The Community Engaged University Administrator

A Primer on Community Engagement for
Post-Secondary Administration Professionals
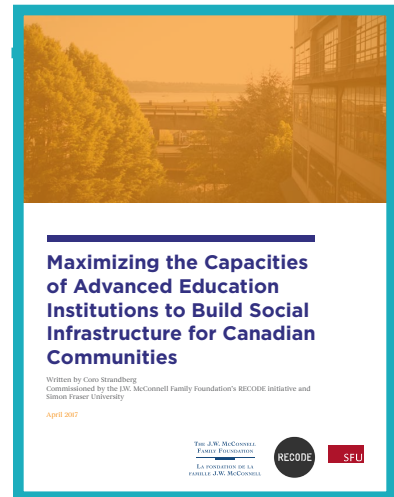
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Introduction

Higher education institutions are increasingly harnessing their assets, platforms, and relationships to contribute to thriving communities. This is driving administrator interest in roles they and their departments can play to enhance their institutions' social impact. This is a new role for many administrators, and they seek mandates, skills, practical examples, and community connections to better prepare and equip them for this opportunity.

To address this interest and help build administrator capacity in this area, the McConnell Foundation partnered with CAUBO to conduct a brief survey and host a workshop for administrators on the topic. This primer summarizes the findings and lays out a pathway administrators can pursue to tackle societal challenges, strengthen communities, and help their institution achieve its aims.

Contributors

Kelly Hodgins, McConnell Foundation Program Officer, and Coro Strandberg, Social Purpose Advisor to the McConnell Foundation, collaborated in designing and hosting the Community Engagement Workshop and drafting this Community Engagement Primer.

Maximizing the Capacities of Advanced Education Institutions to Build Social Infrastructure for Canadian Communities

Written by Coro Strandberg
Commissioned by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation's RECODE initiative and Simon Fraser University

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THE J.W. McCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION
LA FONDATION DE LA FAMILLE J.W. McCONNELL RECODE SFU

Foundational Report

The ideas in this paper are derived from this influential report commissioned by the McConnell Foundation and Simon Fraser University: [Maximizing the Capacities of Advanced Education Institutions to Build Social Infrastructure for Canadian Communities.](#) The report is a call to action to the post-secondary sector to unlock all of its assets to address societal challenges.

Report Highlights

1 *The top benefit of community engaged administration is helping the institution to achieve its community and social impact priorities*

2 *Many administrators have community engagement and social impact roles and responsibilities in their job descriptions*

3 *Among community engagement practices, consultation is most common, followed by collaborating with community partners on shared goals*

4 *The main barriers to greater administrative community engagement are the lack of a formal mandate, and limited resources and time to play a role*

5 *To overcome barriers, administrators could communicate the benefits of engaged administration, build community engagement in department plans and include community impact in job descriptions*

6 *There are many community engagement practices administrators can pursue, even without a formal mandate; one way to do so is to incorporate social impact into ongoing and new projects*

Current State of Administrator Community Engagement

To better understand the current state of Administrator Community Engagement, a poll was conducted of interested CAUBO members in October-November 2020.

67 administrators from 37 institutions answered questions which investigated the degree to which community engagement and social impact are embedded in job descriptions, the nature of current administrator community engagement, and benefits from, and barriers to, administrator community engagement. *(Note that these results are generated from administrators with an interest in community engagement, and do not necessarily represent the broader CAUBO membership.)*

1. Degree to which community engagement is embedded in administrator job descriptions

CAUBO members were asked: "Does your current job description include community engagement or social impact?" Nearly two thirds responded that community engagement is included somewhat or to a great degree; one third don't have community engagement included among their responsibilities. This suggests an opportunity for administrators to discuss with senior management the inclusion of a more explicit role for community engagement and social impact in their job description.

Action: Review your job description for opportunities to include community engagement and social impact as a core value and responsibility for your position.

Definitions

Community: External stakeholders, including community groups, non-profit organizations, businesses and business groups, other post-secondary or research institutions, other public sector institutions, suppliers, customers, students, alumni, international agencies, professional associations, etc.

Community Engagement (CE): Describes the collaboration between higher education institutions and their external communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for collaboration on shared goals.

**Social Impact:** A significant, positive change that addresses a pressing societal challenge.

Poll question to CAUBO members: "Does your current job description include community engagement or social impact?"
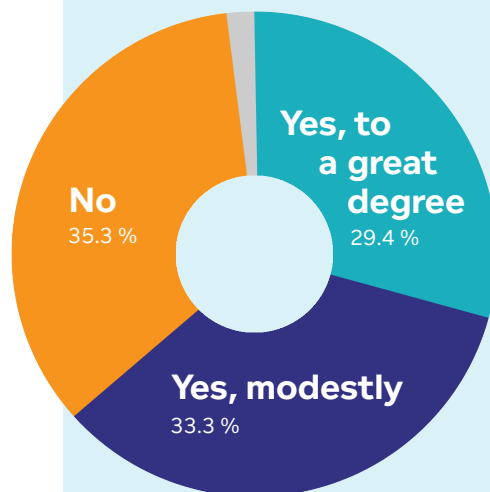
- **No** 35.3 %
- **Yes, to a great degree** 29.4 %
- **Yes, modestly** 33.3 %
- = Don't know (2.0%)

**Poll question to CAUBO members: "What types of community engagement have you participated in over the past 1 - 2 years?"**
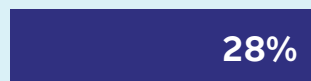
28% I have been involved in community consultation related to an initiative I was working on
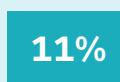
26% I have been part of an ongoing collaboration with community partners on an initiative to achieve social impact together

20% I have been involved in providing information on social impact matters to external partners
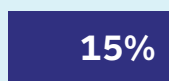
15% I sit on the board of directors of a community organization

11% I have collaborated with external organizations in research projects addressing social / environmental topics

2. Nature of current community engagement practices of administrators

Survey respondents shared the types of community engagement they are involved in. The most common practice (nearly 30%) is consulting the community on administrator projects. The next common practice is to be part of an ongoing collaboration with community partners on an initiative to achieve social impact outcomes together. This is the most advanced level of community engagement, so it is encouraging to see how many are involved in social impact collaborations with community partners.
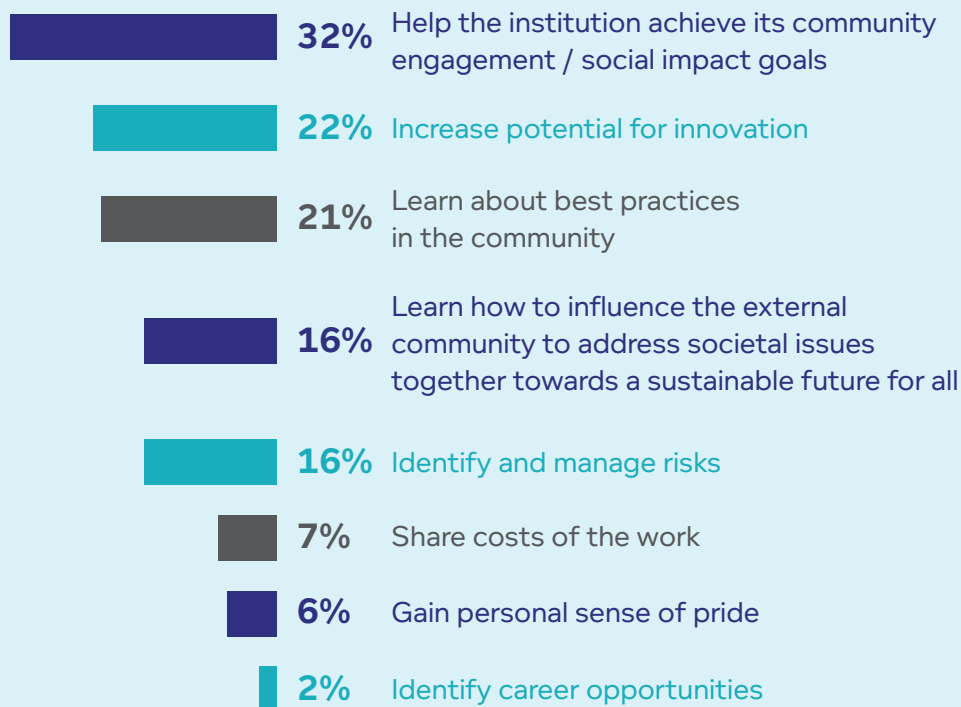
It appears that administrators are not yet tapping into collaborations with external organizations on shared research such as understanding physical risks of climate change or best practices in social procurement, social hiring, greenhouse gas management and Indigenous reconciliation, even though it is likely that administrators in universities and those in external organizations have common interests in addressing social and environmental issues.

➡ **Action:** Identify and expand community engagement practices in your work using these or other ideas in this primer.

Poll question to CAUBO members: "How can administrators benefit from community engagement?" (Please select your top 3.)

32% Help the institution achieve its community engagement / social impact goals

22% Increase potential for innovation

21% Learn about best practices in the community

16% Learn how to influence the external community to address societal issues together towards a sustainable future for all

16% Identify and manage risks

7% Share costs of the work

6% Gain personal sense of pride

2% Identify career opportunities
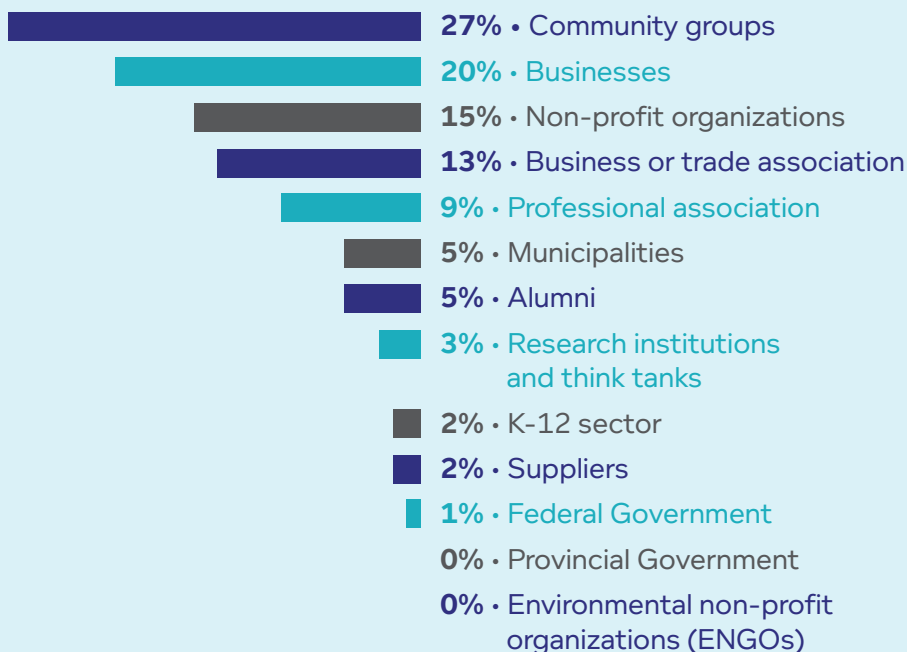
3. Administrative benefits of community engagement

Administrators were asked about the benefits of greater community engagement. The most mentioned benefit (⅓) was to help their institution achieve its community engagement and social impact goals. Other opportunities include to increase the potential for innovation, and to learn about community best practices that could be applied at the institution. Administrators appear to be interested in tapping into new ideas from external organizations to bring into their own roles.

Action: Discuss these results with your team and agree on the benefits of community engagement to the community and your department. Use this to involve leaders in discussions about the merits of community engagement and potential for greater activity in future.

Poll question to CAUBO members: "Which stakeholders have you engaged with in the community engagement context?"

27% • Community groups
20% • Businesses
15% • Non-profit organizations
13% • Business or trade association
9% • Professional association
5% • Municipalities
5% • Alumni
3% • Research institutions and think tanks
2% • K-12 sector
2% • Suppliers
1% • Federal Government
0% • Provincial Government
0% • Environmental non-profit organizations (ENGOs)

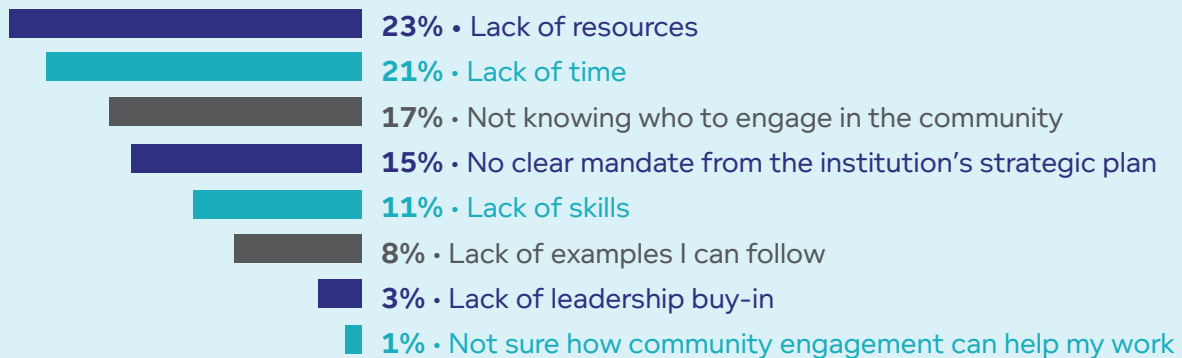## 4. Community stakeholders engaged by administrators

As can be seen in the chart above, administrators primarily engage community groups in their work, followed by businesses and non-profit organizations. There is much less involvement of professional and business groups, governments, and environmental organizations, suggesting future opportunities.

Action: Consider which groups your department is engaging already and if there are other groups that could be engaged in future on shared social impact efforts.

Poll question to CAUBO members: "What are the barriers to engaging with the community?" (Please select your top 3.)

23% • Lack of resources

21% • Lack of time

17% • Not knowing who to engage in the community

15% • No clear mandate from the institution's strategic plan

11% • Lack of skills

8% • Lack of examples I can follow

3% • Lack of leadership buy-in

1% • Not sure how community engagement can help my work

5. Barriers to community engagement faced by administrators

The top barriers faced by administrators when seeking to engage community partners in their projects and work are lack of resources and time, not having a clear mandate in the institution's strategic plan, and not knowing who to engage in the community. Opportunities to overcome these barriers were explored in the workshop and are addressed below.

Action: Discuss these results with your team and consider collective strategies to overcome them at your institution.

How administrators can overcome barriers to community engagement

Top measures to make community engagement more of a priority include:

- Communicating the institutional benefits of community engagement to administration leaders
- Incorporating administrative community engagement goals directly in the institution's strategic plan (see right sidebar for a resource)
- Embedding community engagement in administrator job descriptions

Some administrators recommend establishing a community engagement working group or office within the administration department to build community engagement capacity and partnerships.

Another option is to establish a community-based advisory board to provide advice to the administration team. The community advisory board could be consulted on community engagement opportunities and priorities that administrators could pursue.

Participants also flagged that administrators are not always aware of the organizations and partners they can trust in undertaking community engagement. Tapping into existing relationships held by faculty or advancement can help address this, as can pursuing pilot projects and taking small steps on the community engagement journey.

Administrators were also reminded that: "*A lot can be done despite community engagement not being explicitly outlined in a formal mandate.*" For example, if your institution has prioritized equity, diversity and inclusion or mental health, look for ways to incorporate these priorities into administrative projects and decisions in collaboration with community and external partners. There are likely many opportunities that fit well within the social purpose administrative purview, even though it might not be called out that way.
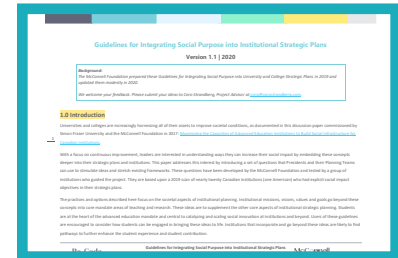
Guidelines for Integrating Social Purpose into Institutional Strategic Plans: The McConnell Foundation prepared guidelines to help universities and colleges embed social purpose and social impact into institutional strategic plans, based on a scan of current university practices. Institutions updating their strategic plans may wish to consider the ideas in this report.

Action: Review the following page's list of opportunities and advance those that make sense to you and your institution.

Barriers and Opportunities

How to make CE more of a priority in your group	How to foster a stronger mandate for CE in your work	How to find out who to partner with externally
• Communicate the benefits to the institution • Support efforts to incorporate CE into the mission and vision of the institution • Incorporate CE as part of the administration's strategic plans, set targets • Encourage administrative leadership to set the tone at the top • Upgrade job description to explicitly include CE roles and responsibilities • Find a way to incentivize the work • Conduct a scan of existing CE activities and use this as a baseline to set future plans, goals and targets • Secure funding to support initiatives • Advocate for its importance at provincial/funding level • Incorporate current university priorities (e.g. diversity and inclusion) into current projects	• Include Administrative CE goals in the institution's strategic plan • Engage leadership in discussions related to CE efforts (seek buy-in) • Include CE commitments in departmental priorities (even if not at the institutional level) • Include CE in the department's yearly goals • Add it in the budget request at the beginning of the fiscal year • Incorporate CE into job descriptions for senior leadership team • Include CE as a core value and responsibility in all administrative job descriptions • Create a CE working group to bring key internal and external stakeholders together • Establish a dedicated office of community partnership within administration	• Ask university colleagues for ideas, e.g. university advancement, faculty members who have built community and industry partnerships as part of their research or teaching, etc. • Ask engaged alumni and donors for their suggestions • Ask existing external partners for their suggestions • Host webinars and educational sessions for community members and identify partners from the participant list • Consult the community to identify local partners and stakeholders • Create an office of community partnerships for central coordination of efforts • Engage or develop community based advisory board to consult on key priorities

> **"**
>
> *Administrators can drive social impact through things we need to do anyway.*
>
> — Effie Slapnicar, Bursar and Chief Administrative Officer, University of St. Michael's College

Administrator opportunities to advance community engagement

Building on the foregoing list of ways to address community engagement barriers, workshop participants were asked to identify activities they would like to pursue with partners in the coming year if time and resources weren't an issue.

Some ideas are department-wide and some are function-specific, as summarized below. One notable approach, profiled in the text box, is to routinely embed social impact and community engagement in upcoming projects and decisions.

Action: Discuss these results with your team and agree on the benefits of community engagement to the community and your department. Use this to involve leaders in discussions about the merits of community engagement and potential for greater activity in future.

Department-wide actions

- **Embedment:** Embed community engagement and social impact in upcoming projects and decisions

- **Hub:** Set up an administrative community engagement office, hub or liaison position to connect with community partners on social impact efforts, focused on reciprocal work that benefits both the institution and the community. This role can help address community and society challenges together with key stakeholders

- **Pilots:** Start small by undertaking pilot projects and developing prototypes for collaborative problem-solving that can be scaled and replicated in other efforts

- **Municipalities:** Build relationships with local governments to identify shared priorities and opportunities for collaborative social innovation

- **Gaps:** Co-host dialogues with community partners on their knowledge and resource gaps and identify how administrators might work with the community to address the gaps

- **Funding:** Provide funding for not-for-profit projects that would benefit the community and the university

- **Dialogue:** Ask external organizations to be invited to their community discussions

- **In-residence:** Recruit a community partner to have an in-residence role within the administration group

Procurement actions

- **EDI:** Extend the institution's equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) priority to the institution's under-represented supplier base

- **Consultation:** Consult internally and then externally on opportunities to engage community partners in procurement

Facilities management actions

- **Campus Plan:** When updating the campus master plan, partner with external organizations to improve the sustainability of facilities and infrastructure. For example, partner with an indigenous engineering firm

- **ENGOs:** Consult environmental non-profits (ENGOs) for ideas on how to green the institution

Conclusion

Administrators demonstrate a keen interest to learn more about community engagement and build social impact into their roles and mandates. This primer is a sampling of ideas and actions that administrators can tap to accelerate their own community engagements. Key to this work is figuring out the right recipe and mix of ingredients at your institution. While formal mandates are preferred, administrators recognize their existing roles provide considerable scope to engage community partners in shared undertakings for social progress. If you don't know where to start, the best advice is to start somewhere and learn as you go. You probably won't get everything right at the beginning, but you are sure to make some progress and get closer to your desired end goal.

One thing is for sure, as higher education institutions continue enhancing their community contributions and addressing societal challenges, administrators are ready and willing partners, prepared to unlock the assets and resources of their departments for the collective community good.

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