may make it easier from an administrative perspective but does it really serve the needs of the community or students to treat all community organizations and placements the same? Several of you have commented that your job is to make it as easy as possible for faculty and students to take part in CSL. Is this consistent with the notion that transformative experiences push people out of their comfort zone? In this environment who has the time to mentor students in their critical reflection process and to build solid relationships with community organizations?

The Foundation is concerned that the preoccupation with increasing numbers – often being pushed by administrators for institutional reasons - may actually be harming the potential for substantial impact; the community placements may just be seen as "add-ons" to existing classroom activity instead of an opportunity to address community issues through a collaborative effort.

Universities
If we are to speak of transforming the university culture we need to recognize that there are different groups within the institution – students, faculty, staff, administrators, fund raisers and corporate interests – who compete for resources and attention and often seem to be working towards quite different objectives.[4] Since curricular CSL programs involve faculty, let's focus on the potential for changes in the knowledge, skills and values of faculty.[5]

Knowledge: Effective CSL programs challenge the conventional assumptions of the university that knowledge is created by tenured professors who, after years of climbing the academic ladder, work in their narrow discipline either in isolation or with a small group of similarly trained experts to objectively analyze the world and to publish the results in a peer-reviewed journal.   The democratization of knowledge - in which many stakeholders with diverse backgrounds collaboratively engage in a process of sharing information and creating knowledge for use by communities - raises fundamental questions about the relevancy of universities as we know them. If other mechanisms demonstrate that they are more effective and timely in producing knowledge to address

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[4] CSL staff have commented on the different opportunities and constraints that exist for them depending on whether they are staff within Student Services or faculty. Given the hierarchical environment that exists within universities, faculty have an easier time engaging colleagues in a dialogue and gaining access to department heads.

[5] CSL practitioners have noted distinct differences between younger and older faculty; the former seem more interested in CSL and prepared to reach out across the cultural divide between academy and the community sector.

society's problems, then tax payers will question funding for universities and students will vote with their feet.

Critical reflection: We have noted that the most powerful CSL experiences touch the student's heart; human interaction and personal reflection breathe life into classroom ideas and concepts. The current academic model discourages students from bringing personal experience (emotional insight, doubt, ambiguity) to the learning process; instead students are expected to build logical arguments based on empirical evidence and the conceptual frameworks of competing experts.   Are faculty or tutors willing and able to effectively mentor the difficult process of personal reflection that connects the world of ideas and community experience?

Skills: The current practice of CSL within the ten universities funded by the Foundation indicates that universities, particularly faculty, are wedded to a strong set of cultural values and practices that do not easily accommodate other cultures. The community sector's culture, with its emphasis on collaboration and sharing of resources, on doing and then learning from mistakes and on trying to include people regardless of credentials, contrasts sharply with the predominant university culture. Faculty are understandably proud of their expertise and the logical progression of learning that they have built into their courses. However, there is not usually much space for other forms of learning or the skills and mindsets that go with them.

Values: In spite of the growth of CSL on Canadian campuses, there is little question that the university culture values research over teaching with service to community a distant third.   In the name of academic freedom, many faculty cling tenaciously to intellectual curiosity as the driver of research and resist attempts to be held accountable to broader community goals, despite the fact that community agencies are counting on students to contribute effectively to their mission. Until the system of hiring and rewarding faculty (pay, promotion, tenure) recognizes teaching and community service on a par with research, it will be difficult to imagine CSL becoming a core activity of universities.

Community Sector

There is a consensus among the 10 universities and within the broader CACSL movement that we need to pay more attention to the voice and interests of communities. Given that CSL staff are employees of universities it is quite understandable that their mandate is to serve faculty and students, first and foremost. As one community organization wrote in the evaluation:

> The two young people who were placed with me did a wonderful job. They were confused, though, about what the university's expectations were. I wonder if their instructor is interested in my perspective / assessment of their work. It might be interesting to meet with faculty and service-learning providers.

Many CSL programs are now putting a great deal of time and effort into better orientation, support and evaluation mechanisms for community organizations. [6] They may still be based on a model framed by the objectives and parameters of the university but they do lead to incremental improvements in the experience for everyone concerned.

Community sector organizations live in another universe from universities; many have fewer than 5 staff and budgets of a few hundred thousand dollars that have not kept pace with the growing and complex needs to be addressed in the community. In this context, many organizations are very grateful for any volunteer labour that they can get their hands on. Is it possible that service provision so outweighs the learning element of these CSL placements that they are indistinguishable from other forms of volunteer work placements? It is a concern for several of the universities.

The Foundation recognizes that our framing of the initiative reinforces some of the inequality between the sectors. By exclusively funding "university-based" CSL programs, the Foundation has given the mandate for the project and the funds to the universities. We have since tried to counterbalance this shortcoming by also funding CEDNET to run community-driven CSL programs. In retrospect, if we had insisted on joint proposals from the community sector and the academy with co-management of the budget, we might have nudged the two cultures to collaborate more effectively from the beginning.

Suggestions for Improvement:
Here are some suggestions for universities to consider as you move forward:
- **Numbers game**: If the ambitious targets that you set in your proposal to the Foundation related to increasing students' participation in CSL are now an obstacle to delivering transformative educational experiences for young people, let's talk about these targets. More problematic may be the expectations that you have raised with senior administrators. Within the limits of your influence, try and carve out space for more innovative partnerships that will probably involve more labour and fewer students.
- **Why are we doing this?** Continue to frame the rationale for CSL in terms of impact – making our communities more resilient and our citizens more engaged – not just in terms of outputs – courses and degrees, work placements, number of students, etc.
- **What gets measured gets done:** Insist on evaluating impact – transformation for students, changing culture and relationships within the university and delivering results in the community, in addition to collating data on outputs.

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[6] St. Francis Xavier University, one of the more experienced CSL practitioners, has led the way in developing training, support and evaluation mechanisms, including the creation of a network of CSL alumni who are available for coaching students and community organizations through the rough spots.

- **Walking the talk**: Recognize that the power and money already rest disproportionately with universities. Create governance structures that are as inclusive and participatory as possible, ensuring that community sector organizations have meaningful input early on. Inviting them onto your turf for a meeting at a time that is convenient for faculty and is conducted by university staff is a recipe for dwindling participation by the community sector. Is there an honest broker – United Way or Volunteer Bureau – that can create an atmosphere and facilitate a process that bridges cultures rather than subtly imposes one on the other? Transparency: Share information including the budget, especially funds allocated to the community sector in your Foundation proposal. Consider having faculty / students from the management faculty in conjunction with people experienced in community sector governance treat your initiative as a living lab for cross-sectoral collaboration. Their joint research and coaching of the initiative would be an interesting CSL experiment in itself.
- **Working at the hyphen**:[7] The starting point for both analysis and action are the complex challenges facing the community – not academic disciplines or courses. With community members, identify a community issue and then see what assets people bring to the table – research capacity, practitioner expertise, citizen experience, private sector investment and government's policy framework – and then co-create integrated learning and social change objectives that you are all accountable for. The best example of this is Lakehead's focus on Food Security - an issue of concern to the entire community which draws people from all sectors and walks of life. Food scientists work with native elders, marketing professors with organic farmers but everyone is part of something larger than their profession or their academic discipline. Even if it is not realistic to have only one theme for your community initiative, you might want to consider this approach for a portion of your CSL programming.[8]
- **It's About Relationships not Partnerships**: There is much talk about institutional partnerships and the need for CSL staff to create protocols to frame university – community collaborations. While these frameworks can help to define roles, lines of communication and accountability, they are no substitute for shared vision and personal chemistry, the core of constructive relationships. Water tight employment contracts and rigorous HR policies do not create cohesive, creative work teams. Similarly, successful community – university collaborations are founded upon relationships of trust and ongoing communication.
- **See it, Do it, Teach it**: Someone in London joked that they would like to put faculty through a CSL program so that they understand the dynamics of the experience. The more that I think of it; this is a great idea. While conferences for CSL faculty and staff allow people to learn from their

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[7] The hyphen between service and learning: the University of Alberta has used this expression to describe the tough work of bridging the two cultures into a collaborative venture that has one integrated vision.
[8] Given the difficulty of getting faculty to modify existing courses, perhaps there may be more long term potential in having faculty design new courses in collaboration with community practitioners.

colleagues, what about immersion / exchange opportunities for faculty and community practitioners to learn from each other?

Conclusion

The ten CSL initiatives funded by the McConnell Foundation are giving thousands of students an opportunity to complement their classroom learning with practical community sector experience. The vast majority of them endorse CSL as a way to enrich their education; for a certain percentage, it is a genuinely transformative experience. The challenge will be to retain and even deepen the quality of the impact on students as CSL programs absorb more students.

Hundreds of pioneering faculty and CSL staff across the country are experimenting with different models of how to adapt and create courses that engage community sector organizations; some of them are co-creating innovative initiatives that are built on new relationships and a shared vision of a community issue. The challenge will be to nurture these pioneers and to create more space and incentives for more faculty to take up this approach.

The community sector appreciates the energy and skills that students bring to the work place and their contribution to specific projects. The challenge will be to fundamentally change the relationship and power dynamic between the universities and the community sector so that the service and learning components are part of an integrated approach to undertake community development.

We know that many of these suggestions are ambitious and call for a level of cultural change and innovation that may lead you to think that we are dreaming. As Thoreau put it in the conclusion to Walden:

> *If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.*

I look forward to an ongoing dialogue as we move forward.

Regards,
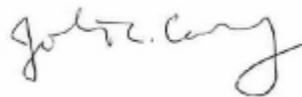
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