# Forum / Tribune

## Reframing University Continuing Education's Role in Community Engagement

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## Abstract

In Canada, a growing interest within higher education in community engagement practices is evidenced through the establishment of national networks, funding opportunities for community-university research partnerships, and the development of specially designated centres on university campuses. However, based on the literature in continuing education, the role of university continuing education (UCE) units in supporting community engagement is not clear. Many UCE units have been involved and continue to be involved in developing and implementing various types of community engagement activities, yet the work of these units is not widely recognized within the university and the community as contributing substantially to the social-purpose mission of the institution. The pressures and tensions relating to balancing the social and economic goals of the UCE unit may be influencing the role of UCE in community engagement. Strategies identified in this article that could assist UCE in embedding community engagement within the practice

## Résumé

Au Canada, l'intérêt croissant pour l'enseignement supérieur en pratiques de mobilisation communautaire est prouvé par la mise en place de réseaux nationaux, d'occasions de financement pour les partenariats de recherche communautaire-universitaires et la création de centres spécialement désignés sur les campus. Toutefois, selon les écrits en éducation permanente, le rôle des unités d'éducation permanente dans les universités (EPU) en matière de soutien à la mobilisation communautaire n'est pas limpide. De nombreuses unités d'EPU se sont impliquées dans la création et la mise en application de divers types d'activités de mobilisation communautaire, et continuent de l'être. Pourtant, le travail de ces unités n'est pas reconnu à grande échelle au sein des universités et de la collectivité en tant que contribution importante à la mission sociale de l'institution d'enseignement. Les pressions et les tensions liées à l'équilibre des objectifs sociaux et économiques de l'unité d'EPU pourraient influencer le rôle de l'EPU en mobilisation communautaire. Les stratégies identifiées

and in reframing the focus of UCE include the development of a community engagement framework and measurement tools that assess outcomes leading to positive social change.

dans cet article, qui pourraient aider l'EPU à intégrer la mobilisation communautaire dans la pratique et à recadrer la cible de l'EPU, comprennent la création d'une structure de mobilisation communautaire et d'outils de mesure qui évaluent les résultats menant à des changements sociaux positifs.

# Introduction

A number of recent articles in the university continuing education (UCE) literature focus on social activism and community partnerships. Nesbit (2011) argues that the social movement roots of the practice remain viable and active despite some changes in organizational structures and programming approaches. Gander (2009), Hall (2009), and Jackson (2008, 2010) suggest that UCE plays an important role in connecting community-based research with community action and societal benefit.

At the same time, the strategic plans of many universities in Canada are highlighting the social-purpose mission of institutions. In the document *Dare to Discover: A Vision for a Great University*, the University of Alberta (2009) outlines its commitment to engage with local and global communities; the University of Victoria (2012) plans to "develop a framework and organizational mechanisms to support and advance civic engagement" (p. 36). Considering the variety of different approaches and the contextualized nature of UCE's work within the university and surrounding communities, should continuing education units support the community engagement aims of their institution? If so, what is UCE's community engagement role and how does it align with the unit's cost recovery mandate?

In this article I will provide an overview of community engagement, focusing on programs and initiatives in Canada. Then I will identify some of the current tensions and opportunities within UCE relating to achieving balance between cost recovery goals and social-purpose programming and suggest strategies that could assist UCE professionals with building both a local and a national vision of engagement.

# Community Engagement and Canadian Universities

Community engagement is generally defined as the collaboration between universities and their larger communities, whether local, national, or international, for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2006). In practice, community engagement encompasses a wide range of activities, including student learning, curriculum transformation, community-defined priorities, and knowledge production (Ostrander, 2004).

The idea of an "engaged campus" that works collaboratively with the community to support initiatives for the social good has gained credence through the work of Ernest Boyer. In

his monograph *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, Boyer repositions the university as both a catalyst for and a partner in developing positive social change (1990). Boyer's ideas are reflective of his belief that higher education is increasingly becoming a "private benefit" with limited connections to the issues and concerns of society (1996, p. 14).

While there is support for the notion of community engagement within higher education, the lack of clarity and shared understanding about its purpose has contributed to uneven commitment from universities. Research studies in the United States identify that the rationale for community involvement by universities ranges from self-interest, such as maintaining the visual appeal of local neighbourhoods, to beliefs that the university plays a role in community initiatives that support the social good (Maurrasse, 2001). In Canada, there is no nationally accepted definition of engagement; however, there is growing interest in establishing community engagement practices as evidenced by the development of national networks, the provision of federal funding for community-university research projects, and the creation of specially designated centres or institutes on university campuses.

Two national networks are gaining prominence for their work in building pan-Canadian collaborations. The focus of these networks is to provide opportunities to share and develop knowledge, and to build capacity and voice relating to specific projects and issues of concern in society. Community-Based Research Canada (CBRC) was the outcome of discussions held at the Community University Expo Conference in Victoria in 2008. The purpose of this network is to bring together individuals, organizations, and members of existing networks interested in collaborating in order to address some of the complex social issues affecting communities in Canada (CBRC, 2012). The Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning (CACSL) was established in 2001 following a symposium facilitated by St. Francis Xavier University. The goals of this alliance are to advocate, educate, network, and research community service-learning in Canada (CACSL, 2012).

Commencing in 1999, community-university research projects were piloted by the federal government through the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to address societal problems at the local and regional levels (SSHRC, 2007). Community-University Research Alliance grants required the establishment of partnerships between postsecondary institutions and community organizations to foster innovation and training and create new knowledge to promote social, cultural, and economic well-being. Projects included the exploration of topics such as urban and rural renewal, housing and homelessness, community health, and culture (SSHRC, 2007). In 2009, SSHRC approved a knowledge mobilization strategy and funding opportunities in order to facilitate the accessibility, impact, and cocreation of research knowledge and to ensure the effective dissemination of knowledge by a variety of means (2009). Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement, a partnership involving Carleton University and CACSL in collaboration with Vibrant Communities, Trent Centre for Community Based Education, Food Secure Canada, and the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, is one of the projects recently funded by SSHRC for the purpose of strengthening "Canadian non-profits, universities and colleges, and funding agencies to build more successful, innovative, resilient and prosperous communities" (Jackson, 2012, n.p.).

Recently, a number of new entities on campus and in the community have been established to support engagement. In an environmental scan of engagement structures in Canada, Mirza (2011) identifies the lead units, plans, initiatives, and approaches to community engagement at 32 universities. The majority of units listed in this scan are specially designated centres or institutes focusing on networking, bridging and brokering courses, research, resource sharing, and community-engaged scholarship involving a variety of stakeholders (Mirza, 2011). Some units concentrate their work on the social economy whereas others have developed

community-engaged courses and service-learning programs. Both the Institute for Engaged Scholarship at the University of Guelph in Ontario and the Office of Engagement at Memorial University in Newfoundland and Labrador have developed new models and frameworks in partnership with community organizations to foster dialogue, scholarship, and policy development for the mutual benefit of the community and university (University of Guelph, 2012; Memorial University, 2012). While the majority of universities have a designated unit, some universities use a decentralized approach. Brock University in Ontario identifies community engagement as "one of the four pillars of the academic plan" (2010, n.p.), encouraging the development of partnerships and community-based initiatives throughout its faculties and service units. At the University of Alberta, continuing education and community-engaged research, teaching, and scholarship are all situated within the Faculty of Extension with a mission to "provide leadership for social and individual betterment through community-university collaborations in learning, discovery and citizenship" (University of Alberta, Faculty of Extension, 2009, p. 5).

Many of the programs and initiatives offered by these new entities on campus—such as action research projects, volunteer work, special events, courses designed to increase access for marginalized individuals and groups, workshops, and public lectures—are similar to the work that traditionally has been provided and continues to be offered by UCE units. Yet despite the community orientation of continuing education, the work of UCE units is not widely perceived by the university and the community as contributing substantially to community-university engagement. Why are the programs and activities of UCE units viewed in this way? Are UCE's contributions to the engagement mission of the university affected by tensions relating to the requirement for revenue generation?

## Revenue Generation and Social-Purpose Programs

Research on continuing education acknowledges the preoccupation of UCE units with cost recovery programming that focuses on preparing people for production and their role in the market economy (Gouthro, 2002; Lauzon, 2000; Schuetze & Bruneau, 2004). However, there is also interest in realigning the work of UCE units by working with organizations involved in social justice (Cruikshank, 2001). Can both of these missions be realized or are they mutually exclusive? What is the primary focus of UCE units in Canada at the present time?

According to McLean, Thompson, and Jonker, the current reality for many UCE units is one of constant organizational and economic challenges including "institutional restructuring, financial restraint, and growing expectations for revenue generation and responsive programming" (2006, p. 86). Other studies indicate there have been a number of concerns raised as well as changes in program emphasis in the past two decades relating to social-purpose programming and activities.

In a 1996 study published by the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) identifying the activities of over 40 member UCE units in Canada, the authors report that the primary activities of these units include responsibilities for nondegree courses, degree-credit courses, certificate courses, distance education, services to adult learners, and second-language training (Morris & Potter, 1996). This study illustrates the wide range of programs and services offered by UCE units across Canada and the growth of programs targeted to professionals. However, the study also reports a number of concerns about the

practice during this period. Morris and Potter summarize the challenges faced by UCE units at this time in the following statement:

> Balancing the traditional role of extending university courses and programs to adult learners on and off campus and the emerging role of academic entrepreneurship requires considerable creativity, energy and deftness of those involved in continuing education. (1996, p. ix)

In 2007, CAUCE published a comparison document incorporating the main themes and survey instruments used in the 1996 study. This study outlines the responses from professionals working in 35 UCE units across Canada. In the preface of this report, Percival and Potter summarize the major changes within the practice of UCE since the previous report. The primary differences reported are the growth of distance education, programming for international and Aboriginal students, and reorganization (Percival & Potter, 2007). The authors suggest that the limited discussion relating to UCE's identity as a professional practice or a social movement is due to the "unrelenting financial pressures that required many continuing education units to fully embrace the tenets of the business model" (p. vi).

The 2007 study identifies a reduction in the support provided by UCE units for community-focused social programming (Percival & Potter, 2007, p. 61). In this report, 34.4% of the respondents indicated their unit subsidizes citizen education and community service programs, reflecting a decrease of more than 26% from the number reported in the 1996 study (Morris & Potter, 1996).

The emphasis on revenue generation programs, often at the expense of developing socially focused programs, has been the subject of much discussion within the literature on continuing education in past years (Cruikshank, 1994, 2001; Finger & Asún, 2001; Gouthro, 2002; Haughey, 1998, 2006; Martin, 2000; Selman, 2005). McLean, Thompson, and Jonker (2006) submit that by focusing on programs for professionals, UCE has lost its social activism role. Others suggest that the focus on revenue generation has contributed to a narrowing of the field. In order to counteract this development, Cruikshank (2001) advocates that UCE "should become actively involved in developing progressive social policy—moving from a market educational model to a social redistribution model" and that professionals should work more closely with community organizations involved in social justice (p. 71).

Recent articles about the practice of UCE suggest that UCE professionals consider expanding their current focus on programs and courses by engaging in partnerships that support the public good. According to Gander (2009), continuing education can contribute to the development of innovative and socially relevant projects through the use of incubation models. Jackson (2010) encourages UCE to play a role in supporting and leveraging the social economy by partnering with others to develop workshops, courses, and research projects. Garrison submits that UCE professionals, with their program development skills, entrepreneurial ability, understanding of the marketplace, and their location within the university, can provide the leadership necessary to assist higher education with adapting to technological and global change (2001). He suggests that initiatives such as piloting new approaches and learning technologies along with the development and delivery of social programs subsidized through other program revenues will assist the university with achieving community outreach goals (Garrison, 2001). Hall advocates the development of local, national, and international networks in order to facilitate learning and engagement and share knowledge and resources (2009). All these kinds of initiatives incorporate the professional and entrepreneurial skills present within UCE units, suggesting there are opportunities for reframing UCE's practice.

# UCE and Community Engagement

The literature about community engagement acknowledges that it can function as a vehicle for promoting community awareness, community participation, and for promoting the social good through the development of a variety of programs, services, and partnerships. However, there is limited research suggesting how UCE units in Canada can develop and support the community engagement practices of their institutions while maintaining the operational goals of their units.

While I acknowledge that each UCE unit must operate within the context of its university and community, I maintain that collectively UCE practitioners can embrace community engagement by adopting a framework for the practice that allows for discussions and the implementation of specific strategies that connect the unit with the university's mission and vision. In order to embed this approach within the UCE unit and build a national vision of engagement, a number of strategies could be considered. Such strategies are outlined in my article "Creating a Common Space for Community Engagement," which also appears in this issue of *CJUCE.* A brief summary of these strategies is provided here.

First, given the contextualized nature of engagement, it is important to develop a shared understanding of community engagement and how it can influence the strategic direction and practice of the UCE unit. By broadly conceptualizing this understanding initially and then further defining it through formal and informal discussion with university faculty, staff, and members of the community, the practitioners of the UCE unit will gain knowledge about the specific opportunities, issues, and needs of the university and the community.

Second, UCE professionals could connect their work to the larger mission of the university and the community by collaborating with university and community partners to develop initiatives such as workshops on community leadership and discussions on issues of concern to local citizens. Additionally, UCE professionals could demonstrate their skills by working on projects, workshops, and other initiatives with community and university partners and by helping to manage and leverage resources that support community engagement goals.

Third, in order to ensure that this work is of benefit to both the university and the community, it would be important to develop measurement tools that assess UCE's participation and effectiveness in developing and implementing community engagement practices that influence positive social change.

Fourth, the establishment of a national network or affinity group as part of CAUCE and participation in other national networks such as CBRC would provide opportunities to share practices and research. Furthermore, it would assist with developing a national perspective concerning UCE's role in supporting community engagement.

And finally, the use of a community engagement framework as a guide for practice offers UCE staff members a new way of thinking about their programs and services, while maintaining their current operational requirements. Participation in national networks would contribute to knowledge mobilization and collaborative research. Moreover, adoption of these approaches would provide UCE members with an opportunity to consider "the wider predicament" by expanding the "perspectives on where we stand in space and time; our relation to other nations and people . . . and also where we stand in our history, in the narrative of our becoming" (Taylor, 2004, p. 27).

# Conclusion

Community engagement can play a unifying role, connecting universities and communities on issues of local and global concern (Stanton, 2007). The challenge for many universities is how to effectively conceptualize and implement the strategies, given the individualized context of communities and universities. Based on the literature, the growing number of networks, classification systems, and funding sources is driving the development of community engagement in many countries, and it is anticipated that support for engagement will continue to grow (Stanton, 2007).

For continuing education in Canada, reframing UCE by establishing a community engagement framework could help practitioners link their current work in their units with the larger social development mission of universities and with other UCE units nationally. In my view, this would provide a new way of viewing UCE's work within the university and the community and lead to greater opportunities as well as better understanding about the role of UCE within higher education.

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# Biography

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