Building Social Infrastructure: The role of faculty

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.

Education 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. For faculty members, "social infrastructure building" is a useful framing to connect their teaching, research, and other public and project roles to efforts that build community capacity in the face of complex challenges.

"Dr. Margie Mendell, Professor at Concordia University, has many years of experience collaborating with social economy practitioners and many levels of government— municipal, provincial and federal. She was part of an advisory committee established by the City of Montreal that was instrumental in developing a "partnership agreement with the social economy" in 2009. Today, the City is one of approximately 30 public and private

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organizations that participate in a procurement program to purchase goods and services from social economy organizations. More recently, Mendell was very proud that Concordia University became the first university to join this procurement program. Over the years, many of Margie Mendell's students have worked as interns in social economy organizations; several chose to work in the social economy upon completion of their studies. The CHNGR program at Concordia University inspired many students to learn more about the social economy as they discovered the dynamic enterprises and organizations that contribute to collective and sustainable wealth in Montreal and elsewhere. These are a few examples of how the link between the social economy, local government and the university are generating dialogue and contributing to new and dynamic learning environments. They are driven by a desire to explore, firsthand, those initiatives that are designing inclusive, citizen based socio-economic initiatives. Through her contribution to these different initiatives, Dr. Mendell shows how faculty members can extend the impact of their work beyond the campus into the broader community.

This paper on social infrastructure building aims to describe other ways that institutions can engage in meaningful activities that are not 'heavy lifts,' but rather, a creative application of existing capacity and expertise. There have always been academics doing inductive research—using their power as academics to dig into complex topics. Universities are making it easier for faculty to play a role in social infrastructure building, whether their focus is on basic, fundamental research, or on very applied, community-engaged work. For example, McGill is opening high-grade research centres on sustainability and policy—and these are de facto interdisciplinary.

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 have produced less-than-optimal outcomes, like climate change, rising income inequality, destruction of Indigenous cultures, resource scarcity, and ecological degradation. Overcoming these issues, to achieve sustainable, shared social and economic prosperity, and to achieve reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, 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.

The inherently interdisciplinary nature of complex social problems presents interesting opportunities and challenges for faculty and their departments. Research questions typically arise from gaps in existing knowledge. The opportunity for faculty now is that more schools are demonstrating their appreciation for researchers interested in community-driven questions—with greater recognition in terms of tenure and committee appointments, and by supporting Community Engaged Scholarship Centres. This creates valuable relationships for the institution and the community.

Faculty can contribute to building social infrastructure by:

- Seeking out community-driven research questions
- Seeking funding for students to have paid research work related to social challenges or community needs
- Mobilizing knowledge as a "public academic"
- Supporting innovative projects (by students, administration, or others)

Where to begin?

Seek community-driven research questions

Inquiring into real, current issues faced by the local community can have more ambiguity, but also more potential for impact, than working only with other published work. When academics demonstrate to community that they are open to hearing their 'burning questions,' this can present interesting opportunities. When a research question emerges from someone outside of the institution, as opposed to from within the academy, then the research will have a better link to community, and has a greater likelihood of serving an identified need in the community.

Help students get paid for their work

Students in postsecondary education institutions are consistently under pressure to conform—there is a survivorship bias in academia to do what's been done, get grades in a consistent way, and work within the system. That pressure raises barriers to using institutional resources for social infrastructure building, which in turn limits the types of projects that get worked on. When faculty seek out funding for students to work on social challenges, help them navigate institutional structures and bureaucracy, and mentor them in undertaking this work, it can take some of the onus off of students of carrying dual burdens of getting the institution to better support work on external challenges, as well as actually doing the work of addressing those challenges through their research.

Knowledge mobilization

There is a changing understanding of what it means to be a 'public academic.' Being a faculty member in an institution embedded in community increasingly includes contributing in extra-institutional roles—for example, as board members, volunteers, and advisors. These are opportunities to share knowledge in non-traditional and informal ways. SSHRC[1] has helped to push faculty to consider "for whom would my work be relevant," and to expand the definition of what constitutes 'research dissemination' to include not only professional and academic conferences, but also community meetings and other public events and forums.

Supporting innovative projects

Teaching from case studies is a staple of business school curricula. At Royal Roads University in Victoria, Associate Professor Robert Mittelman enlists organizations to be live cases for students in the School of Business. The organizations' leaders work with students on understanding and proposing solutions for current community issues. Preparing for live cases is more work and more risk for faculty members. It involves arranging case subjects before courses start, managing relationships during the course, evaluating students consistently, and—critically—striking a balance of academic integrity with community impact. But this approach also affords more benefits to the community, more relevant learning opportunities to students, and for faculty members, the chance to offer a course with "buzz" around it that makes it attractive to students.

Overcoming barriers

Research and knowledge creation in the institution is traditionally structured along disciplinary lines, but building the social infrastructure to address systemic and social challenges—like poverty, or climate change— is an inherently interdisciplinary undertaking, and organizing interdisciplinary research is challenging in practice.

As Mendell puts it, "university departments are necessary but we need to work across disciplines as well." Departments have limited resources, and releasing faculty members to work outside the department requires funds for compensation. Faculty members themselves also have to work above/around institutional structures.

The SHIFT social innovation hub at Concordia University is one such example of a cross-cutting, 'gutsy' space that brings together faculty, students, partners, and collaborators to engage in boundary-spanning work. Simon Fraser University's program, SFU Innovates, has also identified the need for an informal space where "the collision of ideas" from different departments can be encouraged. The value of such 'collision spaces' is well documented.

Acquiring funding is the key barrier to overcome in order to train and collaborate with graduate students, teach them the methodology, and pay for research generally. The Canada University Research Alliance (CURA) was one such innovative program that allowed funds to be given to outside organizations, e.g. to pay participating organizations for their time.

Funding is key to working with community organizations, in order to compensate them to release people to do this work, and for the travel and convening that brings people together who are doing complementary work so they can learn from each other; nothing replaces face-to-face workshops and opportunities for dialogue.

Realizing Benefits

Faculty participation in social infrastructure building projects has potential to bring increased public relevance to academic research and programs. Not only does this create positive community good, but it can additionally yield opportunities for new funding and donations. This potential is multiplied when faculty projects are connected to, and supported by, institutional leadership e.g. a Dean or President setting social infrastructure building as a strategic priority.

Services aux Collectivité is a program created by the Quebec Ministry of Education; it exists as a unit at L'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). The program seconds faculty to work on an issue identified to the university by a community organization. Much innovative social infrastructure work and research has come from this program, including some of the leading work in Canada on suicide prevention. Professors and community groups apply to the program together and the program compensates the departments for their faculty members' time.

Faculty members consider the opportunity to work with Services aux Collectivité to be a prestigious appointment and it presents ready opportunities for the school to showcase its contributions to the community.

Faculty members, through their research, teaching, and other campus and community involvement, steer institutions towards greater engagement with community and expand the definition of what it is to be a professor. The institution and community benefit from this effort.

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.