EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE SOCIAL SECTOR

Authors

SANDRA LAPOINTE

Dr Sandra Lapointe is Professor of Philosophy at McMaster University. She is a Commonwealth alumna, a Fellow of the Humboldt Foundation and an award winning scholar. She is a past President of the Canadian Philosophical Association and a past member of the Board of Directors of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Many of her previous scholarly projects focuses on the history of logic, mind and knowledge. Her current research agenda revolves around Social Sciences and Humanities perspective on issues connected to knowledge mobilisation, skills development and policsy for innovation in the social sector.

Dr Lapointe is the Director of The/La Collaborative, a pan Canadian partnership funded by SSHRC, Mitacs and the Future Skills Centre. The/La Collaborative's mission is to foster better collaborative cultures for social science and humanities education, talent and impact.

VIVIEN UNDERDOWN

Vivien Underdown is a social sector professional passionate about mobilizing collaborative action toward creating prosperous and vibrant communities. She has a Bachelor of Arts from McGill University, and has continued education focused on asset-based community development, user centered design and empowerment. Vivien has worked with United Way Halton and Hamilton since 2019, supporting the mission to improve lives, build community and ignite action. At United Way, she leads capacity building initiatives that grow the knowledge, skills, resources and networks available in the social sector for driving social change. This involves mobilizing diverse community assets and strengthening collaborative bridges with partners in academia.

With the collaboration of Sarah May Lindsay and Alex Bryant

Foreword

The pandemic exposed and amplified multiple societal crises, from income and housing insecurity, to social stratification and fragmentation along equity lines. Across Canada, we saw the demand for social services and support dramatically increase, while at the same time, the education system sustained major interruptions. More than ever, the critical role of social sector organizations was made plain: social innovation is integral to the fabric of our communities and country.

We're excited to partner with McMaster University to examine how experiential learning is enriching the learning of social science and humanities students, and how it contributes to a stronger, more innovative social sector. Experiential learning partnerships provide an opportunity for social sector organizations to gain temporary capacity, to advance their social mission, and train a future pipeline of job-ready talent. Likewise, students gain value through real-world experience that enhances ties to the community, allows them to achieve social impact, and builds skills and employability. We know, however, that building such partnerships is not simple nor linear, and the report's recommendations for how to ensure partnerships are reciprocal, build capacity, and facilitate knowledge exchange are critical to moving forward.

This report comes not a moment too soon, as our changing world requires constant innovation across all aspects of our economy and society. In these evolving circumstances, the role of universities and the social sector will continue to be critical, and we know that more learning and dialogue will drive the next era of social innovation. The Future Skills Centre is committed to supporting research and innovation practice towards building a more dynamic, equitable and prosperous future that provides opportunities to each and every person in Canada. We commend the authors for this important contribution to charting a path forward for social sector partnerships.

Tricia Williams, PhD
Director, Research Evaluation & Knowledge Mobilization
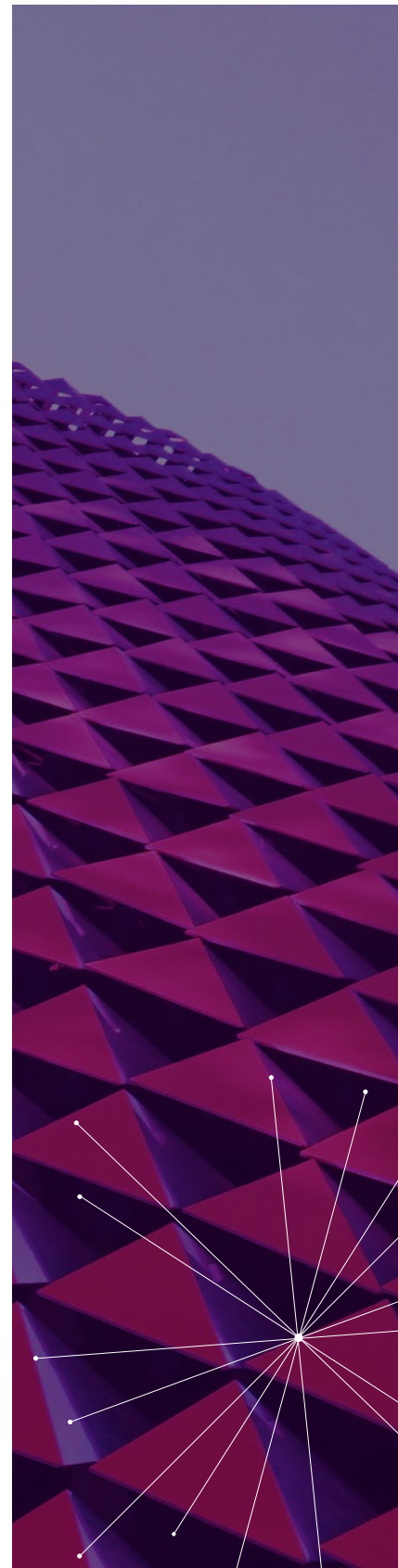**Future Skills Centre**

Table of Contents

Key Findings

Our study draws on the experience of managers in social sector and in particular non-profit organisations and students in the social sciences, humanities, and arts (SSHA) who have participated in experiential learning (EL). The objective is to understand the motivations, drivers, and barriers to experiential learning to guide the design and implementation of EL programs and initiatives that bring campuses and communities together.

The report below is divided in four sections. Part 1 sets the broader context of the research program: to understand how reassessing current models of campus-community collaboration might increase universities' ability to help address social sector needs around capacity for innovation, both incremental and at the systems level. Part 2 presents our analysis of the data we gathered. Part 3 offers an in-depth discussion of these findings, and links to relevant research and literature when appropriate. The final section, Part 4, argues for a series of measures, and makes recommendations, whose primary targets are EL program administrators in universities.

In brief, here is what we learned:

- The main barrier to reciprocity in EL partnerships that bring together SSHA students with social sector organisations is the challenges associated **having to tailor or scope each individual EL project to each individual student's needs, interest, and skills.** This however is an endemic feature of EL partnerships in the social sector.

- There is a **disconnect between experiential learning and community-engagement programming in universities that calls for greater integration.** Reciprocity in EL partnerships should be designed intentionally as part of universities' social impact mission and to generate increased value for both EL partners.

- **The development of EL partnerships should integrate systems-level considerations around scalability and reciprocity.** This requires to shift EL partnerships' current focus on project/program deliverables toward a reciprocity-based model that leverages capacity-building collaboration plans. These should be designed to distribute the cost and risk of EL collaborations, in proportion to the benefit of each party.

- Post-secondary institutions should **prioritise EL strategies that intentionally contribute to increased capacity in community partners** while meeting the actual needs and interests of SSHA students for broad experiential access.

- While intensifying the reciprocity and outcomes of EL programs might require new investments or a redistribution of resources on the part of post-secondary or affiliated institutions, **they also create new attractive opportunities, directly increasing post-secondary institutions' social capital and hence their capacity to contribute to social innovation and systems change.**
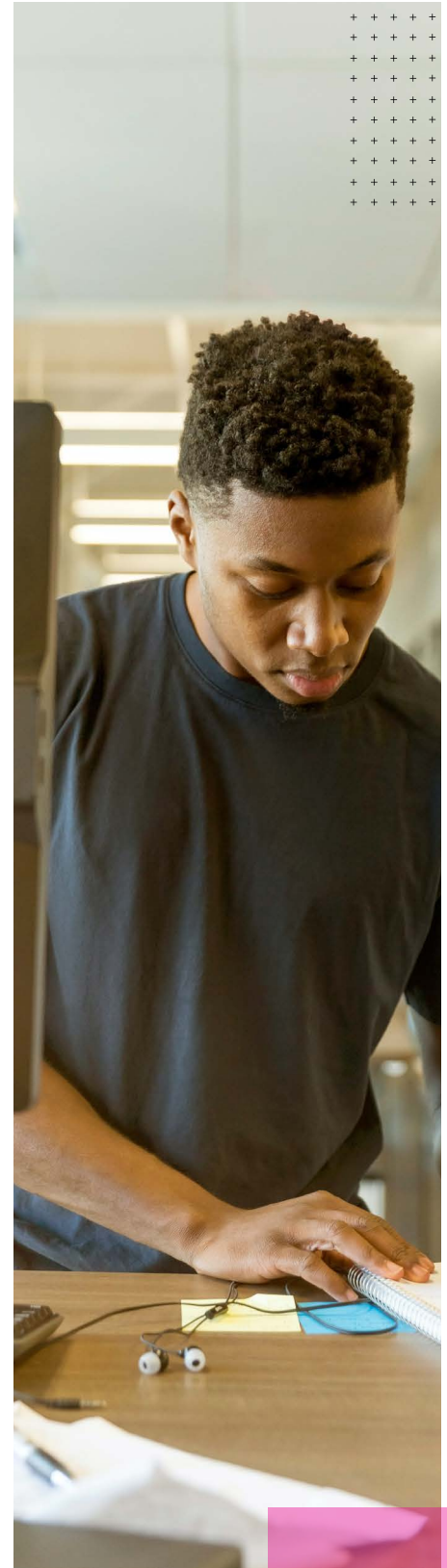
Glossary

Capacity: The level of an organization's capability to deliver services, programs, and products according to its mandate or mission.

Experiential learning (EL): The acquisition of knowledge and skills through practice and upon reflection on a period engagement, observation, and/or immersion. 'Experiential learning' and "work-integrated learning' are often used interchangeably.

EL-partnership: In the context of this article, a community-based or community-focused collaborations between an organisation and an academic institution that revolve around the hosting, facilitating, and supporting of one or more students involved, for instance, in service or project delivery.

Experiential learning program: A set of related measures or activities developed and implemented to facilitate EL.

Foundational skills: A broad range of abilities and knowledge understood to be essential to employability and citizenship, and generally associated with social and emotional intelligence as well as cognitive literacy. They include critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, self-management, intercultural awareness, and effective communication.

Knowledge absorption: The ability of an organisation to assimilate information needed to support continuous and productive innovation.

Non-profit (NP): A model of service or product delivery for the public benefit; see social sector organisation. Also referred to as "not-for-profit" (NFP).

Reciprocity: A system-level feature of collaborations and partnerships whose outcomes and impacts are balanced and mutually beneficial.

Resilience: The ability to effectively respond to and adapt to systemic change, seeking a balance of social, environmental, and economic needs.

Skill: An aptitude, competency, or ability, broadly construed.

Social Sector Organisation (SSO): A service or product provider or facilitator that operates for and is organized around societal support and betterment, such as NPs.

Social ecosystem: The collection of interconnected institutions and organisations through which the resources, talent, and information that supports, interacts with, and affects the social innovation flow.

Social innovation: The phrase "social innovation" is used in a multiple of context to refer to a number of things. Here, it refers to any new idea (e.g., service, process, or framework) intended to meet social needs and to do so by, at the same time, changing aspects of social organisations or relationships in the social impact ecosystem.

Social sector: An umbrella term denoting the activities of societal organizations that identify and operate for the public benefit, including co-operatives, non-profits, registered charities, social enterprises/B corporations, or unincorporated grassroots or community groups; sometimes referred to as the "third sector", in contrast to the private and public sectors.

Part 1. Context of the study

Social sector capacity and the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis

The pandemic has placed immense pressure on the social sector, straining organisations' ability to support community members and drawing greater attention to perennial flaws that need to be addressed, not piecemeal, but at a systems level. What started as a public health crisis from infectious disease multiplied into crises of mental health, social isolation, and gender and racial inequity, to name only a few. It has become commonly recognized that many of these problems are not new, and that pre-existing inequities have been exacerbated.[1] For example, certain populations have been found to be more negatively affected by COVID-19 as a result of structural inequities, such as housing and food insecurity.[2] The compounded effects of the pandemic have led to a groundswell of stakeholders joining the Just Recovery movement.[3] Part of this effort involves strengthening the social safety net and increasing resilience.[4]

When put to the test, the social sector has so far shown some resilience and adaptability.[5] A survey by the Ontario Nonprofit Network found that around only one in eight social sector organisations were operating as usual and that two thirds had adapted to a virtual context.[6] Despite this initial ability to pivot, the sector has faced multifaceted constraints, impacting its ability to prevent and meet the demand for rising community need. A study by Imagine Canada found that 69% of the charities they polled had decreased revenues, 30% had to lay off staff, and 45% felt their financial condition would worsen over the following 3–6 months, evidencing hardships more significant than during the 2008/09 crisis.[7] Meanwhile, needs in the community have skyrocketed. 77% of Ontario organisations in the social services and community development and housing sector have experienced increased demand.[8] Social sector organisations have been faced with an exorbitant demand beyond the mere increase in demand: to find solutions to community members' immediate crises while addressing the complex root causes underlying these crises, all with their limited resources.

It is unclear how much resilience social sector organisations can sustain. More than two years into the pandemic, organisations continue to be strained by staff's decreased well-being and turnover, inflation, inconsistent pandemic requirements, and decreased volunteer bases.[9] The pandemic has intensified the already existing human resource crisis in the social sector.[10] High staff burnout, pushback to return to in-person work, and skills shortages are difficult to manage, especially when layered on top of chronic issues such as the lack of competitive wages and stagnant funding.[11]

---

1 Njoku, "COVID-19 and Environmental Racism," 1.

2 Egede and Walker, "Structural Racism, Social Risk Factors, and Covid-19 — A Dangerous Convergence for Black Americans," 1–2; Webb Hooper, Nápoles, and Pérez-Stable, "COVID-19 and Racial/Ethnic Disparities," 2466.

3 350.org, "Open Letter: #JustRecovery from COVID-19."

4 see, for e.g., Haghani et al., "The Scientific Literature on Coronaviruses, COVID-19 and Its Associated Safety-Related Research Dimensions"; Pinsent, "Understanding Social Innovation and the Need for Resiliency: The Volunteer and Non-Profit Sector."

5 see, for e.g., Haghani et al., "The Scientific Literature on Coronaviruses, COVID-19 and Its Associated Safety-Related Research Dimensions," 1; Pinsent, "Understanding Social Innovation and the Need for Resiliency: The Volunteer and Non-Profit Sector," i–iii.

6 Ontario Nonprofit Network, "2021 ONN State of the Ontario Nonprofit Sector Survey," 4.
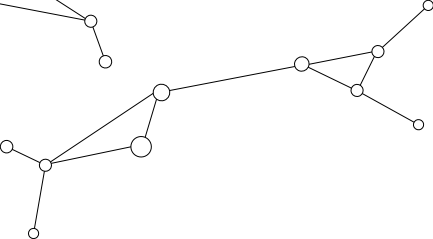
7 Lasby, "Imagine Canada's Sector Monitor: Charities & the COVID-19 Pandemic," 2.

8 Ontario Nonprofit Network, "2021 ONN State of the Ontario Nonprofit Sector Survey," 5.

9 United Way Halton & Hamilton, "The Report on Need in Community: January 2022 Special Report."

10 Ontario Nonprofit Network, "The Nonprofit HR Crisis."

11 Ontario Nonprofit Network, "The Nonprofit HR Crisis."

The urgency with which these challenges have presented themselves coincides with a deliberate increase of sector capacity building efforts, aimed at growing knowledge, skills, resources, and networks to create social impact both locally and across the social ecosystem. Capacity building efforts in social sector organisations often aim at strengthening internal capacity.[12] However, concerted sector strategies that leverage broader community assets to build capacity to address local and system-level needs can both ignite and support transformative social solutions.

Since transformative change benefits from the pressure of outside stakeholders to outline and demand alternatives, a natural partner for social sector organisations keen to support innovation can be found on the campuses of their local post-secondary institutions.[13] Many post-secondary institutions have integrated community engagement and social impact as top priorities, a strategy that has the potential to transform the amount of knowledge, resources, and support available to the social sector. Amongst the many types of endeavours that might connect campus and community, community-engaged experiential-learning partnerships offer a series of advantages continuous with the sector's established reliance on volunteers and the human resource crisis. However, student-engagement in social sector organisations presents an ongoing challenge that can impact outcomes and, ultimately, the consistency of services provided to users.

> With reciprocity at the focus, there is opportunity to bolster capacity on both sides and support continued, iterative knowledge exchange.

Gaps in campus-community reciprocity around EL partnerships

Universities and colleges foster knowledge and skills that can, if they are harnessed adequately, be of great benefit to community organisations. Since 2019, United Way Halton and Hamilton (UWHH) and The/La Collaborative at McMaster University have collaborated to develop several initiatives aimed at connecting post-secondary students and SSOs in mutually beneficial relationships of support, designed to contribute to building capacity in the social impact ecosystem.

The motivation for the development of new models around experiential education and community-engaged learning focused on reciprocity is linked to a twofold challenge: to ensure that social sector organisations benefit as much from receiving the time, talent, and expertise of students and researchers as students gain from real world experience that strengthens their ties to and understanding of community. With reciprocity at the focus, there is opportunity to not only intentionally bolster capacity on both sides, but also to create value much beyond the individual collaborations, namely by generating synergies in the campus-community space that provide opportunities for continued, iterative knowledge exchange.[14]

Opportunities for community-engaged learning take a variety of forms: the Canada Summer Jobs placement program similar to Mitacs internships, community-led volunteer placements, and "innovation lab" style courses offering students "residency" in the community. These and other emerging approaches to experiential learning (EL), however, rest on a host of assumptions about the nature of the challenges and needs EL partnerships are designed to address on both sides. While collaboration can, generally speaking, be presumed to be beneficial to those involved, campus-community relationships can be unnecessarily affected by inadequate expectations and presuppositions that are built into many conventional approaches.

12 see, for e.g., Selamat and Zhang, "The Impact of Design Thinking on Innovative Behaviors, With the Mediating Effect of Knowledge Sharing."

13 Cosner Berzin and Dearing, "Building Capacity for Innovation."

14 Chalmers and Balan-Vnuk, "Innovating Nonprofit Social Ventures."

As the social sector continues to be strained by the pandemic and its impacts, there is some urgency in re-assessing current models of campus-community collaborations aimed at providing added resources and support to social organisations. The magnitude of the task should not deter us; now is a critical time to better understand social dynamics and how to construct ever-improving collaborations in the social innovation ecosystem. To support effective program development and improve engagement, The/La Collaborative and United Way Halton and Hamilton embarked on a project dedicated to exploring the intersection of community engagement, capacity building opportunities for social sector organisations (SSOs), and experiential learning for social sciences and humanities (SSHA) students, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Our research team wanted to gather evidence from with stakeholders on both sides of EL collaborations to better understand and illustrate perceived motivations, needs, interests, and constraints around EL partnerships, broadly construed. We reached out to sixty-four social sector organisations through UWHH's network at that time, eight of which accepted to participate in individual interviews. Through these participating organisations and McMaster, we also recruited six SSHA graduate students to participate in focus groups. Interviewees were involved in a range of community-engaged learning activities: experiential courses, internships, and service learning, as well as in community-based volunteer placements and initiatives, such as UWHH's Social Innovation Lab.[15]

With the intent to formulate general hypotheses about reciprocity of needs that could, once tested, inform the development of community-engaged learning, in particular EL-programs intentionally aimed at capacity building projects around, for instance, social innovation, governance, equity, diversity, and inclusion in the sector, we undertook to identify motivations, drivers, and barriers to participation in EL partnerships more generally. While focused on applying evidence to program development, the study also aimed at acquiring general information about:

- participants' motivations in engaging in EL opportunities,
- the way in which participants on both sides discover these opportunities,
- participants' access to funding programs for EL partnerships and their importance,
- what social sector organisations perceived to be the value of recruiting specifically post-secondary students,
- what SSHA students perceived to be the value of EL partnerships in the social sector,
- participants' perceptions of drivers and barriers, and
- participants' assessment of successes and challenges.

The assumption driving our research is that a better understanding of these factors would help increase clarity and accuracy in defining EL program expectations for all involved, thus increasing the likelihood that participants benefit from a meaningful experience.

Our study was conducted on social service organisations who were registered charities, and implications could be slightly different in social sector organisations without charitable status; however, the questions generated broad insights that may be leveraged in developing EL partnerships across the social sector.

Our study suggests that in order to achieve maximal outcomes on both sides, EL partnerships in the social sector need to navigate specific constraints that do not exist around STEM and professional degrees, where students receive technical training that generally provides predictable baseline value to EL partners. The nature of the diversity that exists in SSHA and the social sector means that there is no way to generalise on the type of technical learning outcomes that may constitute the baseline on which to calibrate EL partners' and students' expectations. For this reason, broad-based SSHA approaches to community-engaged EL can fail to generate the sort of reciprocity that brings genuine value to community-based organisations.

15   United Way Halton & Hamilton, "United Way Social Innovation Labs."
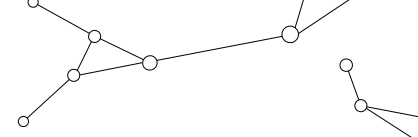
Part 2. Findings

While EL partners involved in this study had an overall positive perspective about their experiences, these experiences did not consistently result in increased capacity and often had greater alignment with mission work. In line with prioritizing relationships and reciprocity, academic institutions could do more to thoroughly integrate basic training on skills required in the social sector.

Successful collaborations

Students' ability to deploy foundational skills, especially those associated with social and emotional intelligence, was perceived as the main indicator of success by social sector actors. Interviewees most often cited personality, including students' attitudes, as the main condition for the success of experiential engagement. One participant explained, "we believe we can train anyone to do anything. But it's the attitude that we really look for". Social sector actors reported that they seek out students who are "self-motivated," "engaging," "communicative", and "interested in impact". To the last point, one SSO actor referred to SSHA students, specifically those studying sociology as "impact driven students". Generally, they also indicate that they value independence and maturity. Strong interpersonal skills were identified as a basic requirement for students working with social sector organisations in the social sector; social sector actors perceived these skills to be required given the community and front-line work typically required. This is in line with the general importance ascribed to foundational skills by employers in all industry sectors.[16]

> "We believe we can train anyone to do anything. But it's the attitude that we really look for."

Next to students' skills and attitudes, social sector actors also pointed to the importance of scoping students' tasks to their skills and goals. The interviewees consistently reported they perceive the balance between scope of work and individual skills as a success condition of EL partnerships, albeit one they also believe requires substantial resources. It was suggested that recruitment and onboarding include meaningful opportunities to meet and discuss students' goals in order to help adjust deliverables where possible. For example, one participant found "that the students will name whether they had a good experience or not based on whether their interests aligned with the actual placement." Participants generally considered that fit and alignment between students' interests and aptitudes on the one hand, and organisational needs on the other, should be embedded in the recruitment or supervision processes, a perception that might be amplified when placement is connected to a specific project or deliverable, as was the case with our sample.

Social sector actors consistently emphasised the importance of providing students with clear expectations as to deliverables, as well as with a transparent understanding of the reporting structure. For example, one participant explained the importance of having a designated supervisory or "go-to" person in the following terms: "when there's too many people that students think they have to report to, especially in charities, when everyone kind of has their hands in everything and we're all the kind of knowing each other's roles, it can be a confusing environment to come into". The students we interviewed also generally expected clarity as to the objectives and deliverables linked to their placement, whether related to their specific project or to the learning outcomes, and students generally appreciated the willingness of some organisations to align placement opportunities with their goals.

Barriers

The results of our study need to be understood against the fact that placement of SSHA students, especially in social sector organisations, is only rarely connected to curriculum embedded internships designed for short-term, full-time

---

16 Lapointe, "Are the Social Sciences and Humanities Positioned to Meet Key Employment Skills?"

employment. With some exceptions, for instance in Social Work schools, curriculum-embedded EL opportunities in SSHA generally work on a model that is in sharp contrast to what is the case in STEM, where co-op, internship, and residency programs are prevalent. In our sample, experiential learning was either offered as part of an individual course and connected to learning outcomes within that course, as a recorded co-curricular activity, a supervised research internship (Mitacs), or pursued as a volunteer extra-curricular opportunity (i.e., independently).[17]

These and other idiosyncrasies of the SSHA context might explain why the students we interviewed understood one of the main success factors to be their community supervisors' level of support regarding the demands of post-secondary coursework, and their amenability to accommodate flexible work hours in response to students' academic commitments.

These added duties, however, are perceived as substantial constraints by social sector actors, who generally view the necessary flexibility as a barrier to successful EL partnerships. Planning and organizing student engagement, especially team-based project involvement, is a significant undertaking. Students' cyclical and, at times, inconsistent availability exacerbates the problem. One participant explained that "academic life goes in seasons" that may not align with SSO programming. They illustrated the point: the "academic year ends in April, but our children's program runs right till June. And we always struggle with getting volunteers for May and June." This same participant observed cyclical changes in stress and workload for students, in line with midterms and/or final examinations and assignments, which can in turn affect their ability to engage effectively with the SSO. When combined with the resource-intensive expectation that project-based engagement fit students' abilities and interests, social sector organisations often struggle to adequately supervise and fully engage students.

Overall, restrictions on students' availability and the expectation that their academic coursework be prioritised was experienced as an overwhelming challenge for EL partners, even more so than the concern some had with students' motivation and maturity. This should be understood on the background of the fact that the EL partnerships in which SSHA students participated were not designed on the model of full-time work-integrated learning and co-op internships, and that, for this reason, EL partnerships need to fit on top of their busy academic workload and scheduling. Even when EL opportunities are curricular or co-curricular (e.g., Mitacs), the default approach is to let students and EL partners negotiate conflicts, which puts undue onus on both students and EL partners. It can be challenging for social sector organisations to offer the sort of flexibility students need, while involving them in activities that revolve around consistent and responsive service.

Calibration of expectations regarding the scope of work and schedule requires increased hands-on involvement from EL partners and is frequently mentioned as taxing, sometimes resulting in sub-optimal experiences on both ends. Participants reported that low capacity, pervasive in the social sector,

17 For a discussion and a taxonomy of experiential learning opportunities, see Chalmers and Balan-Vnuk, "Innovating Nonprofit Social Ventures."

often exacerbates the situation: the work of recruiting, training, and supervising students was perceived as a significant additional burden, even after consideration of the value that student engagement added to the organisations. One participant explained that the balancing of EL benefits and costs is a concern for SSOs, since "they have to get their staff team on board to get the buy-in that having a student is actually enhancing their program, [rather than] than adding more work. I think that's the biggest hurdle, [the] need to demonstrate both capacity to manage and the benefits of employing students". This participant suggested SSOs "have to create that atmosphere within [their] agency [that] having a student is not a burden, but [..] it actually eases the load of the people, of the managers". For some students, the perception was that these constraints affected their experience and, in focus groups, reported they lacked clarity on expectations and reporting structure. In some cases, this caused students to feel under-valued, especially where many other students were involved in the same large project.

Misaligned perceptions of motivations and value

Since students typically only participated in an EL partnership for one academic term, or in connection to one specific project, hosting EL programming leaves social sector organisations in a taxing recurrent cycle of recruitment, training, and supervision. Inconsistent availability and varying degrees of aptitude/preparedness on the students' side also places significant demands upon staff who are working to organize programs that may depend upon student engagement.

> One important motivation is the value of creating a "talent pool" from which they can recruit, while at the same time benefitting from external funding connected to the opportunity.

Nonetheless, some social sector actors we interviewed took post-secondary students to be important members of the communities they aim to serve, and by this token, they considered student engagement as part of their mission. One participant linked this to the social sector's work on diversity and equity and explained that "if you really believe in full inclusion, it's hard to say no to a student". Another reported on their organisation strategy: "immediately when they come into our organisation, they're treated as team-members. […] They get the same information everyone does. So, there's that feeling of inclusivity and engagement right off the get go". This was also described as making the students part of the "charity family". Moreover, participants perceived post-secondary students to be especially well situated to engage in certain kinds of programming, such as youth and senior programming, where they provide peer support to youth or connect seniors to different generations. For example, one SSO actor mentioned the importance of an "intergenerational posture", and that postsecondary students are both excellent mentors for youth, demonstrating successes and possibilities to those close in age, and that seniors "appreciate having younger people around as volunteers or as placement students, so that intergenerational piece is even important for our seniors."

One important motivation for social sector actors engaging in EL partnerships was the value of creating a "talent pool" from which they can recruit, while at the same time benefitting from external funding connected to the opportunity. Some agencies highly valued the opportunity to train the next generation of agency staff and/or prospective community supporters. They took the student-to-staff pipeline seriously and treated student engagement as an opportunity to streamline employment in the sector at large. One participant explained, "it's the best way to recruit . . . if you really want to handpick your staff and train them", and another described EL partnerships as opportunities "to find young potential leaders" who may join the sector.

The mutual benefit of EL was described as a "win-win situation", where organisations gain, and the student becomes an employee. Another SSO

actor pointed to how student exposure to the work of SSOs is, "an opportunity to empower students even if they never work with us, to become ambassadors for charity".

Some agencies specifically sought SSHA students because of a perceived value specific to their training. One participant explained, "recently we looked actually at the Mitacs program, and that's allowed us to bring on master's level students within our organization to do some of the projects that we don't necessarily have the expertise around the table for".

Nonetheless, the prospect of EL partnership was made more vastly appealing to agencies by opportunities for subsidies: in fact, from the perspective of the social sector actors we interviewed, EL partnerships are only possible if they come with partial or full subsidies (or carry no additional direct costs as is the case with volunteering). [18]

It is interesting to note, then, that students did not perceive the prospect of employment in the host organisation as the main benefit of experiential learning. SSHA students reported having diverse motivations for pursuing EL opportunities with social sector organisations. For instance, while some expressed the desire to contribute to social impact, a number of students indicated interest in the prospect of developing skills through opportunities that aligned with their values or their interest in a particular agency. This alignment of value was also clearly acknowledged by EL partners who felt students wanted to have a sense of "legacy". For these students, the possibility that their engagement would create positive impact was a meaningful motivating factor for seeking out the specific engagement opportunities on which they were reporting.

The role played by social values seems to be significant and, in at least one case, creating social impact through community engagement was viewed as the main goal of experiential learning, while acquiring skills or increasing employment prospects along the way was incidental. On the other hand, some students also sought out engagement to build their resumés while in school, typically with the intention that their engagement would align with a career goal but with some great variability as to the right recipe.

18 Programs offered through Mitacs, the Canada Summer Jobs, and co-op placements, which partially subsidize the cost of post-secondary students, allow agencies to access high-skilled talent for often less than half the standard employment costs. While the modalities of each program vary, this subsidy can often cover up to 75% of a salary.
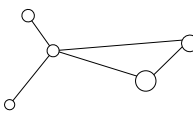
Part 3. Discussion

Understanding perceptions around EL partnerships

Participants in our study highlighted a variety of challenges that may be limiting the potential for EL partnerships to create a reciprocal campus-community ecosystem. Nonetheless, the overarching value of EL partnerships was viewed as positive. It is unclear, given the intangible yet extensive cost social sector managers associate with recruitment, onboarding, and supervision of project deliverables, whether EL partnerships would still be seen as desirable by the participating social sector organisation if they were not generously subsidized through a variety of programs. This is not to say that the value of EL partnership for SSOs is exhausted by the offer of a temporary, cost-neutral increase in operational capacity around a project. Social sector actors see EL partnerships as a way to grow their social and intellectual capital, which, in turn, puts them in a better position to create social impact. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder that social sector organisations must think about the sustainability and resilience of programs, and the friction involved in EL partnerships may prevent social sector organisations from optimizing EL partnerships during times of crisis.

> The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder that social sector organisations must think about the sustainability and resilience of programs.

Our study suggests that generally held notions regarding the presumed motivations and benefits of EL partnerships were only partly shared by participants. Administrators of EL programs generally advertise EL opportunities as a way for students to acquire skills and increase their employability, and for social sector organisations to expand their human resource capacity to create impact. Presumably, EL partnerships in which participants were engaged did provide valuable opportunities for students to build skills and for SSOs to increase their capacity for impact. However, this picture is at best incomplete. SSOs do not always accommodate EL partnerships to increase their organisational capacity, they are motivated by other factors, for instance, the fact that engagement aligns with their mission. Likewise, students' motivations to engage in EL partnerships are not uniformly driven by the intent to build skills. Though we did not ask social sector actors what they believed students' motivations were, we noted that when they discussed students' motivations, they understood them to be largely career-related. In fact, students' motivations were very often misunderstood by social sector actors, who consistently reported that vocational skills-building was the benefit to students accessing EL opportunities in their organisation.

The tension between scope of work and students' skills

Misalignment between the actual motivations and the perceived motivations of EL partners on both sides has spillover effects. Students reported an expectation to have meaningful experiences that would increase their skills and/or create impact. However, this aspiration is presumably impacted by both the level of engagement of their SSO supervisor and the student's ability to conduct the work and meet deliverables. It is no surprise, then, that participants consistently emphasised the importance of properly scoping the work to fit students' skills and interests and having regular check points.

Matching students and social sector organisations on the basis of specific individual skillsets and interests, however, requires negotiation and flexibility on both sides, which heightens the importance of foundational skills. Whenever aligning EL opportunities to recurring programs or initiatives is not an option, EL partners on both sides must, each time, find a way to assign a scope of work that is of interest to the student, aligned with their capabilities, and feasible within the timeframe. It is reasonable to assume that calibrating expectations is an iterative process that also involves regular feedback on progress and check-ins with supervisors. As with any new partnership or contract, this requires a negotiation that is made even more challenging by the fact that partners' perceptions do not fully align with actual expectations of the other party. EL partners may mitigate this risk by implementing some form of interview or selection

process to help them scope work to fit with individual students' abilities, but such processes are resource intensive and does not address the main issues around scalability.

At the very least, part of the solution is to provide EL partners with an accurate and evidence-based understanding of their respective contexts, interests, and needs. Gaps in knowledge about motivations, needs, and capacity on both sides limit the ability of EL partners to negotiate and consider how to calibrate the experience to meet relevant expectations. For instance, since most students have little work experience and may have little understanding of the social sector, they may not be in a position to help community partners form accurate expectations about their capacity to help. Likewise, SSOs cannot know what students are capable of with respect to a project or set of tasks unless they are familiar with their interests, the curriculum of the training programs from which they stem, and their individual work experience. Faced with uncertainty, they may reasonably be more averse to the risk of involving them in relevant opportunities. The main takeaway is that we need to question the administrative assumption that all EL opportunities add net capacity to community partners, and refrain from marketing opportunities as such, unless there is demonstrated evidence of it.

Experiential learning in SSHA and the social sector

The bespoke quality of EL opportunities that are scoped each time on the basis of capacity and interest through a process that engages community supervisor, students, and possibly also various campus stakeholders (e.g., instructors and community-engagement offices) is a unique feature of almost all extant experiential learning programs in SSHA. It can

also appear to be an indomitable and unavoidable feature of EL partnerships in the social sector.
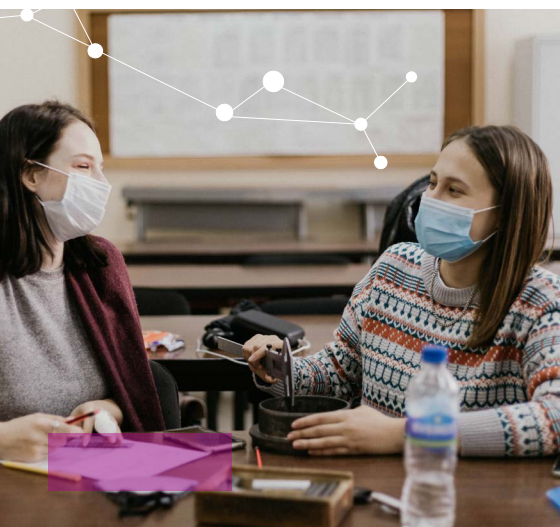
Social sector organisations have diverse and ever-changing portfolios, informed by community and organisational needs that are, in turn, shaped by evolving contexts and the consistently limited availability of resources. Unlike fields such as Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), where EL partnerships revolve around an employer's need for specific technical skillsets, it seems that the skills needed to engage with programs that navigate complex social issues in response to diverse community groups are soft, transferable, foundational skills, such as critical thinking and social and emotional intelligence, which are eminently difficult to teach.[19]

These features of EL partnerships in the social sector lead to a paradox. On the one hand, community-based EL is often positioned as a way for students to build the "soft", "transferable", or "foundational skills" they need to contribute to innovation and the emotional intelligence needed in any collaborative, professional environment, regardless of sector. On the other hand, these very skills are required and considered critically important for meaningful participation in a social sector organisation, which seems to create a vicious circle. Post-secondary institutions dedicated to fostering reciprocity in EL partnerships must take seriously the notions that some basic level of foundational skills-building is a requisite, especially those that are required in successful professional interactions (e.g., leadership, effective communications, conflict resolution, and EDI literacy), and that in order to produce positive employability skills and outcomes downstream, EL partnerships require a range of structured interventions upstream that are designed to equip students at the foundational level.

Since many social sector organisations work directly or indirectly with vulnerable populations, students' preparedness and the proper calibration of EL partners' expectations have strong ethical implications and should not be driven only be considerations of effectiveness and efficiency. It is common sense that social sector organisations that consider

19 Cukier, Hodson, and Omar, "'Soft' Skills Are Hard: A Review If the Literature."
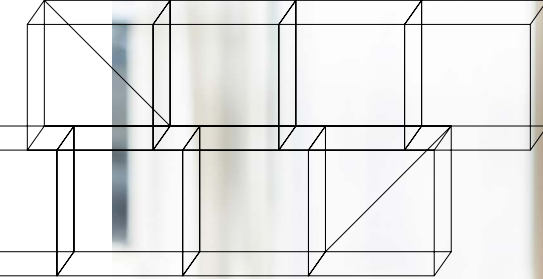
student engagement to be part of their mission would nonetheless prioritize community members at the center of their mandate.

Sometimes, student engagement and community-focus coalesce to create more impact and capacity, and our study demonstrates that student engagement is sometimes perceived to be particularly apt at supporting programming around children/youth or older adults. However, engaging students directly with clients in the delivery of programs and services can be challenging, especially when students lack flexibility around scheduling and need to balance academic workload.

Community members accessing social services often do so to address precarious situations (e.g., with income, mental health, etc.) and unpredictability and changeability can negatively impact them. Organisations with specific routine programs can mitigate these adverse effects by providing routine training to trainees and/or by only accepting candidates that can commit to the required schedules. However, for programs and services that are designed to adapt to clients' unique needs or contexts, these solutions may not be applicable or sustainable.

Generally speaking, social sector organisations interested in EL partnerships can also adopt strategies to streamline the integration of students. They may, for instance, organise planning to including more standalone projects to fit EL models and/or develop processes aimed at onboarding EL trainees into project teams. They may also design EL opportunities that revolve around administrative responsibilities because they are generally more predictable and less challenging, but for that very reason can be less attractive to students, given their motivations. Even with such strategies, the wild diversity of social sector organisations, the enormous amount of work on each staff person's plate, and the changing needs arising from clients are likely to contribute to a dynamic environment where conditions are difficult to predict.

While organisations in the social sector often rely on volunteers to create social impact, their organisational structures and operational cultures are rarely designed to accommodate a flow of "interns" or a broad commitment to experiential training. This creates an environment in which, unsurprisingly, soft skills, and especially those that underpin independence and initiative, are especially valued. While students engaged in these dynamic environments may not always feel that there are clear expectations or scope of work, this may in fact provide them with a close approximation of the actual experience of someone working in the sector. Students who have baseline skills and competencies around maturity, independence, and initiative may be especially well equipped to cope with the fast-paced, dynamic aspects of the social sector organisations. However, being able to operate effectively in these environments and maximize learning requires foundational level skills.

SSHA vs STEM

The implementation of EL programming in the social and public sectors presents a double challenge from a resourcing perspective: the social sector is both extremely diverse and acutely under-resourced. Unlike what is the case in STEM, where more resources and experience are dedicated to implementing and managing broad-scale EL placement through industry internships or co-op programs, the resources dedicated to experiential placement in SSHA faculties are scarce. Some community-based programming is emerging through "innovation hubs", city labs, and funding programs, such as those offered by Canada Summer Jobs and Mitacs; however, the potential of such initiatives is constrained by operational and cultural realities.

Access to funding to set up EL programming is generally linked to the requirement that impact be documented. Large funding initiatives are ultimately justified by the scale or scope of outcomes, which is easier to achieve in sectors where employers' needs and students' skills-levels are predictable and easily calibrated. In technical fields like STEM, it is easier to design EL placement programs that meet these requirements; STEM students participating in work-integrated learning, co-op, internships, and residency programs are typically involved in projects where they are asked to apply their knowledge to technical tasks and deliverables that are clearly defined. Under these conditions, students are well positioned to hone the other non-technical professional skills that will make them "work ready" by the time they graduate. In these cases, experiential learning is a fitting solution to foundational skill-building that can help bridge the employability gap; EL allows future graduates to adjust to a prospective work environment and, ideally, fast-track recruitment even before the completion of their degree. EL partnerships that involve SSHA students and organisations in the social sector, however, revolve around contexts that involve great variability, vast intangibles, and/or complex realities where outcomes are not clear cut. This makes the STEM model for internships difficult to implement and scale to the SSHA context.

Since EL development and scaling has been successful with STEM, a number of questions emerge about the ability to apply these models or develop new models for other disciplines. How do we develop and assess "work readiness" in non-STEM fields? What does it mean for SSHA graduates to be "work ready"?

While the answer is unlikely to be simple, there is an argument to be made that SSHA degrees are in some important sense vocational (not professional) degrees, and that EL partnerships benefit both SSHA students' access to employment and the social sector organisations that may employ them. The main challenge is to set up scalable programs dedicated to preparing large cohorts of SSHA students for the diversity of tasks and problems they will need to address over the course of a career in the social sector, while simultaneously ensuring that the participating community organisations in fact benefit from the exchange.
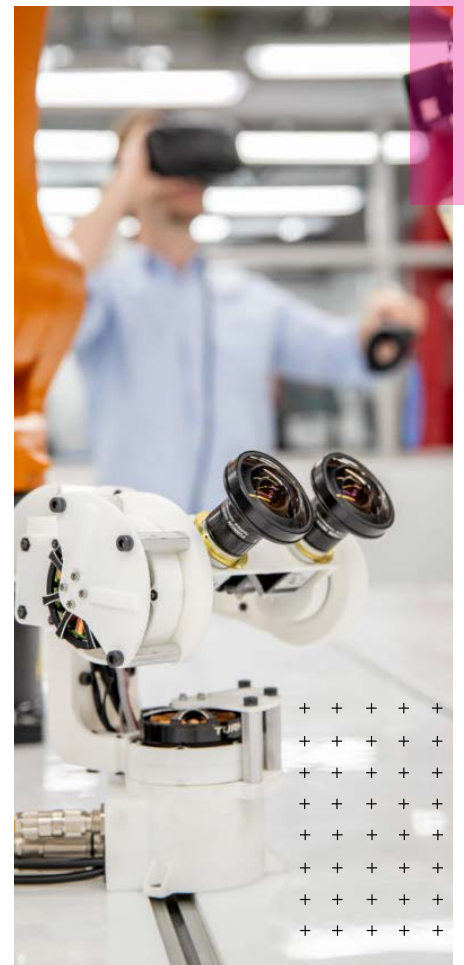
Experiential learning is a fitting solution to foundational skill-building that can help bridge the employability gap

Missed opportunities

The complexity and breadth of community issues calls for solutions that draw on insight and expertise across all sectors. Social sector organisations are often on the frontlines of societal change. They have nourished trusted relationships and have deep, tangible knowledge of both needs and assets in the community. These are critical in driving systems change, but it would be unreasonable to expect that the organisations responsible for addressing immediate community needs also have the full capacity to create concerted progress toward transformational change on their own. Post-secondary institutions, and universities in particular, can also play an elemental role in creating and sustaining innovation and sustainable development in the social impact ecosystem. However, for universities to be in a position to play a transformational role in responding to community needs, strong reciprocal and transversal partnerships are needed.

Social sector organisations have first-hand experience of the complexities that can help academic partners shape their approaches and strategies for impact, guiding them exactly where support is needed, and increasing the relevance of the solutions that are deployed. On the other hand, academic partners have a wealth of human resources and intellectual capital whose capacity for community engagement can be unnecessarily constrained by infrastructure gaps (e.g., lack of incentives, recognition, and reward), or academic cultures (e.g., misperception of the value of certain types of expertise; gaps in the understanding of needs).

While the extent to which social sector organisations would continue to engage in EL without supportive grants and programs is unclear, it is evident that strengthening community engaged learning is in the best interests of post-secondary institutions with SSHA programs that seek ways to partake in the social impact ecosystem. In particular, SSHA programs and faculties are well-positioned to promote institutional strategies and programs for EL that are specially designed to contribute to the social impact and innovation ecosystem.[20] Such programs not only cater to an institution's community engagement mission, but they can also be part of a strategy to increase the perceived social impact of SSHA disciplines and training, and useful for achieving social capital and trust in communities, thus bolstering the foundation on which the impact of research partnerships and knowledge dissemination rests.

EL opportunities are in ever-increasing demand by students. Universities need to demonstrate their relevance in the vocational space defines by the SSHA. One promising approach is to leverage EL partnerships to address various generic needs that social sector organisations have around capacity. Below, we formulate recommendations that aim to help address barriers to developing and implementing community-engaged learning.

---

20 Edge, Martin, and McKean, "Getting to Work: Career Skills Development for Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates."
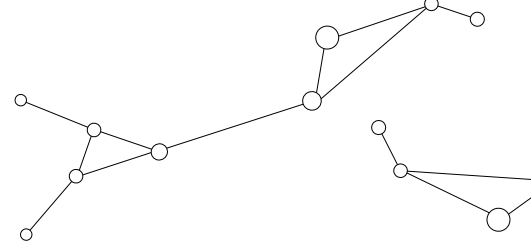
Part 4. Recommendations

Design models that foster reciprocity

In principle, there are no formatting constraints for designing EL partnerships activities that create the sort of value that can position a post-secondary institution as an actor in the social impact ecosystem. However, effective EL partnerships require a concerted commitment to building reciprocal relationships. Campus-community EL partnerships need to bring value to learners (in line with the universities' academic missions) while meeting the needs of community partners, whose mission will lead them to favour engagement that moves beyond mere transaction, in order to build relationships based on trust and tangible outcomes for their community; this is continuous with the principles of community engagement developed by most universities.[21]

When considering how to engineer reciprocal EL partnerships in the social innovation sphere, our study suggests that three constraints need to be reconciled:

a. the EL partnership must contribute to increased capacity and impact for EL community partners,

b. the EL partnership must meet the needs and interests of SSHA students for broad experiential access, and

c. in order to play a much needed part in universities' contribution to social innovation and systems change, EL partnership must be informed by systems-level considerations (e.g., reciprocity, broad accessibility, and capacity).

Opportunities engineered to integrate (a), (b), and (c) will create the conditions in which post-secondary institutions can leverage EL to embed layers of opportunities for collaborative engagement that can strengthen the bond between their campus and community, while supporting talent through enhanced pedagogical practices.

In order to ensure that EL collaborations are in fact contributing to social good and offer sustainable community resources during times of crisis, it is necessary to reassess assumptions around each partner's objectives and factors for success. A key factor for improving success involves universities bolstering their contributions to EL partnerships by adding supports to strengthen both student and community outcomes without placing additional burden on EL community partners. For this reason, EL partnership programs are best developed through co-design and, in turn, require education on all sides to ensure that each party expands their understanding and can contribute to developing relationships that bring net value for each partner and community, in both the short and long term. In doing so, academia will be better positioned as a resource for generating proactive change and supporting resilience during times of crisis.

---

21 see, for e.g., McMaster University, "Principles of Community Engagement"; Dalhousie University, "Third Century Promise: Dalhousie University's Strategic Plan 2021-2026"; Université de Montreal, "Sustainable Development at L'Université De Montréal Strategic Plan, 2021-2023: Transition To Sustainable Campuses"; Carleton University, "Best Practices for Community-Campus Engagement"; Simon Fraser University, "Values and Principles"; The University of British Columbia, "What Is Community Engagement & Why Is It Important?"

Build students' foundational skills prior to EL engagements

There is no reason, in principle, to place constraints on the form EL partnerships ought to take. A breadth of EL opportunities is likely needed to address the diversity of needs and contexts in social sector organisations. However, the insights that were shared during our study about the motivations, drivers, and barriers to EL partnerships in the social service sector suggest that prevalent EL models may neither maximize outcomes for students and social sector partners, nor promote reciprocity in campus-community relationships. This is a missed opportunity, especially for SSHA faculties and departments in universities, who tend to see in EL partnerships an irreplaceable opportunity to build the skills of their graduates.

Few SSHA programs besides Social Work fit the model of professional schools, designed to prepare students for a specific profession or career path. While it generally does not lead to specific professions, training in SSHA is vocational in a "broad sense". Most SSHA degrees require students to develop generally applicable skills like critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and deliberative and analytical skills. This is not a mere added benefit, SSHA degrees attract and train individuals who will access employment in sectors that are continuously evolving and where adaptability and nimbleness is crucial (e.g., social and health services, public administration, and non-profit). Because the skills required in the social sector are multifaceted, diverse, and complex, the seemingly "open-ended" nature of vocational training in SSHA degrees is likely to be an advantage, if the task is to prepare students for the non-linear complexity they will face in employment and equip them with the intellectual, cultural, and political sensitivities required in the sector.

While this does not exclude the need to learn and apply relevant management knowledge (e.g., digital skills; project and data management), successful employment in the social sector requires the deployment of foundational skills (e.g., critical thinking and self-management) that take years to develop but are needed to contribute to innovative, adaptable, collaborative and socially intelligent organisations.[22] If it does contribute to honing foundational skills that can be transferred in an array of professional contexts, leveraging EL training in the social sector could turn out to be an effective strategy to make SSHA students "work ready", by developing the transferrable and soft skills that are highly valued across all industry sectors. As the need for employees equipped to work in socially responsible businesses continues to grow,[23] EL training in the social sector might provide an alternative to service learning when it comes to increasing students' perceived employability. Therefore, the benefit of EL opportunities to students does not primarily have to be in the nature of a specific opportunity, but in features of the experience that focus on inherently transferable skills.

> The skills required in the social sector are multifaceted, diverse, and complex.

Better preparation would allow students to focus their EL placement on applying and refining skills and expand the level of projects in which they might be invited to participate. In doing so, students would maximize their work readiness while improving the outputs they deliver to social sector partners. Since students often participated in social sector EL opportunities with hopes of creating social impact, and some social sector partners participated because supporting youth aligned directly with their mission, investing in training to support mission- and capacity-related outcomes can be mutually reinforcing.[24]

Improving the baseline competencies that students are equipped with prior to EL placements will create more meaningful experiences. As such, the investment may also result in greater reciprocal outcomes for organisations more interested in fostering affiliation between youth and their mission. Finally, developing dedicated EL adjacent foundational skills-

22 Cukier et al., "Soft Skills are Hard"; Lapointe, "Foundational Skills Needs and What Social Sciences and Humanities Need to Know."

23 University of Waterloo, "(University of Waterloo) Incorporating Service-Learning into University Courses Centre for Teaching Excellence."

24 Not all students are youth, and the interests and needs of mature students for EL is a question that would need to be addressed separately.

building programming to equip students with baseline competencies they need to maximize their efficacy with and enjoyment of their EL placements would also address social sector motivations to attract more equipped staff and volunteers and contribute to addressing the sector-wide human resource crisis. [25]

Deepen understanding of assets, needs and success

EL models are generally designed to match assets with needs; they balance the putative cost of student engagement (the asset) with the added benefit of the support it can lend to organisational targets (needs). From an employer's standpoint, contributing to students' increased applied know-how is in line with their own demand for fully prepared future employees with hands-on experience.

However, the assumption that EL take place in a transactional framework of this type rests on the perception that the needs of students and employers are fundamentally asymmetric, with students as a "learner" needing to be trained and the EL partner as "(co)-instructor" providing this training. This orientation also assumes that success is a function of the student's ability to learn while managing to deliver a service or a project, and of the EL partner's ability to create value on the short term through an interaction that also adds to students' learning.[26] Our study suggests that this picture does not reflect the complexity and nuances of the motivations, interests, and needs of EL partners in the social sectors and students in the SSHA.

There is no reason why participants in EL partnerships cannot be both learners in some respect and experts in others. There are, on the other hand, good reasons to reject the assumption that EL partnership must revolve around an assets/needs model rooted in role-asymmetry. Assuredly, we need to maintain, as a central principle of community engagement, student exposure to the EL partners' processes and cultures in their own spaces (even only virtual). However, this does not exclude that universities bring additional value to EL partners by finding ways to integrate the sharing of their own in-house assets. EL models such as the one developed around "Innovation for Social Impact", a partnered initiative designed to leverage EL to increase capacity in the social sector. Innovation for Social Impact promotes cross-sectoral co-learning instruction by opening the classroom to offer training to both students and EL partners, simultaneously.[27] The underlying approach, which can be generalised, involves structured coaching to support SSOs on project scoping to develop clear and shared expectations all the while insuring that they can share their expertise in class. Administrative support in recruiting and structuring student experience on campus lightens the traditional burden of community partners around EL.

Generally speaking, it is safe to assume that EL partners would benefit from more intentional and broader campus supports to engage most fruitfully. For example, EL partners might benefit from toolkits designed to address some of the limitations we identified around the calibration of expectation involved in goal setting, project scoping, and feedback frameworks, which academic institutions are well positioned to develop.

There is no single solution when it comes to creating more intentional and impactful EL partnerships, but the overall objective should consistently be to build more reciprocal campus-community relationships around EL programs. Given the role of scoping the work to the skills of the students, increasing skills-literacy might reduce the likelihood of missed opportunities or suboptimal outcome. To this purpose, developing a framework to discuss skills, assets, and needs might help calibrate expectations and increase the perception of value. Such a framework could also inform the development of EL toolkits or training this might entail.
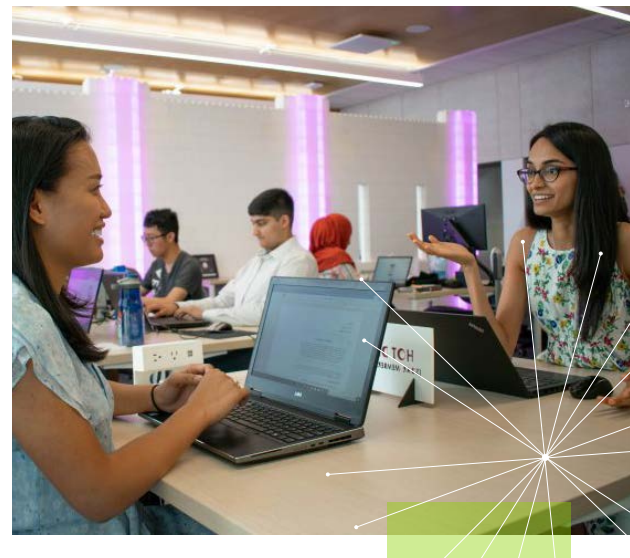
25 Ontario Nonprofit Network, "The Nonprofit HR Crisis."

26 Lapointe and Turner, "Leveraging the Skills of Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates."

27 Future Skills Centre, "Shock-Proofing Skills for the Not-for-Profit Sector."

EL partnerships revolve around multifaceted needs whose fulfilment might require tailoring of opportunities to produce value for all involved. This requires consideration of the role of student engagement within the broader system of associated initiatives related to training, research and innovation on campuses. It may also require a "long view" of campus-community relationships that shifts markers of success toward broader social aims, making space for collaboration pathways designed to complement and bolster the outcome of EL engagement, strengthening relationships and capacity over time rather than approaching EL partnership as short-term, disconnected initiatives. This, however, requires that we appreciate not only the more layered relationships that connect individual students and their EL partners, but the complex ecosystem in which campuses and communities evolve.

Another approach is to create EL partnership models designed to leverage valuable assets that are currently underutilized. For example, there is a well-known disconnect between the universities and their community when it comes to channeling the extensive specialised research expertise and knowledge resources of campuses into partnered projects that accommodate both practical requirements and emerging grassroots insights. This issue, linked to knowledge absorption capacity, is critical.[28] In the social innovation ecosystem, knowledge absorption, while considered key to impact, remains one of the primary challenges, and one that could be addressed through EL partnerships.

One solution is to develop EL models designed to leverage the broad disciplinary and methodological expertise of emerging and established researchers, especially at the graduate level, to provide EL partners with knowledge resources. However, campuses and communities both have expertise and know-how. EL partnerships designed to increase capacity for knowledge integration and social innovation can serve to open a two-way street that mobilizes grassroots insights into the academic research space, steering the focus of academic initiatives to ensure their relevance. Academic institutions would do well to question commonly held notions about the benefits of EL opportunities and apply collaborative methods to determine strengths and gaps on each side.

Collaboration is fundamental in all aspects of EL program development and requires the direct participation of community partners who can share knowledge and provide feedback, to ensure that programs, processes, and tools are adequate for implementation in the sector. Approaches such as empathy-based and end-user integrated co-design[29] can structure collaborative processes while breaking down siloes and perceived cultural hierarchies that tend to draw academia and community apart. Combined with the right tools to build foundational skills literacy, EL opportunities designed with community partners have the potential to transform campus-community relationships, and to position universities as central players in the social impact and innovation ecosystem.

Aim for systems-level impact

From a social ecosystem perspective, there are good reasons to ensure that post-secondary institutions encourage and support EL partnerships as part of a concerted community-engagement strategy aimed at bringing about deep societal impact. EL developers must make a deliberate effort to appreciate the fact that the social sector's primary goal is to address social problems and create social change, and that this is a non-negligible difference with other industry sectors.

Failing to appreciate EL partners' motivations may not immediately affect demand. However, evidence that current EL models struggle to maximize outcomes for all stakeholders means that basic principles concerning offer and demand cannot be assumed to be good indicators of actual value. Organisations might be attracted to the prospect of acquiring extra organisational capacity to offset limited sector resources. However, it must be stressed that scarcity can create conditions in which the prospect of some short term help in the form of grants, volunteers, or otherwise remains attractive even if, paradoxically, it strains organisations in other ways.

28 Schilling, J. & Kluge, A, "Barriers to Organisational Learning".

29 Nogueira, Bjørkan & Dale, "Conducting Research in a Post-normal Paradigm: Practical Guidance for Applying Co-production of Knowledge"; Bate Robert, G., Bringing user experience to healthcare improvement: The concepts, methods and practices of experience-based design.; Donetto et al, "Experience-based Co-design and Healthcare Improvement: Realizing Participatory Design in the Public Sector"

For organisations who take seriously their community mission, the sentiment of value might also be derived from an abstract, yet widely held conviction that EL partnerships contribute to employability and learning of students. Whether this is enough to create net value is unclear. Piecemeal recruitment processes, focussed on individuals, just like the brokering of opportunities, supervision, follow-ups, and assessment that characterizes current EL practices, makes commitment time consuming and cost-heavy. This is even more consequential if all the SSHA approaches to community-engaged EL are not designed or capable to scale. However, it would be a mistake to think that there is no way to streamline models for supporting EL partnerships involving SSHA students in the social sector.

The most effective way to strengthen and optimize the value of EL partnerships on both sides is to develop EL models that can both create reciprocity and be scaled, thus decreasing marginal cost downstream—both human and financial—for both post-secondary institutions and community partners. The argument for scalability is not just economic, it is also one that ties into an understanding of systems-level impact. In order to create impact in the social innovation ecosystem, academic institutional strategies need to involve the development of engagement structures that are designed to weave into the fabric of community. Scalability needs to be understood as continuous with sustainability and impact.

Optimal reciprocity and scalability are generally easier to achieve in programs whose outcome is a professional degree, such as Social Work (or engineering), in which the responsibility of coordinating EL programming is generally carried by academic institutions, and where all stakeholders are able to build shared expectations around learning objectives, lessening the amount of work involved with scoping work to students' skills. How can we create the conditions for reciprocity and scalability (calibrated expectation and shared coordination responsibilities) for EL partnerships that revolve not around professional degrees, but around the broad vocational training the SSHAs offer?

Lean on universities' community-engagement mandate

Assuredly, academic institutions could do more to help students build the foundational skills they need to lead successful EL partnerships, at all levels of SSHA programming. At the graduate level specifically, this is continuous with fostering a culture in which the creation and curation of durable community-focused research partnerships is properly valued and rewarded. Such programs should go beyond theory and principles, building competence around basic elements of career development that reflect best practices for participating in community work and interacting in professional settings. Academic institutions should also assess the burden of policies and processes attendant to EL programs such as ethics clearance, funding applications for EL partners, and, considering the constraints of social sector organisations, look for ways to streamline and increase transparency. Solutions, whatever they are, should reflect insights of community partners who, in turn, need to be clear about the benefit of these processes on their impact mandates and activities.

> Scalability needs to be understood as continuous with sustainability and impact.

In considering systems-level approaches to reciprocity and impact, post-secondary institutions should also think outside of the box and consider campus-wide strategies that are multilayered and versatile, and in which EL programming can participate. For instance, EL projects that students pursue independently as part of extra-curricular volunteer opportunities do not place any direct demands on the academic partners, who are not involved. However, post-secondary institutions may also consider the availability of volunteer opportunities in their communities to constitute an opportunity to increase impact and create reciprocity in the broader ecosystem.[30] Even when volunteer positions are not specifically linked to an academic program, they are fertile grounds in which training programs targeting foundational skills can be couched. The pandemic has emphasised the impact that loss of volunteering can have on SSOs,[31] and system-wide connection is not easily supported by any one organisation. Post-secondary institutions can also leverage such opportunities to enhance their community connections and help broker matches to increase outcomes for organisations and students alike.

Designing EL opportunities that eliminate difficulties associated with scoping community-based projects to fit students skills is all the more important in that it might lead to greater and more stable interest from social sector organisations in participating in EL partnerships. Additional measures may also be considered that guarantee an absolute baseline benefit for EL partners. Whatever the way forward, it is imperative to involve prospective partners in the research and development processes of EL opportunities, co-design, or design thinking is a good starting point. Yet, in such a case, they must receive incentives or compensation for participation; the evolving nature of such co-design often involves unclear and uncertain outcomes and, hence, unpredictable value for the EL partners.

Those in post-secondary education who are leading EL program development must be mindful to gauge adequately the relevant institutional and systems-level factors in both academia and the community. In particular, the misalignment between perceived motivations and actual motivations of both students and EL partners should give pause. At the very least, if the aim is to create more reciprocal and scalable models, academic organisations seeking to develop EL programming in the social sector must put greater emphasis on social sector needs, interests, and constraints. They must also acknowledge that unless the very mission of a social sector organisation focuses and converges with that of post-secondary institutions, it is unlikely that the organisation will be able to substantially invest in accommodating academic partners' needs.

The weight of this consideration should be in proportion to the fact that while post-secondary institutions' interest in EL partnerships are set to persist and grow, it is unclear how social sector organisations' participation in EL partnerships can remain stable or grow alongside demand unless current obstacles are removed. Designing EL partnerships that accommodate these sorts of constraints should be part of universities' institutional commitment to community engagement. To drive intent and create additional incentives, it is crucial that community-engaged learning become a standard feature of knowledge mobilisation strategies.

---

30 Ontario Nonprofit Network, "Risk, Resilience, and Rebuilding Communities: The State of Ontario Nonprofits Three Months into the Pandemic."

31 VanderBerg, "Volunteer Hesitancy Impacting Hamilton's Not-for-Profits"; Lasby, "Imagine Canada's Sector Monitor: Charities & the COVID-19 Pandemic"; United Way Halton & Hamilton, "The Report on Need in Community: January 2022 Special Report"; Charity Village and The Portage Group, "Human Resources Impact of COVID-19 on Canadian Charities and Nonprofits"; Ontario Nonprofit Network, "2021 ONN State of the Ontario Nonprofit Sector Survey."

Bibliography

350.org. "Open Letter: #JustRecovery from COVID-19," 2022. https://350.org/just-recovery/.

Carleton University. "Best Practices for Community-Campus Engagement." Carleton University: Community First, n.d. https://carleton.ca/communityfirst/2018/best-practices-for-community-campus-engagement/.

Chalmers, Dominic M., and Eva Balan-Vnuk. "Innovating Not-for-Profit Social Ventures: Exploring the Microfoundations of Internal and External Absorptive Capacity Routines." International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship 31, no. 7 (November 2013): 785–810. https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242612465630.

Charity Village and The Portage Group. "Human Resources Impact of COVID-19 on Canadian Charities and Nonprofits," April 2021. https://charityvillage.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/COVID_Pulse_Survey_April_2021.pdf.

Cosner Berzin, Stephanie, and Tiziana C. Dearing. "Building Capacity for Innovation: The Case of an Academic–Nonprofit Partnership." Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership 9, no. 2 (2019): 149–64. https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2019-V9-I2-9740.

Cukier, Wendy, Jaigris Hodson, and Aisha Omar. "'Soft' Skills Are Hard: A Review If the Literature." Ryerson University, November 2015. https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/diversity/reports/KSG2015_SoftSkills_FullReport.pdf.

Dalhousie University. "Third Century Promise: Dalhousie University's Strategic Plan 2021-2026." Strategic Plan. Dalhousie University, 2021. https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/about/Strategic-Planning/Dalhousie-University-Strategic-Plan-2021-2026.pdf.

Edge, Jessica, Elizabeth Martin, and Matthew McKean. "Getting to Work: Career Skills Development for Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates." The Conference Board of Canada, February 2018. https://www.conferenceboard.ca/temp/73836a91-e1a3-4e02-a54b-ad24b1894848/9463_Getting%20to%20Work_RPT.pdf.

Egede, Leonard E., and Rebekah J. Walker. "Structural Racism, Social Risk Factors, and Covid-19 — A Dangerous Convergence for Black Americans." New England Journal of Medicine 383, no. 12 (September 17, 2020): e77. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2023616.

Future Skills Centre. "Shock-Proofing Skills for the Not-for-Profit Sector." Future Skills Centre, 2022. https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/shock-proofing-nonprofits/.

Haghani, Milad, Michiel C.J. Bliemer, Floris Goerlandt, and Jie Li. "The Scientific Literature on Coronaviruses, COVID-19 and Its Associated Safety-Related Research Dimensions: A Scientometric Analysis and Scoping Review." Safety Science 129 (September 2020): 104806. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2020.104806.

Lapointe, Sandra. "Are the Social Sciences and Humanities Positioned to Meet Key Employment Skills?" Policy Options, February 2, 2021. https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/february-2021/are-the-social-sciences-and-humanities-positioned-to-meet-key-employment-skills/.

Lapointe, Sandra, and Catherine Klausen. "Foundational Skills Needs and What Social Sciences and Humanities Need to Know." The/La Collaborative: McMaster University, 2021. https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/26187/1/REPORT.pdf.

Lapointe, Sandra, and Jonathan Turner. "Leveraging the Skills of Social Sciences and Humanities Graduates." Skills Next. Public Policy Forum: Future Skills Centre, January 31, 2020. https://ppforum.ca/publications/leveraging-the-skills-of-graduates/.

Lasby, David. "Imagine Canada's Sector Monitor: Charities & the COVID-19 Pandemic." Imagine Canada, May 2020. https://imaginecanada.ca/sites/default/files/COVID-19%20Sector%20Monitor%20Report%20ENGLISH_0.pdf.

McMaster University. "Principles of Community Engagement." Community Engagement, 2022. https://community.mcmaster.ca/about/strategic-priorities/principles-of-community-engagement/.

Njoku, Anuli U. "COVID-19 and Environmental Racism: Challenges and Recommendations." European Journal of Environment and Public Health 5, no. 2 (June 23, 2021): em0079. https://doi.org/10.21601/ejeph/10999.

Ontario Nonprofit Network. "2021 ONN State of the Ontario Nonprofit Sector Survey," 2021. https://theonn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/749034.pdf.

"Risk, Resilience, and Rebuilding Communities: The State of Ontario Nonprofits Three Months into the Pandemic." Ontario Nonprofit Network, August 2020. https://theonn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Final_-English_-Three-months-into-COVID-1.pdf.

"The Nonprofit HR Crisis." Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2022. https://theonn.ca/our-work/our-people/nonprofit-hr-crisis/.

Pinsent, Matthew C. "Understanding Social Innovation and the Need for Resiliency: The Volunteer and Non-Profit Sector." University of Victoria, March 2012. https://www.policynl.ca/policydevelopment/documents/pinsent_social_innovation.pdf.

Schilling, J. & Kluge, A. (2008) Barriers to Organisational Learning International Journal of Management Reviews Volume 11 Issue 3 pp. 337–360 Selamat, Mohamad, and Yanyu Zhang. "The Impact of Design Thinking on Innovative Behaviors, With the Mediating Effect of Knowledge Sharing." International Journal of Business and Management Science 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–26.

Simon Fraser University. "Values and Principles." Simon Fraser University: Office of Community Engagement, 2022. https://www.sfu.ca/communityengagement/at-sfu/is.html.

The University of British Columbia. "What Is Community Engagement & Why Is It Important?" Community Engagement, 2022. https://communityengagement.ubc.ca/community-engagement-at-ubc/what-is-community-engagement-why-is-it-important/.

United Way Halton & Hamilton. "The Report on Need in Community: January 2022 Special Report." United Way Halton & Hamilton, January 2022. https://www.uwhh.ca/report-on-need-in-community-january-2022-special-report/.

"United Way Social Innovation Labs." United Way Halton & Hamilton, 2019. https://www.uwhh.ca/innovationlabs/.

Université de Montreal. "Sustainable Development at L'Université De Montréal Strategic Plan, 2021-2023: Transition To Sustainable Campuses." Strategic Plan. Université de Montreal, 2021. https://www.umontreal.ca/public/www/images/developpement-durable/ANG_UdeM_Sunstainability_strategy.pdf.

University of Waterloo. "Incorporating Service-Learning into University Courses." University of Waterloo: Centre for Teaching Exellence, 2022.

VanderBerg, James. "Volunteer Hesitancy Impacting Hamilton's Not-for-Profits." The Hamilton Spectator. December 12, 2021. https://www.thespec.com/opinion/contributors/2021/12/12/volunteer-hesitancy-impacting-hamiltons-not-for-profits.html.

Webb Hooper, Monica, Anna María Nápoles, and Eliseo J. Pérez-Stable. "COVID-19 and Racial/Ethnic Disparities." JAMA 323, no. 24 (June 23, 2020): 2466. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.8598.