



Building Social Infrastructure: the role of Presidents

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.

Presidents of postsecondary institutions, and others responsible for institutional vision and leadership in the education sector, will find some new and valuable opportunities here for their institutions to increase their impact and build social infrastructure for Canadian communities.

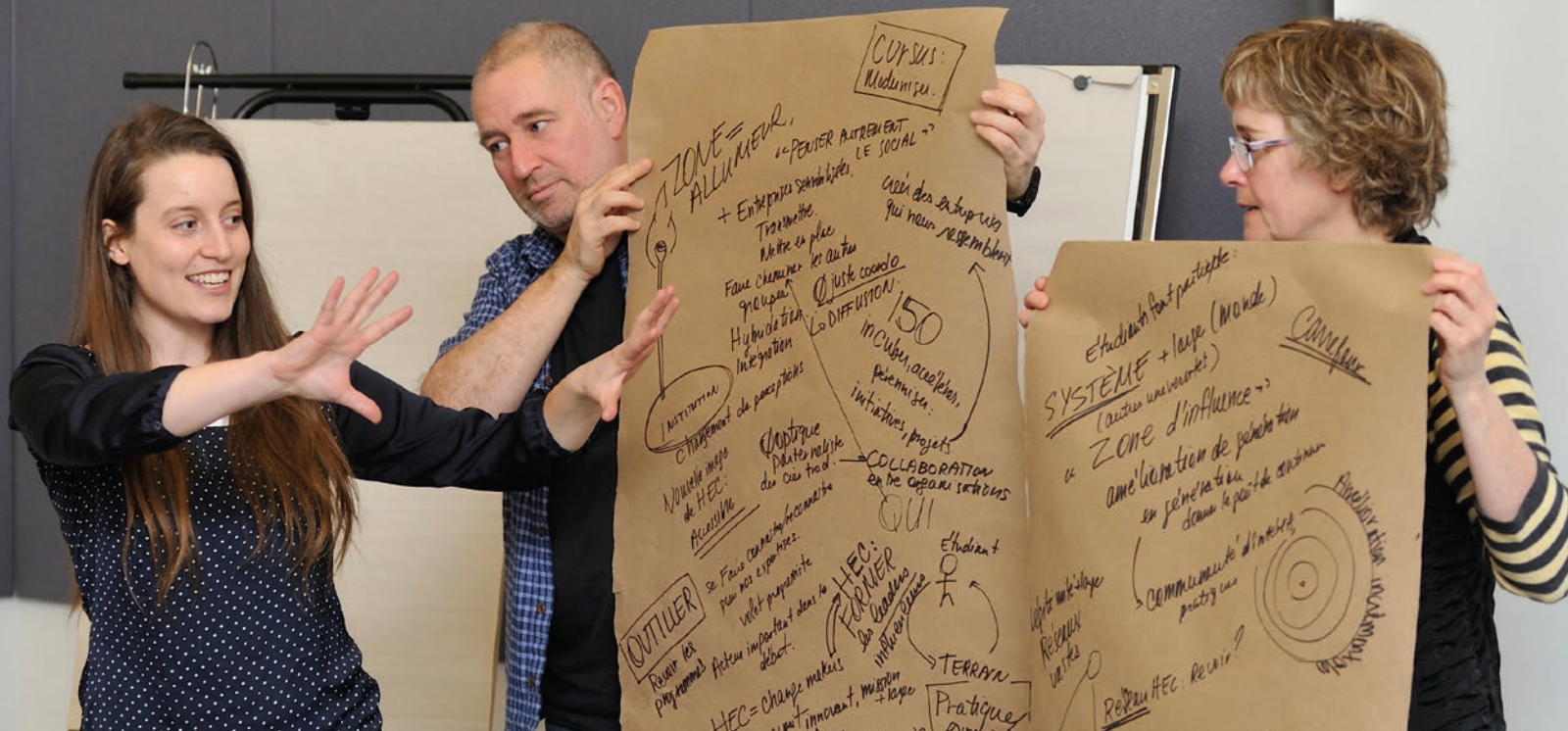
Effective storytelling creates opportunities for people and departments to see the potential for social infrastructure building in what they are already doing.

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 education institutions, by virtue of their influence, expertise, and other assets and resources, are well-positioned to support this change.



The challenge for Presidents is to strike the balance between sharing an inspiring vision and strategy, while also having the capacity to influence and align members of the institution and community behind that vision and strategy. In the context of projects to build stronger social infrastructure, this is all the more challenging. This is because the concept of ‘social infrastructure’ is not always widely understood, and also because no individual in the institution (Presidents included) can independently advance an agenda without coordinated action by other powerful players in the institution.

Nonetheless, Presidents have a unique leadership role in the institution:

- As the ‘face’ of their school, they tell the story of their institution, express the vision and values through those stories, and give credibility to stories through their office
- They help their institution achieve more impact through its programs, its partnerships in the community, and attract and aligning resources to support these
- They embed social infrastructure building into the culture of the institution, and build the administrative capacity for it to take on a life of its own.

Where to begin?

Bring ‘social infrastructure’ into the way you tell your stories

Vancouver Island University President Ralph Nilson explained that most Presidents love to tell stories about what’s happening on their campuses. Presidents are often proud to share the positive impacts that flow from their institution, even if they don’t use social infrastructure as a narrative framework. Telling stories about a university’s social infrastructure has ripple effects, highlighting and reinforcing the institution’s work in the community, and helping faculty, students and stakeholders connect with each other and the community. Effective storytelling creates opportunities for people and departments to see the potential for social infrastructure in what they are already doing.

See how existing work can be “levelled up”

- At King’s University College, former Principal David Sylvester appointed a staff member to speak to people who were ‘waiting to be invited.’ This refers to a systematic approach of illuminating the hidden networks of people and projects already building social infrastructure on and off the campus.



Sylvester’s office invited faculty members to “leverage your research to change the world” and had 18 faculty from 4 disciplines show up to get involved. These researchers were already publishing their work in academic journals, but also wanted to see that published research make a bigger difference in their community. King’s used that capacity and enthusiasm to support and eventually provide a home for the London Poverty Research Centre to “ask tough questions that reveal provocative solutions that allow us all to work towards seeing an end to poverty in London, Ontario.”¹

One of the reasons the research centre attracted faculty was that it didn’t require them to renegotiate or alter their existing research focus; it was just a complementary use of their existing work. The President drafted the constitution for the research centre, negotiated support from public foundations and other partners, and the College provides administrative and back-end supports.

This effort was folded into the broader planning and reporting process for the College, and also provided more stories about the institution to share. Now the College can speak to issues of precarious employment, mental health, homelessness, food security—and use the research centre to translate research for the use of the community, policy makers, and newspapers. The centre is a vehicle to translate work that might only be read by peers, into a tool to change things in their city. It’s a win-win all around.

¹ <http://www.povertyresearch.ca/about/>

Recognize, encourage and support

Presidents who wish to see social infrastructure building become embedded in the culture of their institution should take every opportunity to praise the people doing the work, and give them more resources if possible. Make the work known to the community: acknowledge it, support it, and resource it.

It’s not enough to simply enumerate what people are doing. It’s necessary to affirm it—to say “this has caught the President’s attention, and it’s important to the school”, and find ways to visibly support these change-leaders. This approach sends a message about the institution’s priorities, which goes along with building shared culture and support around the strategy.

Make social infrastructure a shared strategic priority

Clearly stating that building social infrastructure is a strategic priority for the institution is one part of getting buy-in from departments that are unfamiliar with this lens, (administration or finance, for example). It also helps for the President to delegate the work of developing the mechanisms, templates, frameworks, and financial resources required to make it work to these groups.

Presidents can use their profile and influence to see that the importance of social infrastructure projects makes its way into the culture of the institution from all sides. For example, while Presidents may share their vision

and plan directly to their executive team, they also have a platform through Universities Canada, and ideas shared here may later get relayed back to their VPs Finance through other channels like the Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO).

There is a need for strategic champions throughout the institution who can help to advance the social infrastructure agenda and culture with their own influence. Jean Paul Boudreau, formerly at Ryerson, helped advance a social infrastructure building agenda from his role as Dean of Arts. He was later appointed as Special Advisor to Ryerson President Sheldon Levy which helped him to be more influential and effective in his conversations across the institution.

Benefits and opportunities

The opportunity is for Presidents to see social infrastructure building as an area for growth as opposed to a burden. As outlined above, a commitment to social infrastructure helps institutions achieve more impact through their partnerships and programs, and helps them create a legacy that benefits the community and the institution. This can bring more engagement and fulfillment to the faculty and staff who get to see their work making a meaningful contribution to their community. It can also result in more opportunities to engage funders and other stakeholders.

Overcoming barriers

One of the benefits of making social infrastructure a strategic priority is that it helps to address resistance to initiatives that might be disconnected, or seen as unnecessary outside of a unifying narrative that ties them together. Presidents have to make the time to build a shared story about social innovation and social infrastructure because things like embedding experiential learning can be controversial or contested, and have to be negotiated diplomatically, particularly where there are competing priorities.

Some have argued that the university's core mission is to perform at the highest level in creating new knowledge, and that while "doing social justice" flows from this work of knowledge creation and mobilization, making social justice a core mission pulls away from the institution's true purpose. Nilson, at Vancouver Island University, argues that we must recognize the inequity that was created historically by education in Canada. If we want to see an equitable Canada, we have to make education relevant to the communities around the institutions. He states that while education is a key determinant of social change, education isn't, of itself, meeting all the needs and demands of the populations that postsecondary institutions have a responsibility to serve. A lot of scholarship is about making the work meaningful in our current world and context, and Presidents lead the institution in their responsibility to tell that story and see that the work is done effectively.

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.

