Strengthening campuses and communities to build a prosperous Canada: Regional perspectives on the social impact of Canadian universities
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Introduction

Canada’s universities play an essential role in sustaining and contributing to the economic and social wellbeing of their communities. As vibrant, modern and engaged institutions, universities are anchors for their communities and highly involved in fostering local social development and impact. This engagement benefits both universities and their communities through activities such as work-integrated and service-learning opportunities for students and research and knowledge-creation opportunities for faculty. However, community engagement needs to go beyond academic endeavours. Canada’s universities can play an increasingly important role in the growth and stability of their communities.

Building on more than ten years of university-community focused work, Universities Canada is leading a pan-Canadian initiative to map, strengthen and promote the social impact of Canadian universities. As part of this project, Universities Canada conducted a series of roundtable discussions in regional hubs across Canada to share knowledge, insights and learnings; deepen relationships between peers and across sectors; and inform the direction of Universities Canada’s Social Impact Initiative.

This report provides an overview of the approach to the roundtables, discusses key takeaways on cross-cutting themes and highlights regional differences identified during the roundtables. It also details strategic considerations for Universities Canada’s Social Impact Initiative, shares lessons learned and identifies next steps.

Approach

In 2019, Universities Canada conducted 11 social impact roundtables across the country in Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, Waterloo, Saskatoon, Vancouver, Victoria, Montreal, Quebec City, Sackville and Halifax. The objectives of the roundtables were to better understand the types of collaborative partnerships happening between universities and communities across Canada, collect social impact success stories, share promising practices and gain an understanding of the challenges and barriers that exist for universities and communities when working in partnership. Other objectives were to identify strategies to strengthen and maximize the social impact of Canadian universities and understand how Universities Canada’s Social Impact Initiative can amplify the impact of universities on their local communities.

Participants were invited to the roundtable through universities’ social impact leads. Universities Canada aimed to have a balance of different voices at the table and sought assistance from university, community and advisory group members when needed. All sessions achieved a mix of university and community participants with the exception of the Victoria roundtable, which only had institutional representatives present. Each roundtable convened between seven and 25 participants. In total, more than 150 people took part in the discussions.

The locations of the roundtables were determined based on critical mass of member institutions, as well as the location of advisory group members. All roundtables were held in-person with the exception of the Calgary session, which piloted virtually connecting the University of Lethbridge and its community partners.
Crosscutting themes

The roundtable discussions were broken into three sections: impactful stories and promising practices, challenges and barriers that prevent initiatives from reaching their full potential, and possible solutions to overcome these barriers.

Four crosscutting themes emerged across the discussions: relationships, institutional structures and policies, terminology and resources. Key takeaways for each theme as they pertain to social impact challenges and promising practices are detailed below.

**Relationships**

**Challenge**

University-community relationships are instrumental to the success of social impact initiatives. These relationships are sensitive and complex. Historically, university-community relations have been hierarchical, and knowledge from the university has been viewed as superior to community knowledge. Community voices and needs have frequently been overlooked and devalued, while research has been conducted “on” community rather than “with” community. Furthermore, community engagement initiatives have typically been viewed as charitable activity to help” the community, instead of recognizing the reciprocal nature of the relationship and the unique benefits that the community brings to the university.

The separation of university from the community also creates logistical barriers. For example, universities and community organizations operate on different timelines, as post-secondary institutions follow an academic calendar year while community organizations follow the fiscal year. Transportation to and from the university can also be challenging, with minimal public transportation and parking on some campuses. Additionally, establishing a point of contact at the institution or in the community to initiate a project can be problematic as relationships tend to be based on individual networks rather than stem from the institution.

**Promising practices and strategic considerations**

Developing and maintaining strong, trusting and reciprocal university-community relationships is critical to ensure that both universities and communities thrive.

Key takeaways to overcome barriers include:

- Building and maintaining the relationship at the institutional level to sustain the connection through economic hardships and/or staffing changes.
- Recognizing that relationships are fragile and take time to develop and sustain, and focusing on developing a strong foundation to ensure the relationship will last in the long-term.
- Committing to maintaining the relationship when funding has ended.
- Co-creating and co-leading from the onset.
- Being sensitive to the perspectives, needs and complexities of both parties and being open to listening and learning from others.
Crosscutting themes

- Being authentic, humble, flexible and reciprocal when engaging and building relationships with partners.
- Ensuring both parties have equal voice and power while being mindful of relationship hierarchies as well as one’s own positionality, interests and needs.
- Respecting and valuing other forms of knowledge outside of traditional research knowledge and expertise, such as lived experience.
- Recognizing how the community adds value and contributes to the institution.
- Finding ways to meet in the middle, such as by dividing the workload, sharing intellectual property, caring for the other’s needs, building a shared vision and committing to advancing work together.
- Adopting a “community-first” approach that seeks to listen, understand and respond to community.
- Employing an equity lens to be sensitive to diversity and create an inclusive environment.
- Setting realistic expectations and communicating frequently.
- Giving space for people to be themselves and taking the time to get to know each other.

Institutional structures and policies

Challenge

Institutional structures and policies can constrain social impact activities and prevent full engagement between the university and community. For example, the value of this work is not always recognized by the university or by university senior leaders, which can deter engagement and reciprocal collaboration. Furthermore, university reward and grading structures do not always encourage – and can, at times, even discourage – students, faculty or staff from undertaking social impact initiatives. These activities are therefore viewed as a lower priority to other “core”, revenue-generating or cost-cutting initiatives within the university. Additionally, institutional cultures (both government and university) tend to be risk averse and avoidant of change, thereby hindering innovation and restricting the institution from reaching its full potential.

Promising practices and strategic considerations

To overcome this challenge, participants encouraged universities to commit to social impact at the institutional level.

Participants recommended:
- Integrating social impact into strategic plans to build a culture that encourages everyone – staff, students and faculty – to take ownership of their social impact.
- Engaging the involvement of senior leadership in social impact initiatives to help them understand the sensitivities of this work, as well as the importance of and need for these initiatives.
- Ensuring administrative policies respect and prioritize the sustainability of partnerships at the institutional level.
• Allocating adequate resources (staff, funds and time) to ensure initiatives are meaningful and not relegated to ‘side of the desk’ work.
• Respecting the amount of time and energy it takes to advance and sustain this type of work.
• Rewarding social impact initiatives through faculty tenure and promotion structures and student credentials, while, recognizing potential penalties and drawbacks that may prevent students, faculty and staff from partaking in social impact initiatives.
• Formally including social impact activities in job descriptions to ensure sustained commitment and engagement in this work. This will also help measure, track and increase ownership of social impact initiatives.
• Changing administrative policies to remove barriers and better support community partners.
• Breaking down silos between university and community by integrating community representatives into the university environment, and vice-versa (for example, by sitting on boards)
• Decolonizing the institution and empowering Indigenous voice and engagement.

Terminology

Challenge
Universities employ a variety of terms to refer to university-community impact work, including social impact, social infrastructure, social purpose, social innovation, community engagement, changemaking, public good, and more. The use of and emphasis on terminology creates confusion across the university and community and can impede the advancement of impact activities. Participants stressed the importance of strategically considering which terminology is used, as it can reinforce notions of the “ivory tower” and exclude certain groups from the conversation.

Promising practices and strategic considerations
Participants emphasized the need for simple and inclusive language that is understood by all parties. Promising practices and strategic considerations include:

• Speaking the language of your audience to strengthen relationships and have a meaningful impact.
• Listening to the terminology used by the community and working together to develop collective and strategic messaging.
• Identifying common spaces, needs and purpose.
• Employing storytelling to convey impact and outcomes, rather than using terminology and jargon.
• Developing common measurement frameworks, definitions, knowledge translation and mobilization plans to connect research to community action.
• Sharing data and information using storytelling, plain language and bold titles.
Crosscutting themes

Resources

Challenge
Insufficient resources (time, funds and staff) and/or an ineffective use of resources restricts the ability to implement and commit to social impact initiatives, thereby relegating social impact projects to lower priority work. Likewise, short granting cycles limit the ability for social impact initiatives to have a long-term impact and develop sustainable partnerships. Funder models and expectations create further challenges as they often conflict with community needs, restrict community access to funding and do not measure the impact of project.

Promising practices and strategic considerations
Participants proposed a variety of practices and strategic considerations to overcome the lack of or ineffective use of resources.

Key takeaways from the discussion include:
• Integrating social impact into coursework to enrich students' learning experience and encourage them to continue social impact initiatives throughout their university career.
• Partnering with other institutions and sharing resources.
• Shifting how funds are spent to strengthen community from all angles, such as through social procurement practices.
• Better aligning and leveraging activities and partnerships.
• Collectively advocating for support from the government for longer-term and flexible funding that will increase universities’ community impact.
• Engaging with third party organizations (e.g. Ashoka Canada or the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification Pilot) to deepen the institution’s commitment to social impact through certification, and also to increase resources dedicated to social impact initiatives.
• Measuring social impact initiatives to understand how activities can be strengthened and to drive value recognition. Storytelling was recommended as an effective tool to demonstrate this impact.
• Planning for impact, outcomes and sustainability and basing the work on theories of change and logic models.
Regional differences

The section below highlights the regional differences that emerged at each session. Note: Views vary not only due to regional differences, but also due to the identities of participants in the room (i.e. the university-community balance, personal bias and perspectives, etc.), the group dynamics and/or the local context.

Edmonton
The first roundtable was held in Edmonton and served as a pilot to assess the format and delivery of the session. The Edmonton roundtable was the only session not hosted on a university campus. A strong theme that surfaced at this session was the need to understand and be mindful of one’s own positionality and perspective. The ability to be open, willing to learn, and approach issues from a place of humility is important in building engaging relationships that prioritize the needs of the community. Participants strongly emphasized the need for reciprocal relationships, language understood by all, institutional commitment to social impact and adequate resources to advance this work. Participants also recommended leveraging students’ drive for change, measuring activity and impact, and involving student voices in these conversations.

Calgary
Conversations at the Calgary roundtable focused on building long-term, trusting relationships and finding ways to “meet in the middle”– that is, to co-lead initiatives with university and community representatives and be nimble and caring of partner needs. Participants discussed the value of engaging with third party organizations to deepen institutional commitment and help measure the university’s impact. Another strong theme that emerged was the importance of challenging risk averse university cultures in order to encourage innovation and allow for trial and error. Participants also suggested incorporating social impact into strategic planning documents and developing feedback loops to improve and strengthen activities.

Toronto
The Toronto roundtable echoed a number of takeaways from the sessions in Edmonton and Calgary, including the need for a “community-first” approach, co-leading projects with community, prioritizing relationships, embedding social impact into the institution’s culture and the use of inclusive language. Participants stressed that short-term funding cycles, terminology and rigid institutional incentive structures are significant barriers to social impact initiatives. Participants recommended setting clear expectations from the start, being transparent about outcomes and activities, and dedicating time to build and maintain relationships.

Waterloo
Discussions in Waterloo emphasized strengthening community-campus connections by increasing intergenerational engagement, connecting across demographics and bringing community issues onto campus. Empathy emerged as a critical component to building relationships and overcoming community-campus barriers. A promising practice discussed was interweaving social impact throughout the institution (student, faculty and staff) to increase ownership and build a culture of social impact that is sustained beyond staff changes and non-reliant on senior
Regional differences

leadership. Challenges raised focused on a lack of resources, competing priorities, rigid institutional reward and incentive structures, colonial structures and approaches, and the risk-averse nature of universities. Participants recommended leveraging students’ changemaking abilities, recognizing and valuing social impact work, being persistent, and developing joint messaging and advocacy.

Saskatoon
Participants at the Saskatoon roundtable discussed the importance of clear and consistent communication, placing value on lived experience and community knowledge and ensuring activities are community-centred and community-driven. Participants identified the need for government to support and recognize the importance of this work as well as the need for institutions to shift from a "charitable approach" to one where universities and communities are equal partners. Participants also stressed the need for universities to recognize how their structures can deter people from engaging in social impact initiatives and can penalize them through financial repercussions, academic or career advancements, etc. Participants recommended ensuring administrative policies respect the university-community relationship, cross-pollinating university and community representatives on boards, and integrating social impact into tenure and promotion structures at the institution and into job descriptions at the community level.

Vancouver
The Vancouver roundtable was the only session co-hosted with a community partner (the Vancouver Foundation). Participants emphasized the importance of being responsive to different community needs, empowering and recognizing non-traditional researchers as experts, breaking down institutional barriers and creating a culture within the university that enables and supports social impact initiatives. Funding emerged as a strong challenge, in particular a lack of resources, short-term funding that hinders long-term relationships and funding models force community partners to fit into a specific mold in order to meet the funding requirements. Participants encouraged Universities Canada to deepen advocacy work to increase long-term funding, incorporate Indigenous voices and engagement in this initiative, and work collaboratively with organizations such as Ashoka U and the Canadian Carnegie Classification Pilot to avoid duplication, share resources and strengthen efficiencies.

Victoria
The Victoria roundtable was held with only university representatives. A promising practice that was raised was to plan for impact (i.e. develop theories of change and effective logic models) and plan for sustainability by seeing initiatives through and giving time to build trusting relationships. Participants recognized the value of storytelling to communicate impact and recommended “removing the clutter” from the way we communicate stories – that is, knowing your audience and changing your language accordingly. Competition between universities for funding, visibility, students and local partners emerged as a strong challenge of social impact work. Participants recommended shifting away from a “me to we” approach and toward a collaborative approach to tackle local challenges.
Montreal
A recurring theme at the Montreal roundtable was relationships. The importance of building trust and protecting and nurturing relationships with community partners was central to the discussion. Participants emphasised the need for co-creation from the onset and to enter the relationship with humility and respect. Oftentimes, community partners are approached by universities with very tight and prescriptive timelines and objectives, leaving them feeling undervalued and used. Multiples examples of successful initiatives demonstrated the benefits of adopting a co-creation approach in establishing long-lasting relationships. A challenge identified by many participants was the time and effort it takes to build meaningful relationships and the lack of valorization and reward for that kind of work in academia.

Quebec City
Participants at the Quebec City roundtable discussed the importance of educating the university community to the value of social impact work. Community engagement should not be seen as the third mission of universities but rather as transcending the missions of teaching and research. Faculty members in attendance also raised the issue of doing social impact work and advancing their career at the same time, as any young professors are advised to avoid community engagement activities until they obtain tenure. Participants also noted that the structure and culture of universities do not encourage community engagement activities and stressed the importance of having strong support for social impact initiatives from university leaders.

Sackville
Participants at the Sackville roundtable raised the importance of ensuring to the relationship between the university and community is mutually-beneficial. Oftentimes, partnerships can be beneficial for the university and the students, but the community organization does not reap the same benefits. In addition, slow-moving university administrative procedures can often jeopardize the trust between the university and community partner, highlighting the need for easier and faster ways to deliver compensation to community partners. It is also important that universities think about partnership in a way that is appealing to community organization and ask: What can the university contribute that would be useful for the partner?

Halifax
Discussions in Halifax focused on the Change Lab Action Research Initiative (CLARI), a cross-province initiative designed to support Nova Scotia communities with academic and research expertise, designated spaces and communication technology to address social and economic challenges. The program provides seed funding for academics to work on a problem identified by the community, thereby acting as a hub for the community to connect with their local university. The Community Sector Council of Nova Scotia toured the province to promote the program in local communities.
Key considerations for Universities Canada

Participants offered several recommendations on how Universities Canada can strengthen and amplify the social impact of Canadian universities. One suggestion was for Universities Canada to engage in strategic storytelling to demonstrate the impact of universities in their communities, as many participants perceived Universities Canada as being well-positioned as a national association to develop and promote these narratives.

Others thought it would be helpful for Universities Canada to continue convening university-community gatherings and facilitating conversations with a more specific focus. A thematic focus could bring university and community organizations together to collectively tackle complex issues such as affordable housing, mental health, opioids, reconciliation, homelessness, transportation, climate change and more. Alternatively, conversations could focus on different dimensions of social impact, such as social procurement, university-community partnerships, use of facilities, alumni relations, experiential learning, among others. Participants also suggested connecting Universities Canada’s Social Impact Initiative to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), as the SDG framework is more widely known and could help drive effort towards reaching these goals.

Another recommendation was for Universities Canada to serve as a knowledge hub to share tools and resources across members. This could include measurement tools, partnership best practices, sample MOUs, approaches to include social impact in strategic plans and case studies of reward structures that recognize and value social impact.

A number of participants also suggested that Universities Canada incorporate social impact into its advocacy work with the federal government. They believe that Universities Canada, with extensive expertise and strong relationships with the public service, is well positioned to demonstrate the importance of universities in strengthening communities and help increase funding for this work.

Additionally, Universities Canada could work with its members to generate commitment at the senior leadership level for social impact initiatives and practices at universities. Universities Canada could also provide its members with a series of guiding principles to help advance the social impact of Canadian universities as a nationally-shared priority.
Lessons learned

There were many lessons learned from these social impact roundtables.

Key takeaways include:
- Terminology: The term “social impact” is not an effective term as it does not resonate with many people. While discussions are focused on the outcome of strengthening community prosperity, a variety of terms are used (social infrastructure, social purpose, community engagement, changemaking, social innovation, etc.) which creates confusion.
- Participants: Exploring participants’ perspectives and experiences was key to the success of the roundtables. As social impact touches on many dimensions at the university, it was valuable to develop a strategic understanding of the many ways in which universities connect with communities.
- Community-university balance: While Universities Canada strived to achieve a balance of university and community voices within the roundtables, the majority of roundtables had much greater university representation. Co-hosting the roundtables off with a community organization could help create more balanced discussion. It was also recommended to establish a clear purpose for community organizations to attend.
- Timing: Participants recommended increasing the length of the roundtable to three or four hours and including a lunch or an opportunity for networking.
- Response: Participants were eager for more opportunities to exchange and learn from each other. Participants provided very positive feedback and were pleased to see Universities Canada take on this Initiative.

Conclusion and next steps

Universities Canada thanks all participants for sharing their insightful comments, perspectives and experiences at the social impact roundtables. Over the coming months, Universities Canada will continue working with its advisory group and network of social impact leads to advance this initiative through a series of regional gatherings, accompanied by a communications campaign to showcase the impact of universities in communities. Universities Canada will continue connecting with Community Campus Engagement Canada, the Canadian Pilot of the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, Ashoka Canada, RE-CODE, CAUBO and Colleges and Institutes Canada to consider areas for collaboration. Universities Canada will also explore synergies with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and consider ways of leveraging this framework as we move forward with this project.
Appendix A
Social impact roundtable agenda

About
Universities Canada is the national association of Canadian universities. Building on 10+ years of university-community focused work, we are leading a pan-Canadian initiative to map, strengthen and promote the social impact of Canadian universities. Please see the attached backgrounder for details about the social impact initiative.

As part of this project, we are conducting a series of roundtable discussions in regional hubs across Canada to share knowledge, insights and learnings; deepen relationships amongst peers and across sectors; and inform the direction of Universities Canada’s initiative.

Objectives
The aim of this session is to:
• Identify social impact success stories and promising practices
• Understand barriers and ways to overcome these obstacles
• Consider strategies to strengthen and maximize social impact
• Identify how Universities Canada can help amplify the social impact of Canadian universities

Agenda
Welcome and introductions

Context and purpose
Successes and promising practices
• What is a recent (within the last year) social impact story that you’re proud of?
• What are practices that made that story so impactful?

Challenges and solutions
• What are challenges that prevent social impact initiatives from reaching their full impact?
• What is needed to help overcome these barriers?
• What role can an initiative like the one led by universities Canada support your work?

Next steps

Close
Appendix B
Social Impact Initiative: Overview

What is the Social Impact Initiative?
Over the past decade, Universities Canada has increasingly focused on university-community engagement to address key challenges and barriers and explore opportunities to advance campus-community partnerships for greater impact. In 2018, Universities Canada received a grant from the McConnell Foundation to amplify this work; more specifically, to lead a pan-Canadian initiative to map, strengthen and promote the social impact of Canadian universities in their local communities.

The aim of this initiative is to gain a deeper understanding of social impact initiatives at member institutions, build tools to increase capacity and share knowledge and develop a robust narrative on the role of universities in their communities.

What do we mean by “social impact”? All universities have a social impact on their local communities. For the purposes of this initiative, Universities Canada defines the term “social impact” as the positive outcomes of initiatives that tackle social, economic, environmental and cultural challenges faced by people, organizations and communities. This concept goes beyond the academic mission to holistically encompass all aspects of the institution including:

- **Financial activities** (i.e.: buying local and supporting nearby businesses)
- **Physical spaces** (i.e.: community access to gyms, meeting spaces, libraries, land, etc.)
- **Relationships** (i.e.: nurturing relationships with students, government, industry, etc.)
- **Research activities** (i.e.: researching innovative solutions to local challenges)
- **Teaching and learning** (i.e.: learning opportunities that directly engage with local communities)

The following diagram is a helpful tool to visualize the many ways universities socially impact their communities.

![Diagram](image)

**Instruments of engagement**
- Financial activities
- Physical spaces
- Nurturing relationships

**Outcomes include:**
- Greater social inclusion
- Economic growth
- Stronger environmental practices

We recognize that member institutions employ a variety of terms to refer to university-community initiatives, including community engagement, social innovation, social infrastructure, social enterprise, social purpose, and public good, among others. **Universities Canada uses “social impact” as an umbrella term to encompass these concepts.**

**Note:** The scope of this initiative focuses on the social impact of Canadian universities in their surrounding communities, including the campus community and local areas. Virtual and global communities are not a focus of this initiative.
Appendix C
Participants’ list

**Calgary**
Parker Chapple, Executive Director, Calgary Pride
Alexandra Daignault, Liaison for Student Social Entrepreneurs & Junior Board Liaison, Trico Charitable Foundation
Robbin Gibb, Neuroscience, University of Lethbridge
Cameron Howey from Lethbridge United Way
Melanie Hulsker, Acting Director, Calgary Neighbourhoods, The City of Calgary
Janice Newberry, Anthropology, University of Lethbridge
Jessica O’Connell, Campaign Manager for Public Sector, United Way of Calgary and Area
Brandy Old, Agility Program Coordinator, University of Lethbridge
Tanya Pace-Crosschild, Executive Director, Opokaa’sin Early Intervention Society
Penny M. Pexman, Associate Vice-President (Research), University of Calgary
Michael Quinn, Associate Vice-President, Research, Scholarship and Community Engagement, Mount Royal University
Leslie Reid, Vice-Provost, Teaching & Learning, University of Calgary
Lena Soots, Interim Director, Research, Scholarship and Community Engagement, Trico Changemakers Studio
James Stauch, Director, Institute for Community Prosperity, Mount Royal University
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**Edmonton**
Morgan Allen, Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative
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**Halifax**
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Appendix C
Participants’ list

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Sackville
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Toronto
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Tanya Bowes, Board Secretary & Director, OCAD University
Christopher Brittain, Dean of Divinity, Trinity University College

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Eliza Chandler, Tangled Art and Disability, School of Disability Studies, Ryerson University
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John Duncan, Director of the Ethics, Society, and Law program, Trinity University College
Manjit Jheeta, Director of the Toronto Partnerships Office
Isabelle Kim, Director, University of Toronto Centre for Community Partnerships, University of Toronto
Pauline Larson, Senior Economic Policy Manager, Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area
Julie Maclsaac, Director, Innovations and Transformations, Teaching City Oshawa
Susan Mazza, Special Projects Officer, Government Relations Office, University of Toronto
Jason McKinney, Church of the Epiphany and St.Mark (Parkdale, Toronto), Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust, the Parkdale People’s Economy Neighbourhood Planning Table, and the Parkdale Community Food Hub
Melanie Panitch, Executive Director, Office of Social Innovation, Ryerson University
Cheryl Prescod, Executive Director, Black Creek Community Health Centre
Jessel Reyes, Migrants Resource Centre Canada
Lorna Schwartzentruber, Associate Director, Access Programs & Community Engagement, York University
Effie Slapnicar, Bursar & Chief Administrative Officer, University of St. Michael’s College
Peter Stoett, Dean Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Ontario Tech University
Appendix C
Participants’ list

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Alia Weston, Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Faculty of Graduate Studies, OCAD University

**Vancouver**
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Kris Archie, Executive Director, Circle on Philanthropy

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