How universities are working to shatter the ivory tower

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Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee chair Sabina Ali and second yr UofT urban planning student Stephanine Cirnu discuss change and improvent possibilities on community developments in the RV Burgess park in Toronto, ON. (Photograph by Cole Garside)

Universities have not always been the best of neighbours. Community members squabble with the schools over irritants like development plans, rowdy student parties and self-centred research practices.

That's beginning to change as universities increasingly turn to local residents and non-profit organizations as allies, not adversaries. "There is a fundamental shift in universities across North America from the ivory tower to the public square," says Diane Kenyon, vice-president of university relations for the University of Calgary, which added community engagement to its strategic plan in 2011. "There are no walls and no barriers between the university and its community."

What's driving the change? More importantly, is it for real? A $2.5-million, seven-year national study on university-community engagement, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), is investigating a proliferation of partnerships across the country for answers.

Carleton University political scientist Peter Andrée is principal investigator of the "Community First" SSHRC study that runs to 2019. He cites three factors driving the "emerging" movement.

One, he says, is about researchers "being more respectful to our research partners, who we now see as partners and not just subjects." Another, he says, is that students now want "meaningful experiences that contribute to their education and that are developed in co-operation and collaboration with outside organizations." Finally, he points to rising public expectations about the "social licence" of universities in uncertain times. "Their legitimacy within their communities—local, national and international—is being tied to immediately serving those communities and the public good."

Encouraged by what he sees, Andrée cautions that "we are only 25 per cent of the way" toward realizing the full potential of collaborations.

Here's a snapshot of some university-community engagement projects across Canada:

Acadia University

Initiative: Activity-based therapy for disabled children

During orientation two years ago, Acadia president Ray Ivany watched as hundreds of students streamed across campus to the science building one evening. "What's on tonight?" he thought, then realized it was a volunteer session for the university's signature community engagement project—an activity-based therapy program for disabled children and youth.

S.M.I.L.E.—Sensory Motor Instructional Leadership Experience—is an academic-based program that uses swimming, gymnastics and sports to help those with mental and physical disabilities develop motor, social and intellectual skills. Created in 1982 by an Acadia professor, the program now attracts 280 children a year from Wolfville-area schools, who show up at the university's athletic facilities four times a week for sessions led by 450 student volunteers. "It's part of the culture here now at Acadia," says S.M.I.L.E. director Roxanne Seaman, a professor of kinesiology. "It has grown beyond what anyone had imagined."

Similar programs offered elsewhere are often tied to kinesiology courses, but S.M.I.L.E. recruits volunteers from across the campus: business, nutrition and music students contribute discipline-based expertise while team coaches and others volunteer their time too. With fundraising by the Acadia Student Union and others, the program last year installed a Snoezelen room, a therapeutic space for relaxation or stimulation activities for those with sensory disorders.

Lillie Coolen, a 2016 kinesiology graduate who returned to Acadia this year for additional courses to apply for medical school, says her five years as a volunteer (and now a student program director) taught her about leadership, communication and empathy. "You go to university expecting to grow intellectually and theoretically," she says. "My ability to understand people and see things from their perspective; that is something you only get with a hands-on learning experience like S.M.I.L.E."

Carleton University

Initiative: On-street parklet

In 2015, a chance encounter at a City of Ottawa workshop on streetscape improvement led to an unexpected collaboration between Carleton University architecture students and a local business organization. "It was a moment of fate," says Johan Voordouw, an assistant professor of architecture at the Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism at Carleton University, of meeting Jamie Kwong, executive director of the Quartier Vanier Business Improvement Area at the workshop.

In response to the city's request to reimagine 25 parking spots around the city for urban-friendly uses, Voordouw and Kwong negotiated a partnership. Students in Voordouw's design-build studio generated designs for a "parklet" occupying almost two parking spaces on a commercial street dividing tony New Edinburgh and less affluent Vanier. At its annual meeting last year, BIA members voted on five student proposals, selecting a slope-roofed cedar structure with colourful planters and seating for up to six. "We are all about being a creative BIA and getting people attracted to our street in a tough area of Ottawa," says Kwong. "We are interested in innovative ways to create spaces that are more pleasant."

Some critics chafed at the temporary loss of parking over the summer, but Mayor Jim Watson dropped by to admire a pedestrian-friendly "conversation starter" about invigorating urban spaces, says Kwong.

Simon Petepiece, then a fourth-year architecture student, had never had an opportunity to work on a commission as a class project. "What made the architecture experience more exciting was this kind of project where you get that interaction," says Petepiece, one of four designers of the Vanier parklet. "For us, that was at the forefront: to get experience outside of our academic career."

Now in discussion with Voordouw on future projects, Kwong urges universities and local communities to discover each other for mutual gain. "Both sides have to create the opportunities," she says. "It is beyond internships, volunteer roles and co-operative education; it is about more engagement."

University of Toronto

Initiative: Thorncliffe Park

University of Toronto president Meric Gertler is candid about the sometimes-frosty past relations between his institution and its downtown neighbours. As president for the past four years, the internationally recognized urban theorist is championing new efforts to connect the downtown campus, in particular, and its surroundings.

For Gertler, the success of U of T and the city are entwined. "Everything we do using our intellectual resources and our energy from our students and faculty to make Toronto a better place ends up helping us," he says. "When we go to recruit faculty from across Canada and around the world or when we go out to recruit students from across Canada and around the world, Toronto is a big part of our offer."

Gertler is mulling a possible multidisciplinary "school for cities" to address complex urban issues. In 2015, he named urban affairs professor Shauna Brail to a new position of presidential adviser on urban engagement, with a mandate to foster partnerships and raise their profile. He says he is heartened by grassroots projects springing up between faculty, students and community organizations.

One such partnership last year linked master's planning students and the Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee, a volunteer group in a high-density, immigrant neighbourhood in midtown Toronto.

Women's committee executive director Sabina Ali says she was surprised at the overture from Aseem Inam, then a visiting professor in U of T's department of geography and planning. In her experience, university researchers typically prefer working with large, established organizations.

Students in Inam's Urban Design Studio spent the academic year working with Ali's committee on local priorities, such

as improved access to green space for children in a dense urban environment. Through workshops and interviews with residents, the students refined their ideas and assisted the committee in publishing a booklet on neighbourhood priorities for cultural, recreational and economic renewal.

Stephanie Cirnu, who graduates this spring with a master of science in planning, says she and her classmates could not have done the assignment without Ali and her neighbours.

Learning to listen, adds Cirnu, has changed how she views her profession. "I had always conceptualized urban planning and design as more of a technocratic exercise," she says. "I now see any design is the product of community participation in the process."

University of Calgary

Initiative: Immigrant health

Immigrants and refugees experience discrimination, culture shock and roadblocks in navigating the Canadian health care system, according to some studies, negatively affecting the well-being of newcomers compared to those born here.

At the University of Calgary, health researchers in the Cumming School of Medicine decided to look for ways to improve the health system experience of immigrants by working with ethnic communities on research topics of relevance to them. "We are saying, 'We want to do the things that you want us to do,' " says Turin Chowdhury, an assistant professor with the departments of Family Medicine and Community Health Sciences at the medical school. "This is a new way of thinking."

Born in Bangladesh, Chowdhury focused first on his own Bangladeshi-Canadian community in Calgary.

Last spring, in a get-to-know-you gesture, the university set up a booth at a cultural event organized by the Bangladesh-Canada Association of Canada. In the following months, Chowdhury and others from the medical school held focus groups to listen to residents' health concerns, such as a shortage of culturally sensitive doctors. "We had never had this kind of opportunity before," says Mohammad Lasker, an association volunteer who worked as a medical doctor in Bangladesh and the Middle East before coming to Canada four years ago. "This is a really great opportunity for our community to develop and build co-operation with the university that will empower Bangladeshi-Canadian citizens and Canadians at large."

Later this year, Chowdhury and the association plan to hold a town hall event to map out a research agenda with a community focus.

Andrea Djurkovic, a third-year bachelor of health sciences student who works with Chowdhury, says she has gained research insights by listening to Bangladeshi-Canadians about their health care concerns. "There is no better way to find out things than to talk to the people themselves," she says.

UBC

Initiative: Homeless services app

In 1908, the founders of the University of British Columbia planned to place the main campus on Point Grey Peninsula, 11 km west of downtown Vancouver. Today, the research-intensive institution has a significant physical presence in the city and an expanding mandate to work with community groups.

"Philosophically, at that time [the founding of UBC], these were seen as places of learning and reflection and needed to be removed somewhat from the immediacy and busyness of cities," says Philip Steenkamp, vice-president of external relations for UBC. Now, he adds, "there has been a strong sense that no, universities need to be intimately involved in their community to enjoy the support of those communities and to have the credibility to prove their value."

In a recent collaboration, a web-based app was created for those living on the streets in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, one of Canada's poorest neighbourhoods. Designed and refined in 2015 by student volunteers at UBC's Learning Exchange, LinkVan features easy-to-understand icons to locate, for example, an available shelter bed for the night, all guided by feedback from members of the community. "One of the unique features of LinkVan is that it has been developed in the community, with the community and by the community," says William Booth, literacy outreach coordinator for the Downtown Eastside Literacy Roundtable, a coalition of education-related institutions that partnered with the Learning Exchange on the app project. LinkVan developers relied on community "ambassadors" to connect to the homeless (many with low literacy skills), tweaking features in response to feedback.

Fourth-year UBC computer science student Felix Tso, who joined the LinkVan project last year, says the volunteer experience taught him skills he will need as a programmer. "The most difficult part of working in computer science and working with other people is communication," he says. "A lot of computer science is not hard. It is about communicating ideas and getting feedback and working with other people."

Since the rollout of the app, front-line service providers have been adding information to communicate with their clients. LinkVan partners have also introduced pop-up "tech cafes" in parks and other locations frequented by homeless people, offering technical support for digital devices.

Meanwhile, several municipalities have expressed interest in adapting LinkVan for other needy constituents, such as low-income seniors.

Booth is encouraged by what he sees. "Communities are requiring more of universities, and universities are beginning to listen."

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