



Building Social Infrastructure: The role of students

What is social infrastructure?

“Social infrastructure” is the set of organizational arrangements and 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. Examples in postsecondary institutions include offering bursaries to students with specific barriers to accessing education, convening researchers and securing funds to address complex social problems, and using procurement policies to support local businesses. 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.

There is a tension at the heart of postsecondary institutions of reconciling ‘old knowledge’ with ‘new knowledge.’ Students may feel this acutely when the institution’s approaches to describing or creating social change are at odds with students’ own lived experience and understanding of social issues. Students are under pressure to conform—to do what’s been done before, to get grades in a consistent way—that can feed a culture of

“just get your degree and get out.” That pressure pushes down on all students, but has especially negative impacts on those who possess a desire to make change in their institution or the surrounding community.

When financial insecurity is added to the mix, it can feel even more daunting for students to assert themselves in transforming ‘old knowledge,’ or in enacting positive social change in the institution and beyond.

The quality of students’ experience of their education has an important bearing on what types of change are possible.

When an institution’s leaders commit publicly to improving social infrastructure, this can signal that the school understands and embraces its role (and those of its students) in driving positive social

change. Making such a commitment can demonstrate to students that the institution recognizes the pressures students face to conform, and it invites students to take up opportunities to make a real impact. It communicates that the institution can support, and not implicitly oppose, change-making projects. When institutions frame social infrastructure building as a priority, this creates an environment in which students can better see their potential to improve Canadian communities by way of their student experience.



This can increase their level of satisfaction and engagement with their education, increase their social connections, and help them to develop a greater overall sense of agency.

Framing the opportunity

Canada's advanced education institutions have historically played an important role in shaping the country'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 students attending institutions are also ever-changing; however, who the students are—demographically, culturally, personally—is not as easily changed. The character of the student body is both a result and a determinant of the social infrastructure and systems in which postsecondary institutions exist. The quality of students' experience of their education has an important bearing on what types of change are possible.

The traditional narrative of advanced education institutions is that they are a place where students 'expand their horizons.' It is where they can find a sense

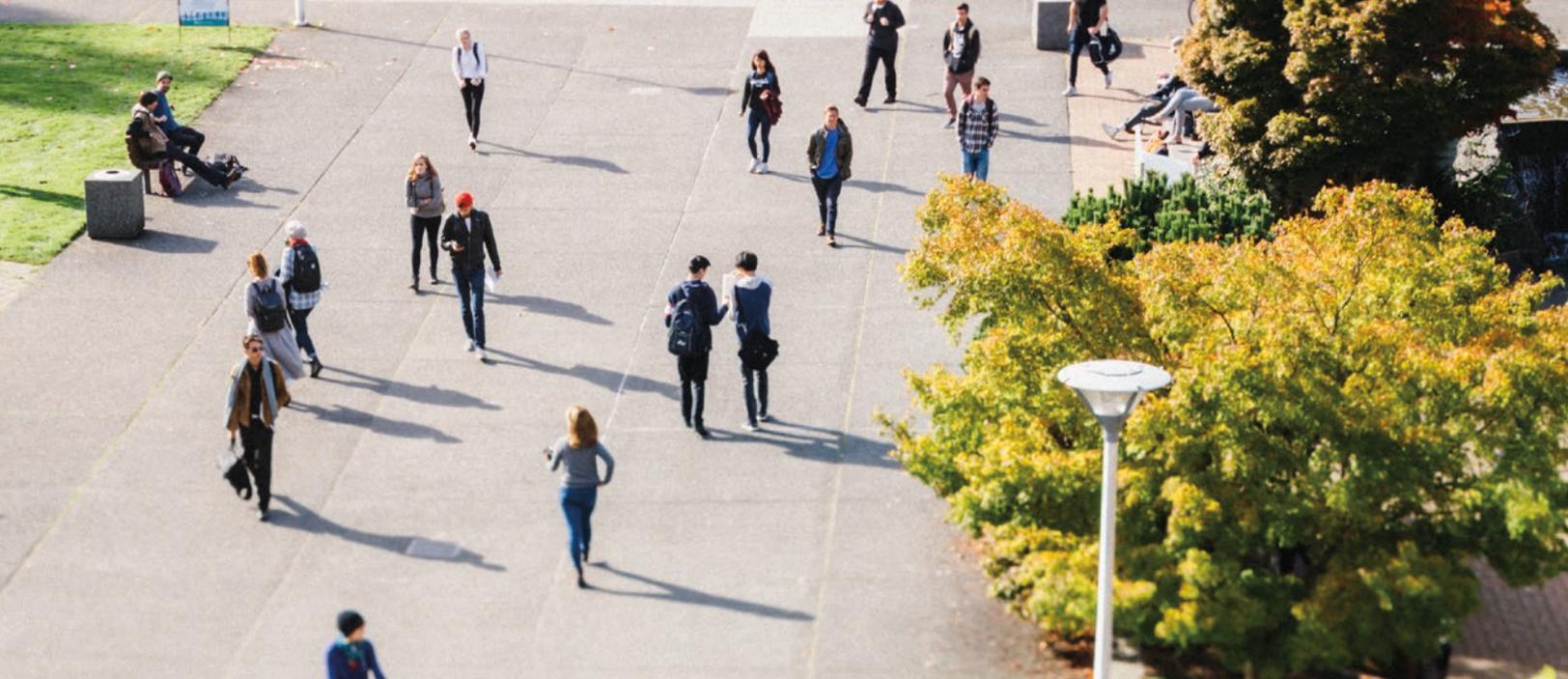
of meaning and purpose, potentially related to the place they live and the current issues and challenges specific to that place. This kind of specific, place-based knowledge and experiential learning goes hand-in-hand with the basic and fundamental research knowledge from traditional research streams and disciplines.

Many students across Canada are finding ways to creatively and compassionately engage with complex social problems inside and outside the institution in a practical, time-limited way.

The challenge is how to do this, while also surviving financially, meeting the demands of coursework, and working around an entrenched institutional structure designed to stay constant even as the student population changes.

Students can contribute to building social infrastructure in several ways:

- **Share stories:** talk with your friends and other students about your decision to engage with a project or issue, and your experience; this helps to build meaningful and lasting community connections
- **Find your people:** connect to a group organizing around an issue that interests you and join them
- **Represent:** bring a student point of view into institutional conversations and processes, and hold leaders accountable
- **Find Funds:** seek and take up opportunities to be paid for project work



Where to begin?

Share stories, ask questions

Talking to friends, peers and other students about systemic social change is the foundation for that change; there is no action without understanding. Students tend to trust each other more than they trust faculty, staff, or administrators. It's important for students to know they are one of many that share the same concerns, and that opportunities to connect with and engage peers in important conversations is easily missed.

Find your people

There are lots of ways that campuses provide opportunities for changemakers to connect to changemakers. One example is ChangeLab, an initiative of Simon Fraser University. This is an immersive one-term cohort program that empowers student changemakers, teaching the skills they need to create lasting social change. Instructors, from both SFU and the community, deliver classes in a non-traditional, deeply experiential format. Classes feature mentorship and skills-based workshops in a collaborative studio environment.

Other academic opportunities to connect with a community of change makers might include

community-engaged research and internship opportunities available directly through departments, and with student-led Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs).

Student clubs with a service mandate also offer significant social connection and experience to participating members, while also building social infrastructure in various ways.

Represent: Participate in governance

Students can have a deeply influential impact on their institutions by filling the student seats on the Senate and/or Board of Governors. These positions are often overlooked, but have tremendous influence over curriculum, and university/college budgets and policies.

Election to a Student Union may also be an avenue to effect change. Student Unions in Canada have (among too many examples to list) brought municipal voting to campuses, established consultative committees to senior administrators, campaigned to proactively address discrimination, eliminated bottled water and other disposable items from campuses, held referendums to get funding for critical services such as campus Food Banks, and contributed to developing comprehensive mental health services.

Students benefit from learning about, and participating in, social infrastructure building projects by gaining an experience of education that is more than just 'checking a box.'

Both the university and Student Unions have many opportunities for informal involvement in committees and working groups—often to develop and oversee the delivery of campus programs—where student contributions are both valuable and appreciated. Sustainable Concordia, a university-sponsored program that convenes campus-wide dialogue and actions on campus sustainability, is one of many similar programs on campuses Canada-wide.

Overcoming barriers

A fundamental barrier that students face is financial security. Many students have to work while studying, and don't have the free time to consider engaging in social infrastructure building projects.

What many students don't know is that small grants may be available for social infrastructure building projects. However, these are not necessarily well-publicized on campus, and most students are not formally taught the administrative skills to apply for grants, nor the research-related skills they would need to carry out social innovation projects, even if those are related to their field of study.

Another barrier is for students to overcome the perception that they need permission to get involved in campus projects, events, and associations—it's valuable to find (or demand) allies that can help student voices be heard.

Realizing Benefits

Coming to terms with the scale and complexity of challenges facing humanity today can be overwhelming, demoralizing, and depressing. For students, understanding education through the framing of 'social infrastructure building' can provide some much-needed hope and optimism where it is often lacking in postsecondary. As well, it can provide a common ground for shared meaning and understanding between students and the institution.

Students benefit from learning about, and participating in, social infrastructure building projects by gaining an experience of education that is more than just 'checking a box.' Their education becomes a meaningful experiential learning opportunity, it inspires them to see in themselves the potential to contribute to positive systemic change, and it sets them up for the challenges they will take on after graduation.

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.



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