

Higher education, higher purpose:

Using financial and physical instruments for social purpose administration

Call to action

Intrinsically, universities have always been instruments of social change. Since their creation, institutions of higher learning have contributed to society's progress through their core mandate of teaching and research. But this is only part of their capacity for enhancing a community's wellbeing and furthering the social agenda.

"Given the mission of universities is associated with promoting social betterment, people who work at universities are predisposed to finding ways to contribute to social betterment using all of the instruments at their disposal," says Andrew Petter, President of Simon Fraser University (SFU). "This is especially important at a time when communities so badly need the support of institutions with whom they have strong associations, in bolstering their social infrastructure."

Today, Canadian society is faced with many so-called wicked challenges: climate change, rising income inequality, lack of affordable housing, an aging population, addiction, social unrest, extremism, growing fundamentalism and radicalization, First Nations reconciliation, resource scarcity, food security, ecological degradation, etc. At the same time, institutions of higher education are uniquely positioned to accelerate and scale their societal contributions to enable a transition to a more just and sustainable world.

"Being an exemplary institution in 2018 means acting in a responsible manner toward our stakeholders," says Denyse Rémillard, Vice-president Administration and Sustainable Development at Université de Sherbrooke (UdeS), "and not only to take into consideration their interests, but also the economic, social, and environmental impacts of our decisions.

As administration and finance are at the heart of a university's operations, we can make a concrete difference to the community and society as a whole by integrating sustainability and social responsibility into the administrative practices and decisions."

A year ago when SFU hosted C2U Expo in Vancouver, Petter approached one of the partners, the McConnell Foundation, about initiating a conversation with other university presidents into the potential for higher education institutions to approach social infrastructure in a more systematic way. With a history of more than 80 years of support for post-secondary education, the private foundation proved to be the ideal partner. "The nature of our work has evolved over the years as the opportunities and the needs have shifted," says Chad Lubelsky, Program Director at the McConnell Foundation. Four years ago, McConnell launched the RECODE project to better identify strategies, tactics, or pathways for post-secondary institutions to help build social infrastructure, thereby increasing their impact to better strengthen communities.

"We started RECODE to assist in embedding social innovation practices and mindsets into the post-secondary sector across the country," explains Lubelsky, noting that McConnell is part of the International Social Innovation Exchange Network. "At the time our focus was more on social enterprise and social finance. But by working with CAUBO, Colleges and Institutes Canada, Universities Canada, and other leaders in the field, we discovered that there was a more ripe opportunity to support changes in social infrastructure." In fact, Universities Canada recently hired a person to inventory social innovation practices.

In 2017, SFU and McConnell's RECODE initiative commissioned Coro Strandberg, an expert on sustainability leadership and transformational business practices and relationships, to prepare the report, *Maximizing the Capacities of Advanced Education Institutions to Build Social Infrastructure for Canadian Communities*. The paper observed that while institutions are already building social infrastructure through education and research, the resources and assets within the purview of finance and administration hold significant untapped capacity.

The report identified levers of change within the university. "It's a reconceptualization of the institution," explains Strandberg, "going beyond the essential mandate of teaching and research and looking at how an institution can unlock and leverage

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a whole array of assets to contribute to community wellbeing. More than that, it's a framework for discussions within and across institutions. There are already advanced social purpose practices in the form of responsible investing, sustainable procurement, diversity and inclusion, and green building management, but there was no comprehensive framework to foster engagement and strategy across the entire spectrum of finance and admin practices."

The energy and excitement around the opportunities identified at a round table discussion of university presidents in response to the framework outlined in the paper has led to a series of follow-up initiatives. The presidents were already engaging with Universities Canada and Colleges and Institutes Canada. They encouraged McConnell to reach out to CAUBO to help take the initiative to the next level. "The president outlines the vision, but universities have to go multiple administrative levels deep in order for this framework to take hold," notes Lubelsky, adding CAUBO members are inherently well positioned to execute the work.

"The project could not be where it is today if not for CAUBO," adds Strandberg, noting that the organization was receptive to exploring the potential of this initiative. "Because CAUBO's mandate is aligned with this initiative and they are agile, they are able to respond to these opportunities."

Together, CAUBO and RECODE are seeking to identify industry best practices and support administrators in learning about embedding greater social value in domains such as human resources, facilities management, procurement, investment, risk management, planning and budgeting and ancillary services. While many administrative officers are already familiar with social and sustainable procurement and social and sustainable investment, the aim is that eventually, all core administrative functions will have a more explicit social component.

The joint initiative is designed to outline opportunities, learn about and overcome barriers, and support advanced education administrators in building the capacity of their institutions.

What does it all mean?

In her 2017 report and in the *Social Purpose Administration Primer: Using Financial and Physical Instruments to Build Social Infrastructure* (February 2018), Strandberg provides an overview of instruments for social engagement and calls for a focus on those that fall within the financial and physical, managed by finance and administration departments at universities and colleges. The document gives a description of each of these conventional assets and instruments, with examples of how they can be reconceived to serve an even higher purpose (<https://re-code.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Social-Administration-Primer-V1-Final-EN.pdf>).

"The instruments associated with finance and administration are important to extending the reach of the university's social betterment mission," says Petter. "Each of these has the potential to add social value. We need to think of these instruments as opportunities for the university to operate not only as an education and research institution, but also as a social enterprise with capacities to add value to the communities we serve. The key to unlocking these capacities is to approach our finance and administrative levers in a more purposeful way."

He adds that this does not mean having to compromise the value of these instruments to advancing the core academic mission of universities. "But there are additional benefits we can gain from these instruments to make universities more valuable contributors to social infrastructure," says Petter, adding that universities can build on the experience they have already developed in areas such as service learning and community-engaged research. "We haven't given the same consideration to the community benefits that can be derived in the realm of finance and administration, yet there are huge opportunities there."

In her reports, Strandberg argues that activating financial and physical instruments to their fullest potential requires multi-disciplinary, cross-sector collaboration both within and beyond the university. It involves building pathways to link ideas, knowledge, and perspectives developed in higher education institutions to leaders in non-academic sectors.

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

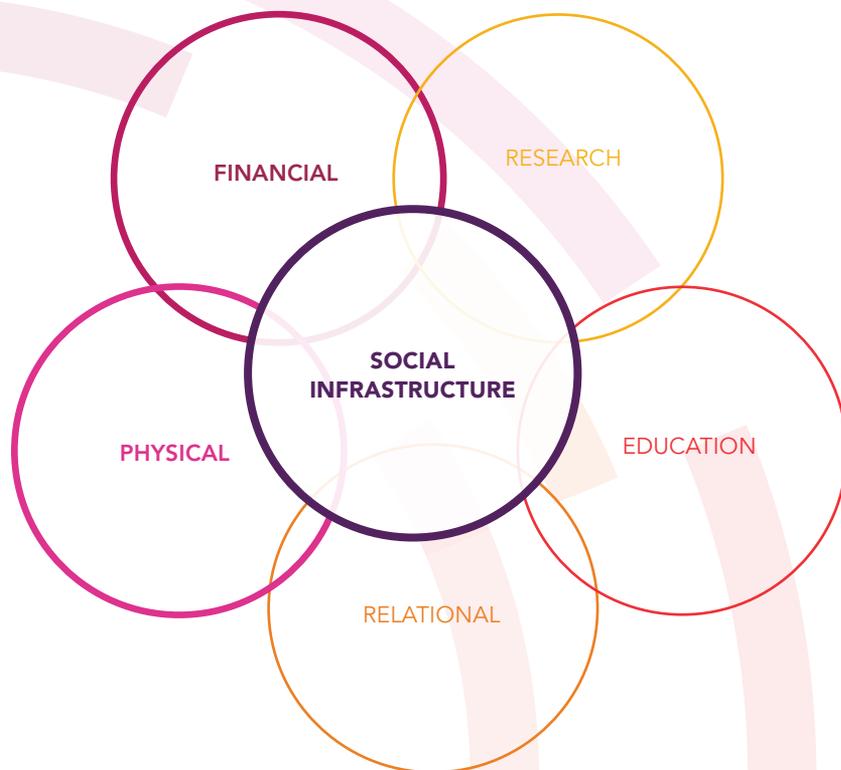
– the organizational arrangements and deliberate investments in society's systems, relationships, and structures that enable society to create a resilient, just, equitable and sustainable world. It includes social, economic, environmental, and cultural assets. (Maximizing the Capacities of Advanced Education Institutions to Build Social Infrastructure for Canadian Communities by Coro Strandberg.)

Petter points out that many higher education institutions are already engaged – and have been for many years – in a number of initiatives that activate these instruments to build societal infrastructure. However, to date, this has occurred on more of an ad hoc than a deliberate or strategic basis.

State of play

For the past three or four decades, through a number of different programs, Brandon University (BU) has been making higher education accessible to people for whom access to larger, southern communities is not possible. Along with measures such as sending faculty to Northern Manitoba, the university has also brought in educational assistants from the North and from Hutterite colonies for formal training at the main campus. By scheduling the classes in the spring and summer, the university leveraged its unused residence space for the program. "At the same time, there are additional resources put into each class to help participants succeed," notes Scott Lamont, Vice-President of Administration and Finance at BU. "Those are just the kinds of things the university has been doing for 40 years without thinking of them as initiatives with a social purpose."

OVERVIEW OF INSTRUMENTS FOR INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT



SOCIAL PURPOSE FINANCE AND ADMINISTRATION:

- Integrating social and environmental objectives into administration and finance functions, roles, decisions, and behaviours to benefit the institution, students, and communities.
- Harnessing administration and finance tools, assets, resources, and relationships to innovate, accelerate, and scale social impact.
- Aligning job purpose with social purpose, where all administrative jobs have more purpose and contribute to social impact.

Recently, however, the University has become more conscious of its social purpose mandate, capitalizing on opportunities and initiating projects expressly made to build social infrastructure. Over the last few years, some of the unused residence space has been used to house evacuees from flood or fire as well as to provide affordable accommodations for community events such as conferences, the Canada Games, and, most recently, the Legion Games.

Noting the positive impact the decisions have had on the broader community and the relationships with that community, BU is currently exploring an ambitious

downtown future development project. The president is in discussion with the City of Brandon and the Brandon Downtown Development Corporation as partners in a proposed public private (P3) revitalization of the city centre. The institution has also reached out across institutions, hiring the University of Winnipeg Community Renewal Corporation to contribute expertise it gained on its own project.

These kinds of initiatives are increasingly common. In 2008, SFU and the City of Surrey signed a Memorandum of Understanding to create an expanded university campus and mixed-use city centre. Another initiative that

maximized use of University real estate saw plans for the UdeS to partner with the City of Sherbrooke in acquiring natural reserve status for the jointly-owned Parc du Mont-Bellevue, with the goal of protecting this natural resource and improving the user experience. Going forward, the UdeS and the City will jointly administer the park with the help of an external consultant.

“This project reflects the spirit of collaboration with our various partners and the involvement of our university community in building social infrastructure,” says Rémillard.

While some initiatives involve external partners and community outreach, others involve modifying internal instruments. For instance, while it was important for UdeS to have a sustainability policy, it was even more important for the institution to develop a multi-sectoral action plan, involving more than 100 members of the university community and encompassing seven strategies to operationalize the university’s visions and goals. These included responsible procurement, greenhouse gas emissions reductions, residual materials management, sustainable mobility, etc.

“We work closely with members of our community to create close links to all areas in which the university is active,” adds Rémillard. “The reputation of our university is greatly enhanced by our involvement in sustainability and for many of our students, this reputation was a significant factor in choosing the UdeS.”

A rising tide raises all boats

In her report Strandberg pointed out that student values are shifting and that more and more young people are looking for educational experiences and careers where they can make a difference and contribute to society. As such, they are also looking for these values in the functioning of the institutions they attend. Pursuing a higher social purpose can enhance not only an institution’s reputation but also its ability to attract and retain students, faculty and staff.

During the May 2011 flooding in western Manitoba, BU relocated an entire elementary school to its science building. After their return home, the University President handed out “Graduate of BU” T-shirts to all the children.

“It was another way to connect to the community,” says Lamont. “No doubt that the university hopes that these students will think of BU when it’s time for them to attend post-secondary.”

Sometimes using financial and physical instruments can rapidly benefit an institution – such as BU’s emissions-reduction energy project that had a return on investment of three years and allowed the institution to meet its 2020-21 greenhouse gas targets well in advance. At other times, the benefits are less quantifiable, and the rewards more long term. “By making larger contributions to society, universities give governments, taxpayers, and community leaders more reasons to support them,” says Petter, adding that an institution’s involvement in the community helps to dispel the impression that universities are ivory towers, disconnected from society. “In philanthropy alone there has been a real shift. People want their gifts to make a difference.” He notes that donors are more apt to give to universities that demonstrate greater societal impact. This, in turn, enables such universities to garner more support for their entire mission, including education and research.

At the same time, Lamont points out that the impetus behind building social infrastructure goes beyond the “what’s in it for me” proposition. “At the core, social purpose management is really not about extrinsic value but about intrinsic value,” he insists, pointing to such activities as the sustained collaboration of BU staff and students with World University Service Canada in fundraising to bring refugees to study at the institution, making it possible for BU to accept three students per year. By adopting a social purpose mandate, a university can empower people to exercise that desire to make a difference through their administrative functions.

Says Petter, most people see their involvement at a university as more than just a job. “They are there because they see a larger purpose and an opportunity to contribute to society,” he explains. Strandberg agrees that embracing social purpose administration taps into people’s own desire to make their work more meaningful.

Similarly, the impetus behind building social infrastructure goes beyond a desire to attract more funding,

philanthropy, or students. A healthy community is essential for a healthy institution. Therefore, what is good for the community is also good for the university. “Maximizing the use of assets in a planned, responsible, and measured way will lift all boats and enhance the viability of communities and their institutions,” notes Stranberg.

“Rather than ‘what’s in it for me,’ the university needs to ask itself ‘can I do something good without it hurting me,’” says Lamont, pointing to a concern expressed by some members of the university community about Brandon’s downtown development project. “A revitalized downtown makes for a revitalized university. But if you’ve helped downtown and hurt the university, you haven’t accomplished a thing.”

A risk management assessment indicated that early plans for the downtown redevelopment would have not allowed the university to accomplish its goals. Subsequently, the institution turned to a P3 model, with expressions of interests from private developers. “There is still a lot of worry on campus that we are going to use up all our time and attention as well as internal and external resources looking after downtown,” explains Lamont, adding that repairing an academic building such as BU’s science complex involves government funding and fundraising, whereas the downtown project may be completely fundable with private money. “We’ve been doing our best to explain that these are separate sources of funding.”

Challenges

Lubelsky points to problems of inertia and perceptions among peers as some of the other constraints involved with “rewiring” the use of instruments in the financial and physical realms of the university. “The mandate is wired for an old system,” he says. “Administrators are being asked to re-engineer the processes by which they bring their mandate to bear, to challenge the status quo. Part of social purpose administration work involves identifying the barriers. We won’t have any success if we are ignoring reality.”

Embracing social purpose administration requires a cultural shift at some institutions and for some people within every institution. Petter notes that

universities are very diverse places where people tend to have strong and differing opinions. “It’s an important conversation to have,” he notes, adding that some may worry that activities that add social value will detract from the academic mission. “Change takes time and effort, and often requires resources to get from here to there.”

In fact, in these times of budgetary cuts and financial constraints, the cost of social purpose administration continues to be common concern. “The main challenges are resistance to change and the limits imposed by financial constraints,” concurs Rémillard.

However, there are many opportunities to extend the use of a university’s existing financial and physical instruments at minimal or no cost to the institution. For example, when a donor pointed out the untapped potential for unused residence space, BU seized the opportunity to use dorm rooms as student scholarships. In another instance, the University tapped into a federal fund for survivors of residential schools so it could offer children from nearby indigenous communities free access to BU’s Mini-University summer day camp program. “Often it is not a question of financial resources but of having the creativity, energy, and leadership,” says Lamont.

TERMINOLOGY

Canadian institutions use different terms to describe their work in this area.

Here are some:

- Social innovation
- Social impact
- Social purpose
- Social infrastructure
- Community engagement
- Sustainability
- Sustainable development

So far, this creative thinking to use the institution's existing instruments, structures, and resources has been applied on an ad hoc basis. "Like most universities, we have pockets of social responsibility rather than having it as a mainstay of our strategic plan," continues Lamont. "Social purpose administration works well where there are champions. However, in order for the university to be able to call itself a significant leader in this area, social innovation has to be part of a strategic plan and it has to have champions other than just the president. There have to be people willing to do the work and willing to think about administration in a different way so that social purpose is part of what is being accomplished in addition to the straightforward goals of operating a university." When remarkable achievements are limited in nature, disjointed, and disconnected within the institution, they remain ad hoc and siloed so they do not realize their potential for accelerated and scaled impact.

Moving forward

In spring 2018, CAUBO and McConnell consulted with university and college administrators on the subject of social purpose administration at the Council of Western Canadian Financial, Logistical, and Operational Personnel

BARRIERS:

1. Lack of a mandate from the strategic plan
2. Time and resource constraints
3. Entrenched systems and mindsets
4. Short-term operating focus
5. Lack of knowledge and practical examples
6. Need for pathways to work with community, teaching, and research.

(COWFLOP) conference and the CAUBO 2018 Conference. At these events, university administrators expressed considerable enthusiasm for scaling and accelerating the concept of social purpose administration and finance. These consultations confirmed that there are many social purpose administration and finance initiatives already underway, with many good practices to be shared across institutions. At the same time, administrators feel that incorporating social purpose administration and finance into institutional strategic plans is an important and necessary prerequisite to increasing innovation in this area of professional practice. Some are already starting to take steps in that direction.

"Our university has always been a leader in sustainable development," says Rémillard, and our strategic plan has just reaffirmed our determination to further the integration of sustainable development in all our administrative actions and decisions. These goals are also integrated into the mandates for each Vice-President."

Lamont agrees that although every university practices social purpose administration to some degree, it is important to make it an institution-wide agenda. It might be argued that communicating success stories is as critical as generating a strategic goal, he adds. Petter concurs that integrating social purpose administration in a strategic plan should build on an institution's existing and ongoing practices. "If universities reflect on what they are already doing in this area, they can more readily gain support for making social purpose an institution-wide priority," he notes.

CAUBO and McConnell are taking several steps to support this process. The partners are now hosting a webinar series to help institutions learn from each other, through sharing and replicating best practices. They are also developing an Inventory of Best and Emerging Social Purpose Administration and Finance Practices at Canadian Institutions based on a survey of administrators conducted in the spring. Finally, efforts are also underway to determine how best to incorporate social purpose administration and finance into institutional strategic plans, which will result in a discussion paper.

"Most people who work at universities are already motivated to advance social betterment," says Petter. "Thus if those with responsibilities for finance and administration are given the mandate and opportunity to expand their roles in this regard, I believe that there will be a natural inclination to act. Indeed, I would like to think that, in 10 or so years, it will be commonplace in Canada for such employees to find and develop ways for their institutions to enlarge their contributions to communities while discharging their primary responsibilities to advance the academic mission of the university." *YN*

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Sign up to be kept informed (Chad Lubelsky, Program Director, McConnell: clubelsky@mccconnellfoundation.ca)
- Read the two papers
 - White Paper: <https://mccconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Maximizing-Capacities-of-Advanced-Education-Institutions-to-Build-Social-Infrastructure.pdf>
 - Primer: <https://re-code.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Social-Administration-Primer-V1-Final-EN.pdf>
- Submit your case studies www.surveymonkey.com/r/2T37Z2S
- Get started, taking small or big steps in an upcoming decision, task, project, or initiative by considering social, environmental, or stakeholder benefits that can be incorporated or addressed. Or, scale an existing initiative through replication, broadening its impact, or involving more peers, or internal or external stakeholders.
- Watch for:
 - Webinars (to come)
 - Introductory workshop (to come)
 - Read about case studies in the inventory (to come)