
Strategic planning: Review of external data/information

Briefing theme: Community Engagement

Background:

- Much has been written from thought leaders and pundits alike about how the pandemic has caused a once-in-a-lifetime disruption to almost all sectors, including post-secondary education. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has not been a change agent so much as an accelerant of trends already well underway. In what some are calling “post-Corona”, several real threats and opportunities lie ahead for higher education.
- The following briefing provides a synthesis of these trends that are disrupting the post-secondary sector that are specific to community relations and engagement opportunities and expectations. This is pertinent for the University of Calgary to consider as we embark on the development of our next strategic plan.

Key Trends Identified:

- **Widespread attempts to deepen the commitment to the ‘third mission’ of universities: community engagement.** In the late 20 century, the ‘third mission’ of higher education emerged as a new term to refer to the active contribution made by universities to social and economic development, implying the emergence of a fundamentally new purpose and set of activities for universities in the modern world. The reality, however, is that universities have been closely tied to society throughout their history. Many argue that it is precisely this feature of universities – that of being ‘inextricably intertwined, responsive to and beneficial for societies’ – that has ensured the longevity of the idea of the university to this day.ⁱ

Today, many universities around the world are looking for ways to deepen this commitment and connection to their communities. These efforts generally fall into one of four categories:

- a) institution-level embedding of community engagement in higher education and research,
- b) increasing the prevalence and quality of community engagement activities at institution level,
- c) encouraging community engagement activities at the level of individual faculties or units, and
- d) general references to the importance of community engagement and impact.ⁱⁱ

- **While the pandemic had an impact on social cohesion, universities remain among the most trusted institutions in society.** The pandemic was polarizing, and eroded trust needs to be rebuilt in some cases. Chaos in the upper levels of government led to an eroding level of trust in public institutions in general, and higher education was not immune.ⁱⁱⁱ For example, even scientists saw a 6% drop in public trust from Canadians during the pandemic.^{iv}

That being said, over time, universities have continually been (and continue to be) one of the most trusted voices in society.^v Public opinion in Canada is more favourably disposed with respect to universities than it is in the US or the UK. Some have suggested that this support universities have enjoyed from the public may be related to the success Canadian universities have had in ensuring accessibility for all qualified students, regardless of their means or socio-cultural background.^{vi}

- **Increasing number of stakeholders.** The growing number of constituents a university needs to engage has been growing over time. With expanded reach and new activities, come more people to answer to. This isn’t a bad thing, but it does take increasingly more time and resources to ensure relationships with students, parents, faculty, staff, community partners, governments, alumni, donors, industry, and so on are being appropriately stewarded. Given this, there has been a move towards more robust systems and processes to track information and data related to the stewarding of external relationships and partnerships at universities.

- **New found engagement opportunities.** Engagement is critical when it comes to relationships with donors on any level, and especially so when it comes to alumni relations. The upside to the pandemic was the recognition that virtual outreach opens doors to new engagement opportunities that aren't hindered by time, distance or expense.^{vii}
- **Potential long-term repercussions for fundraising.** All of the issues that affected education during the pandemic can affect advancement and fundraising – they can either bolster or erode the student experience which ultimately is the greatest motivator of family and alumni giving. In many cases, the COVID-19 cohorts appear to be less engaged students. Unhappy students turn into unengaged alumni, who turn into uninterested prospective donors.^{viii}

ⁱ Farnell, T. (2020). Community engagement in higher education: trends, practices and policies. Retrieved from https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NESET_AR1-2020_analytical-report.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Farnell, T. (2020). Community engagement in higher education: trends, practices and policies. Retrieved from https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NESET_AR1-2020_analytical-report.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Baldwin, K. (2021). Disruption and the Future of Higher Education and Advancement. Retrieved from <https://www.givinginstitute.org/news/563675/Disruption-and-the-Future-of-Higher-Education-and-Advancement.htm>

^{iv} Edelman (2021). Trust Barometer. Retrieved from https://www.edelman.ca/sites/g/files/aatuss376/files/trust-barometer/2021%20Canadian%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_0.pdf.

^v Proof Strategies (2022). CanTrust Index: 2022 Results Report. Retrieved from <https://proofagency.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Proof-Strategies-CanTrust-Index-2022.pdf>.

^{vi} Gerler, M. (2021). What do universities owe Canadians. Retrieved from <https://www.univcan.ca/media-room/videos/meric-gertler-chair-of-universities-canada-inaugural-speech-what-do-universities-owe-canadians/>.

^{vii} Baldwin, K. (2021). Disruption and the Future of Higher Education and Advancement. Retrieved from <https://www.givinginstitute.org/news/563675/Disruption-and-the-Future-of-Higher-Education-and-Advancement.htm>

^{viii} Baldwin, K. (2021). Disruption and the Future of Higher Education and Advancement. Retrieved from <https://www.givinginstitute.org/news/563675/Disruption-and-the-Future-of-Higher-Education-and-Advancement.htm>