SAMUEL CENTRE FOR SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Supporting the Whole Student Workshop

October 15-16, 2018

Montreal, Canada

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1. Overview

On October 15-16, 2018, the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) hosted a workshop to address the challenges facing youth during post-secondary education, and explore pathways to foster connectedness between students, educators and the wider community.

The workshop convened 60 participants ranging from students, recent graduates, professors and staff from McGill University, Concordia University, Vancouver Island University (VIU), Université Laval, University of Toronto, and Lester B. Pearson United World College of the Pacific (Pearson College UWC). We also welcomed international participants from the University of Oxford, the London School of Economics and Political Science, Harvard University, Michigan State University, Columbia University, and New York University. Also critical to the discussions were communities who are leading change in education and youth empowerment: Misipawistik Cree Nation, Wampanoag Nation, Special Olympics International, TakingITGlobal, The Walrus, the Jeanne Sauvé Foundation, The Prince's Trust, Synergos, and See Change Initiative.

Illustration by **Lynne Dalgleish**
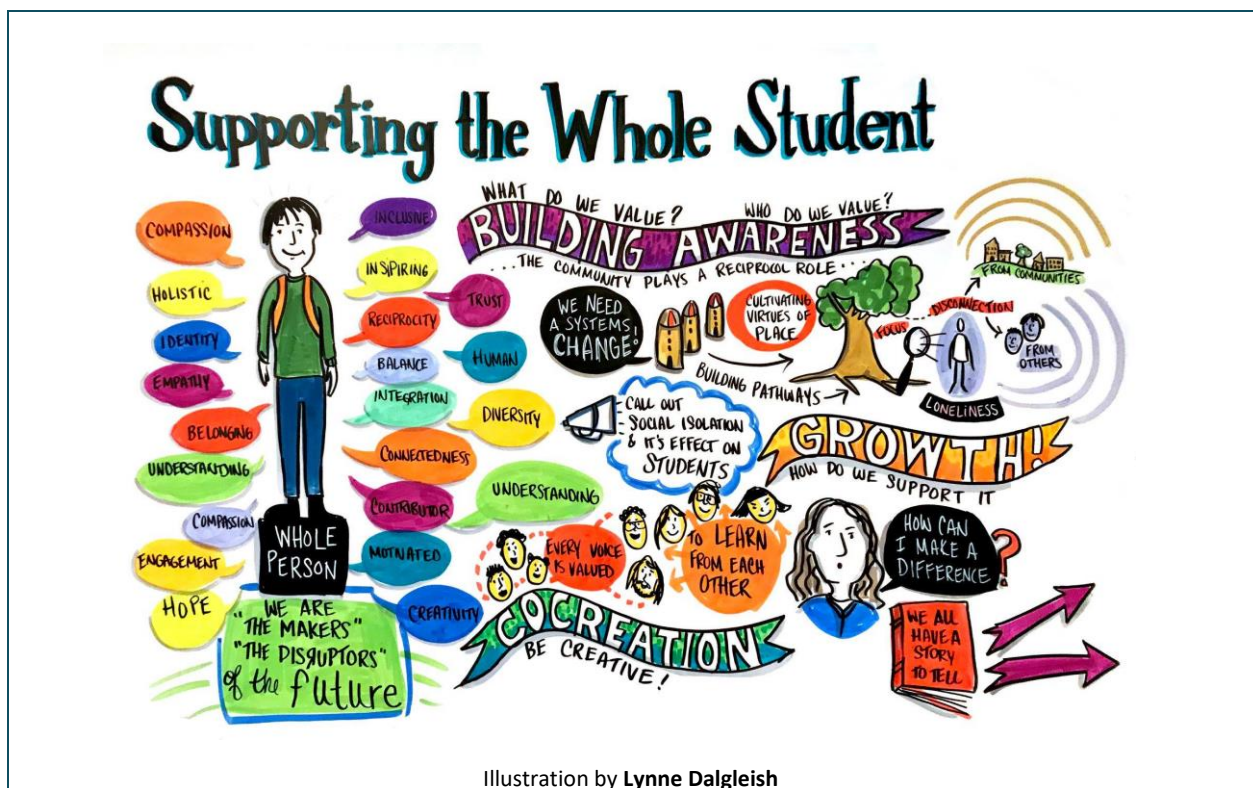
About the Workshop

The objective of this gathering was to address some of the disconnects that are both causes and consequences of social isolation in post-secondary education. This included disconnects between students and their peers, students and professors, theory and practice, academic achievement and student well-being, and ideas and action.

In addressing each of these disconnects, the workshop sought to answer the question, "What does it mean to support the whole student?" SCSC partnered with a diverse array of thought leaders to curate seven interactive sessions, each with a component of storytelling, case studies, guided exercises, and collaborative brainstorming.

The sessions included:
1. Fostering inclusion and connectedness in the classroom;
2. Advancing holistic approaches to support students on campus;
3. Implementing community-wide strategies to mental health and well-being;
4. Ensuring accessibility for all, particularly for people with intellectual disabilities;
5. Exploring the benefits of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL);
6. Building bridges between students and their surrounding communities; and
7. Empowering youth to transform ideas into action.

2. What Do We Value?

"Students are feeling disconnected from their communities and the institutions of power... It's no wonder that many are anxious about the future and are undergoing a spiritual crisis of meaning and purpose."

Kim Samuel, Founder, SCSC; Professor of Practice, International Development, McGill University

In universities today, rates of anxiety, depression and loneliness are on the rise. Kim Samuel and SCSC are working to raise awareness about the culture of social isolation that is both contributing to these trends and resulting from them.

Kim acknowledges the responsibility of universities to "support the whole student," and to foster an environment where students can not only develop academically but also socially, emotionally and professionally.

Together, we need to reimagine new ways to build a culture of community and support, so that everyone –students, professors and administrators – can feel empowered to create change.

Kim Samuel, Founder, SCSC; Professor of Practice, International Development, McGill University, speaks about the importance of teaching to the whole student.

"We must collectively come up with strategies to foster connection and collaboration, combat social isolation and destigmatize it. We must therefore ask the questions: What does a university value? And on a broader scale, what and who do we value as a society?"

3. Storytelling Session I

To set the stage for the hands-on facilitated sessions, several participants shared powerful stories about overcoming isolation in universities.

> *"Not talking about things that cause us discomfort makes us more isolated."*
>
> *Hannah Puralewski, B.A. '17, McGill University*

Hannah Puralewski, a McGill graduate and suicide prevention advocate, shared her experience as a student living with depression. Her story is one of acceptance, growth and resilience.

Hannah Puralewski, B.A. '17, McGill University, speaks to the importance of destigmatizing and openly talking about mental health.

During her time at McGill, Hannah struggled to share what she was going through with others, due to both a personal sense of shame and a lack of awareness regarding mental health: "Having to teach people what depression was, amplified my sense of isolation." Hannah saw a disconnect between the number of students struggling with their mental health and those who felt comfortable enough to talk about it.

In her third year, Hannah got involved with student groups dedicated to eradicating stigma around mental illness and she ultimately found the courage to share her own story publicly. "I was struck by the fact that so many of us keep silent because we are isolated by our pain, and yet by sharing a part of my life that was deeply painful, I was connecting with others." Hannah asked, "How can we create a society where people feel comfortable asking for help?" For Hannah, survivors who are able to share what they went through and how they overcame their struggles are critical for preventing suicide on a small and large scale. Her life's mission is

to discuss her experience at every opportunity in the hopes of minimizing the number of people who suffer as she did. "I believe that it starts with those of us who have suffered connecting with one another, and those who have not suffered striving to become better listeners, and to better understand suicide and mental illness in all their complexities in spite of their personal discomfort."

Hannah now works as an advocate in a rural community in Wisconsin, contributing to resources that saved her life at the time, which includes writing for the local paper about mental health and suicide prevention. To read Hannah's story, click here.

"Let's build places for students to be fulfilled."
Claudine Provencher, Head of Student Life, London School of Economics (LSE)

Following Hannah, Claudine Provencher, Head of LSE LIFE, spoke about the environment she and her team are trying to create at LSE – one that aims to connect students to resources and support in order to grow academically, professionally and personally.

At LSE, Claudine learned that many students, especially international students, are confused, anxious and stressed when they first arrive. To address this, she strives to create a culture of support for students by treating them as "whole people" and by breaking down barriers to accessing critical academic and personal resources. LSE LIFE also encourages departments to come up with innovative ways of interacting with and supporting students. Claudine described that the key to their success is in creating a "safe space," where students feel comfortable asking for help when they need it. Claudine inspired us to work to create purpose-driven spaces that connect students to each other, to their professors and to the greater community.

Values and Practices of Co-Creation: "Safe and Brave Spaces"
Anita Nowak, Lecturer, Faculty of Management, McGill University

A lecturer at McGill's Faculty of Management and an expert on empathy, Anita Nowak developed the first course on social entrepreneurship at McGill. Anita explained that we are living in a society that hinders connectedness, especially in the context of universities where

belonging is not necessarily central to teaching. Anita spoke of the "safe and brave space" she creates in her classroom, where she promotes authenticity, vulnerability, values alignment, and "co-creation" among her students. She does this by encouraging students to develop their own personal narrative, taking a step back from conversations and letting her students debate among themselves, and by bringing in speakers from the field. Anita describes social entrepreneurship as "deeply political and spiritual," making her role as "curator, facilitator, observer, and synthesizer" all the more important.

Three of Anita's students reinforced the impact of her approach to teaching. One student, Valary, B.Eng. '19, McGill, expressed that the course allowed her to "work through self-actualization," and taught her how to live according to her values. This also resonated with Clélia, B.A. '16, McGill, who told us that the course inspired her to stand for her values by following her passion for social entrepreneurship, despite initially not having the approval of her family.

Through Anita and her students, we learned about how to create an environment of reciprocity, confidence-building, authentic participation, and co-creation; to "give students agency, make them feel valued" and "lift students to their highest moral authority." (Nick Milum, B.A. '19, McGill University).

4. The Caring Classroom

"Caring does not need to be taught, just awakened and valued."

Kim Samuel

"I believe in you" is an important message that Kim shares with her students as a Professor of Practice at McGill University. This message is a reflection of Kim's classroom ethos, the 3 R's: Respect, Recognition and Reciprocity, by showing respect for students and their views, by recognizing their different abilities and contributions, and via reciprocity as teaching and learning is a two-way street between students and professors.

By cultivating the 3 R's, Kim argued that teaching becomes more meaningful and rewarding,

and students feel seen, valued, and are better able to thrive academically. Kim reflected on how by sharing her own stories and making herself vulnerable, she felt that her students saw her more as an equal, and felt more comfortable expressing their views in the classroom, as well as consulting her in times of need. Teaching to the whole student also requires engaging students in different ways – through creativity, storytelling and deep listening. Kim noted, however that the responsibility to create the ethos of a caring class does not lie solely with the professor – there must be an "equal commitment and leadership on the part of students."

Kim Samuel and Dean Velentzas, B.A. '18, McGill University; Social Connectedness Fellow 2018 lead an exercise on creating supportive classrooms.

Dean Velentzas, one of Kim's former students and a Social Connectedness Fellow, reflected on how a caring classroom environment can shape the way students value their education. He explained the way students "play the game," by fixing their schedules, signing up for classes with friends and looking for the easiest electives. Although these are all methods that students expect will make their university lives easier, through Kim's class, Dean recognized that this was in fact not what he valued, or what motivated him.

He realized that an intimate classroom environment with open discussions where students and professors feel equally valued, as opposed to the typical dictatorial lecture styles, was far more conducive to learning. Dean also acknowledged that students need to look out for one another and encourage participation and dialogue among each other in order to create a reciprocal and caring environment. "When an equal respect exists between everyone in the room, you are much more willing to be participative and attentive."

Discussion Questions

a. What is the role of the university in supporting caring classrooms?

To answer this question, the group collectively brainstormed potential barriers to the university supporting caring classrooms, and potential pathways to overcome these barriers. One barrier identified was an overemphasis on grades and academic qualifications to evaluate students, teaching assistants (TAs) and professors. By placing more value on students' critical-thinking skills, team-building, capacity to empathize, and written and oral expression, universities can better equip students with the skills to thrive after graduation and to make an impact in their communities.

With a broader scope of evaluation, students would not have to be in constant competition with each other or tie their self-worth to their grades, leaving them more time to learn for personal gratification, rather than for the fulfilment of grade expectations. In many universities, TAs are awarded their position based on the grade they obtained in the course. Emphasis should also be placed on their ability to lead and facilitate group discussions and engage one-on-one with students. Similarly, for professors seeking tenure, there is often a greater emphasis on the number of academic papers and books they have published, rather than on their teaching methods and abilities. Participants identified a need for universities to support professors to enhance their teaching skills, and to recognize quality of teaching as a more effective evaluation.

Another barrier to the caring classroom is the size of classes. At large institutions, amphitheatre-type lectures are inevitable, but it can be a challenging environment in which to build community, and create connections between students and professors. Participants overwhelmingly expressed that smaller groups and classroom environments can facilitate greater communication. As one participant said, "We must be sure that research is being passed down as knowledge in a meaningful way." Professors and TAs can, however, work to create an environment of comfort and trust even within a large lecture hall. Encouraging student participation and small group work, for example, can help students to engage better with the material and with each other.

b. What is the value of the caring classroom in supporting the whole student?

In answering this question, Joseph Kalt, Co-Director of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development (HPAIED) and Professor of International Political Economy at Harvard Kennedy School, explained the way he creates a caring classroom. He puts the final exam on the syllabus so that his students know what they're in for from the start, and allows students to use their own discretion as to when and how they use technology in the classroom. In his classroom, he hopes students emerge with life skills, resilience and learning. He sees these small changes as vital to supporting the whole student. He strives to create an environment where students can exercise their agency, and create a mutual relationship of trust to reduce pressure and enrich the learning experience for both professor and student.

Joseph Kalt, Professor, Harvard Kennedy School,
shares his methods for creating a caring classroom.

5. The Caring Campus: Learning from Vancouver Island University (VIU)

"We must feed the forces of inclusion and starve the forces of exclusion."

Ralph Nilson, President and Vice Chancellor of Vancouver Island University

In this session, students and faculty from VIU demonstrated how the values of the "caring classroom" can scale to a "caring campus." We learned about the impact on students,

professors and the entire community when leaders at every level of the institution embrace the values of holistic learning and a caring classroom.

Ralph Nilson, President and Vice Chancellor of VIU, explained how VIU recognizes that holistic education is key to the students they serve, as they have a large cohort of Indigenous students, students coming out of care, first-generation students, and students from other under-represented backgrounds. VIU reaches into and serves the community, to enrich resources and support for their students.

Ralph Nilson, President and Vice Chancellor, VIU, presents how the university's ethos contributes to a caring campus.

As Ralph explained, "education is a key determinant of social change and sustainable prosperity." In many ways, VIU is a unique example of a caring campus.

With an ingrained dialogue of inclusion, small class sizes, a diverse student cohort, and strong student-faculty bonds, there is a reciprocal caring and learning relationship between faculty and students. However, this environment emerged from a need – VIU noticed a large number of students and applicants struggling from social isolation, whether due to trauma, poverty, challenging family environments, or the culture shock of re-entering education.

One initiative that emerged from recognizing the pervasiveness of social isolation on campus was the Peer Support Navigator for the Tuition Waiver Program. Many students who come out of care programs have their tuition covered at VIU and at other schools in British Columbia, but this does not mean that all of their needs to succeed in university are met.

Tia Schaefer, one of the Navigators and a former youth-in-care herself, explained how the Navigators offer support for these students by listening to their challenges, helping them fill out forms or find housing, advocating for them to the university's administration, and connecting them to important services and resources in the community.

Tia Shaefer, Peer Support Navigator, explains the challenges students coming out of care face while at university.

With this kind of support in place, Tia explained how "education becomes more than just a degree, but also a community, more holistic and relational."

To discuss how larger institutions may be able to create similar types of support networks, Gillian Anderson, Department Chair and Professor of Sociology at VIU, led a collective brainstorm by asking: "Working from the place you are, what do you think could be instituted or co-created where you live that might facilitate the building of a caring institution?"

Participants drew both from their own experiences and from what they learned from the VIU speakers and compiled a set of key components for this type of environment:

- Working "with and not for" the students (i.e., consulting students to find out where the gaps in resources and support are, and building on their suggestions);
- Mentorship programs to create support that transcends "year groups" and focuses on pairing students from under-represented backgrounds; and
- Greater accessibility of resources by embracing unique expertise that may not be commonplace. For example, allowing individuals with disabilities to teach a class on disabilities or bringing in Indigenous elders for courses covering Indigenous material.

As a collective, we agreed that the prevailing culture of large institutions has to change; we must work together from all levels to build an inclusive and connected community.

Illustration by **Lynne Dalgleish**
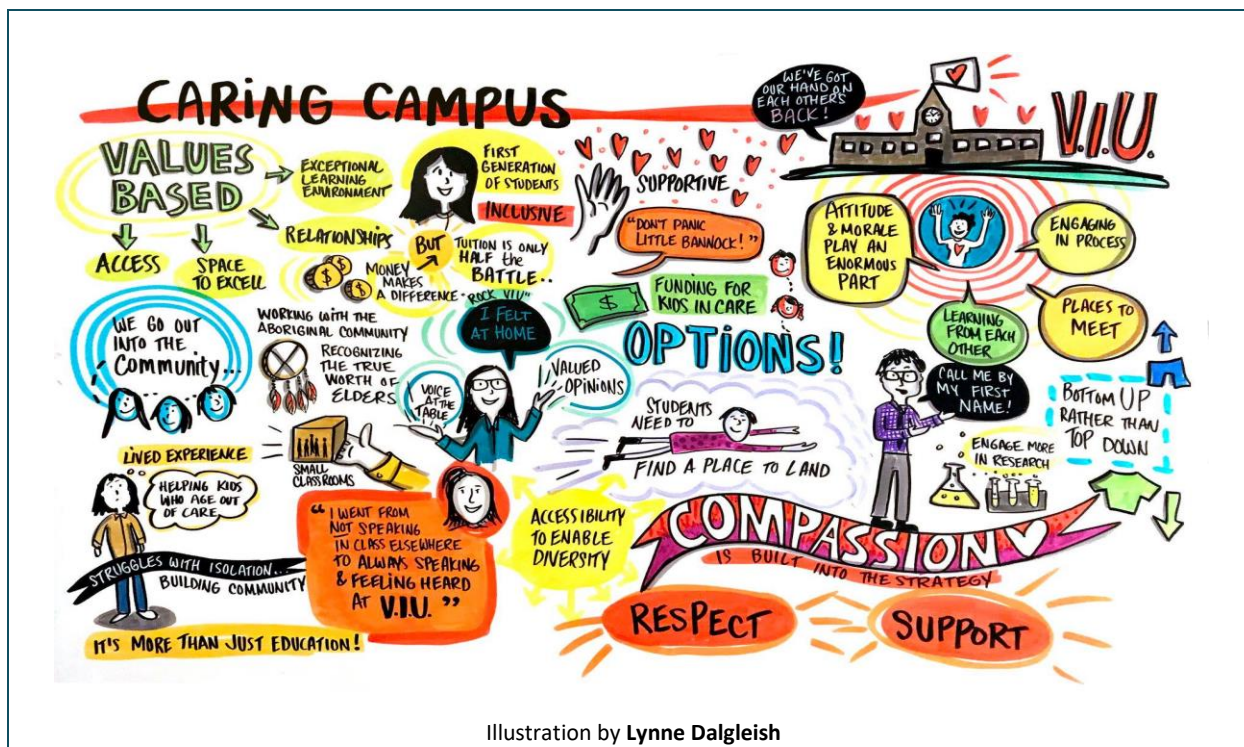
"Students come into the classroom with strengths and are already engaged in communities. If we can get them engaged in work they're already passionate about, whether voluntary or not, they will bring these strengths into the classroom as a springboard for their academic studies."

Gillian Anderson, Professor and Department Chair, Sociology, VIU

6. Storytelling Session II

"How can there be peace if people don't understand each other and how can people understand each other if they don't know each other?"

Désirée McGraw, President and Head of College, Pearson College UWC

Désirée McGraw, President of Pearson College UWC, gave us a look into a caring campus community at the high-school level. UWC started as a cross cultural post-war institution as a way of preventing future conflict, through transnational connections. 90% of students are on financial assistance, chosen strictly on merit and their potential as global ambassadors.

To Désirée and the UWC community, "the classroom starts in the boarding house." With the majority of students aged between 16 and 18, UWC stands by a method of "deliberate diversity." This "intentional intercultural international community" uses methods such as "tension twins," whereby two students from deliberately conflicting or diverse backgrounds are put in dormitory rooms or boarding houses together to "build understanding, recognition and facilitate cooperation." This is one of the foundations of the community and transcends the houses to the classrooms.

Désirée explained that, "with the rise of nationalism, tribalism and xenophobia, it's critical that people have these experiences at such a formative time in their lives. The idea of transcending these nationalist movements that amplify differences between people, these shared experiences at a formative age, transcend all of that by residing in a living and learning environment. This allows us to address global challenges and act across differences so that diversity is a strength and inclusive communities are created around this diversity." We must recognize that "young people who have the capacity to connect across cultures, are adaptable and resilient, and have more valuable qualities than merely being academically proficient." On this note, Désirée concluded that "we have to start younger"; values taught during adolescence are more likely to remain with them in higher education and beyond.

Illustration by **Lynne Dalgleish**
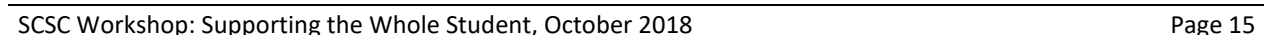
7. A Community-Based Approach to Mental Health and Well-Being

"By intentionally giving our time to reach out, to be kind, to share, to connect, we are reminded that there are no 'others,' only our 'other selves' and that we all 'belong.'"

Evelyn Rodinos, Counselling Psychologist

Throughout the two days, mental health emerged as a common thread at the core of student well-being. Evelyn Rodinos, a Counselling Psychologist, joined us to address the mental health climate in post-secondary institutions and to offer strategies to engage the entire community in fostering well-being.

The most prevalent mental health issue facing students today is anxiety, which is being reported at increasing rates in post-secondary institutions. Anxiety is often overlooked as less significant than depression and generally seen as less problematic. Evelyn noted that the needs of students seeking mental health support on campus far outweigh the resources. "Maintaining a healthy campus environment cannot be left to the professionals alone. It must be a community responsibility. We are all on the frontlines."

Evelyn explained that oftentimes, social anxiety stems from the human need for a sense of belonging. "When our belonging needs are unmet, we have difficulty establishing and maintaining relationships, social activities cut off, and the resulting social isolation puts us at risk of reduced well-being." There are many ways to meet this need – family, student groups, religious groups, organizations – but Evelyn emphasized that "even just one person, seeing you for who you are, can make all the difference." Social connectedness is a "resilience resource," and we can all be supporting the mental health of one another "simply by authentically connecting with our colleagues, students, friends, and other human beings to actively make space, make eye contact and dialogue with each other."

Evelyn led us in an exercise to show how the simple act of listening *without* judgment can help make someone feel that they belong, are valued and are not alone. "Authentically connecting" means to listen without judgement and trying not to problem-solve. It is not the outcome, however, but the process of engagement, that is the most significant. "The giving of your time,

your communication of interest, your acceptance fosters the feeling in the other of being valued enough to be really heard, to be accepted as 'valuable enough'."

"We must address mental health literacy."

Celine Thomas, Strategic Initiatives Coordinator, SCSC; Social Connectedness Fellow, 2017

Celine Thomas, Strategic Initiatives Coordinator, SCSC; Social Connectedness Fellow 2017, presents her findings on mental health challenges at McGill University.

Celine shared her view on the mental health crisis on campus and pathways forward. As a Social Connectedness Fellow, Celine found – through interviews and research – that there was a large disconnect between student *campaigns* for mental health and *access* to mental health resources. Celine suggested that students can work toward greater literacy by educating our peers about mental health, and being more present, aware and by actively listening to our friends when they talk about their well-being.

In addition to increasing mental health literacy, students and staff must hold their institutions accountable in addressing the triggers that arise from the current academic climate and channeling resources to ensure administrative support for student well-being and mental health. Celine also suggested that institutions can offer a mental health resource tutorial for new students, either during orientation, or when they first sign up for classes online.

During our breakout session, we worked in small groups to tackle the questions:

a. **What can we do in our own roles to support each other better and improve our understanding of mental health?**
b. **How can we all be changemakers?**

Key Outcomes:
- Students should prioritize taking care of themselves (i.e., allow oneself to step back from any situation and take a break when necessary);
- Students need to acknowledge and congratulate themselves for their achievements, no

matter how small;

- Students and faculty must hold their universities accountable by advocating for more youth to be at the decision-making table regarding mental health responses and resource allocation;

- Professors can adopt alternative methods of class participation and evaluation to ensure students with different learning abilities and social comfort levels, can still contribute and benefit from the course material;

- Schools can provide parents, caregivers and any other student support networks with the guidance and tools to understand the academic system and the resources available to their children / friends;

- Schools should offer professors mental health training so that they are aware of support resources on campus and can help guide students to these resources as required; and

- Everyone can try to authentically connect with each other: listening *without* judgment and *without* problem solving.

Illustration by **Lynne Dalgleish**

8. Inclusion for All: Special Olympics

"How can we demystify stigma and exclusion if we can't connect with each other?"
Soeren Palumbo, Senior Director, Global Youth Engagement, Special Olympics International

A large part of tackling social isolation is addressing the exclusion of those who do not fit into conventional norms of intellectual ability. Soeren Palumbo, Senior Director of Global Youth Engagement at Special Olympics International, has been working toward broadening inclusivity and accessibility in education through sports. Soeren explained that universities are often designed to be *exclusive*; they cater to those with specific learning abilities, accepting students based on stringent academic credentials that individuals with intellectual disabilities may lack. Soeren emphasized how, in addition to students *with* intellectual disabilities benefiting from being in post-secondary education, students *without* intellectual disabilities benefit by having a shared experience and learning how to be more inclusive. Special Olympics is creating more intentional communities of inclusion in campuses worldwide through Unified Sports, where youth with intellectual disabilities play on sports teams with other university students.

Soeren Palumbo, Senior Director of Global Youth Engagement, Special Olympics, discusses the benefits of making education accessible to people with intellectual disabilities.

These shared experiences help to eradicate stigma, stop people from viewing people with intellectual disabilities as being an "object of someone's service," and help to transform students into advocates for more inclusionary practices in universities. Soeren suggested that by inviting people in who are marginalized and disconnected, we can create inclusion, understanding and connectedness. Echoing Désirée, Soeren left us with a poignant reminder: "We can't create peace or end war if we can't get to know each other. If we can't have shared experiences, we won't progress."

Looking to inclusivity and policy-making on a broader scale, Eden Beschen, a Social Connectedness Fellow, researched inclusive post-secondary education in North America. Only six percent of post-secondary institutions have an "inclusive approach to education," which she defined as "when students with an intellectual disability are in college courses alongside their peers without a disability," and in these institutions, students are often non-matriculating and auditing classes. Although this is a step in the right direction, there needs to be greater action toward inclusion on a broader level.

Many families are not aware of *inclusive* higher education, and with broader public awareness, young people with intellectual disabilities, and their parents or caregivers, can learn that college is an option. On a policy level, there is little existing legislation in Canada concerning disability inclusion in higher education. This inclusion, Eden explained, can be tackled by expanding the movement, encouraging universities and colleges to begin inclusive initiatives, and by connecting individuals and organizations to facilitate inclusive higher education. Eden pointed to Syracuse University and Inclusion Alberta for inspiration.

Illustration by **Lynne Dalgleish**

Eden and Soeren posed the following question to the group:

a. **How do we promote empathy and inclusion in research-driven / higher learning institutions?**

Key Outcomes:

- Teachers should consider the diversity of students not only regarding language, but also consider cultural and educational backgrounds, as well as the diversity of learning styles when presenting material;

- One program that is helping to facilitate inclusion is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), an education framework to help teachers meet the learning needs of all students. Any higher learning institution could implement the principles of the UDL framework;

- In the context of sports, having team members without intellectual disabilities as allies for those with intellectual disabilities, is a crucial part of embracing diversity of talent and mind. Being an ally for those who can't amplify their own voices, and demonstrating that this type of teamwork can be effective both on the field and in the classroom, can contribute greatly to strengthening inclusivity; and

- As a movement for inclusion, we need to give institutions incentive to change their policies. We need to demonstrate how inclusion can *add* to the student experience, rather than complicate or detract from it. As Soeren puts it, "Creating inclusive institutions is not a favour; it's a way to enhance the fabric of a university and be an enriching factor in the classroom."

9. Inspiration Education: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

"Learning happens in the body, learning happens in the heart."
Timothy P. Shriver, Board Chair, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

In our last session of Day 1, Timothy Shriver, Board Chair for CASEL, spoke about a much needed change in the developmental framework of our education systems, one that encompasses the social and emotional learning aspects of education.

Tim stressed that "the main pathway through which knowledge flows is a teaching and learning relationship," and that unfortunately, in our current one-size-fits-all model of education, we have created "an entire infrastructure that's designed to help the left frontal cortex of your brain, teaching to satisfy one part of the brain rather than all of it." In other words, we are not teaching to the whole student, but rather basing individual performance on one part of the brain, and therefore only one way of learning.

Timothy Shriver, Board Chair, CASEL presents the principles of social and emotional learning (SEL).

Because our education system is so black and white, "people are going into education for the wrong reasons and with the wrong tools." Furthermore, if a student is unable to connect with their teacher or the content presented in class, they can neither learn nor be present.

Social and emotional learning, in theory, molds individuals into "caring, connected, and contributing problem solvers." Like Kim's 3 R's (Respect, Recognition, Reciprocity), Timothy spoke of the 3 B's of social and emotional learning:

- Believing: Looking inward to discover an audacious, unknown, possible giftedness;
- Belonging: Sharing your gift with another and valuing the gift another shares with you; and
- Becoming: Connecting your gifts in order to heal, unleash, serve and create.

Most visible today in primary education, SEL teaches self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness, all of which are powerful and teachable skills. For example, the smallest exercise of practicing daily gratitude at the start of class, can change the neural pathways of individuals and has been linked to better self-management. In documented cases of success, SEL methods improved outcomes across a wide spectrum – from suicidal ideation to academic achievement – and resulted in students having stronger relationships with their teachers and peers.

Illustration by **Lynne Dalgleish**

As a group, we recognized that these skills are still important to develop and exercise in a post-secondary context, yet all social and emotional learning is not integrated into curricula at this level. Where students are dealing with mental health challenges and feeling disconnected from their peers, teachers, and curricula, Tim argues that the principles of SEL can help to create stronger and more caring classrooms in post-secondary institutions. To learn more about SEL, click here.

10. Storytelling Part III

Day 2 opened with a storytelling session from Becky Cook, Coordinator for the Misipawistik Land-Based Learning Program and Gabe Hughes, DPhil Candidate at the University of Oxford.

Gabe Hughes, DPhil Candidate, University of Oxford and **Becky Cook**, Coordinator, Land-Based Learning Program, Misipawistik Cree Nation share their stories about creating community and connection for Indigenous students and youth.

Drawing from her work in her home community of the Misipawistik Cree Nation, Becky spoke about creating "safe spaces" for Indigenous youth. Sharing circles form a big part of the *land-based learning program,* where spaces are created for people to share their experiences and re-engage with their land, language and culture. Facilitators and elders teach the younger generations how to listen, sit still and be present, and discuss their responsibilities within the community.

Throughout the process, youth are encouraged to find their own path. As Becky expressed: "No one can tell us what we were put here for or what we were meant to do; it's up to each person to figure that out." Not only does this way of learning teach social and self-awareness, it also teaches people what a respectful relationship with nature looks like. There are many parallels to draw between land-based learning programs and creating a caring classroom and campus.

> *"We were able to create a community for each other."*
> *Gabe Hughes, PhD Candidate, University of Oxford, Wampanoag First Nation*

Gabe Hughes shared the challenges she faced transitioning from her undergraduate to

graduate degree. During her undergraduate degree at a small campus near her community in Newfoundland, Gabe explained how easy it was to create and engage in events for Indigenous students. This was due to the fact that there was a large Mi'kmaq student presence on campus and the university was supportive in creating safe spaces for these students. In her final year, she applied to the Art History Program at the University of Oxford, after visiting a museum there that she believed was exploiting Indigenous artifacts. Her goal was to be an ambassador and bridge for her community while there. However, throughout her degree, she observed cultural relativism and ignorance on the part of the students and faculty. She realized that much of what people knew about her culture was sensationalized by film and media.

Gabe overcame some of the isolation she felt by connecting with students from other Indigenous backgrounds around the world, and together they formed a student support network for Indigenous students and visiting scholars at Oxford. Gabe's story shows us the importance of having discourse around issues of appropriation, cultural relativism and lack of support for Indigenous students on campuses. Just as she encourages museum curators to work with, and not for Indigenous communities, universities should engage in a similar manner with their Indigenous student bodies to create more inclusive and caring campuses.

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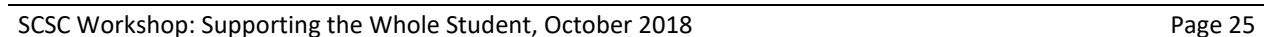
11. Bridging Theory and Practice: Enhancing Community Engagement

"The classroom can be a bridge between a student's sense of self and their potential for action."

Rachel Kiddell-Monroe, Professor of Practice, International Development, McGill University

Rachel Kiddell-Monroe, Professor of Practice, International Development, McGill University, speaks to the importance of experiential learning in the classroom.

Rachel Kiddell-Monroe and her former student, Samantha Poncabare, spoke about a different kind of classroom – one that bridges theory with practice. With a background in humanitarian work – having worked in conflict zones with *Médecins Sans Frontières* – Rachel aims to use her practical experience to show students how theory translates on the ground.

In 2018, Rachel designed a fourth-year seminar for 25 students with this vision: Humanitarianism in the 21st Century: Challenges and Dilemmas. A key component of the course was a collaborative humanitarian project, in which students were required to volunteer with Montreal organizations working with recently-arrived forced migrants. By designing the course with an emphasis on practical experience, she helped her students to see that they could apply the academic theories they had learned throughout their degree to the issues playing out on the ground, and that they could make an impact on the global issues they were learning about, namely global forced migration, by getting involved on a local scale. Furthermore, the course allowed them to discover their strengths and develop their interests as individuals outside the classroom.

"A classroom where someone can apply their theoretical knowledge with practical experience is infinitely more rewarding than the reality of most courses at university."

Samantha Poncabare, B.A.' 18, McGill University

Samantha explained how the course, and her engagement with asylum seekers, fostered in her a deep sense of belonging to her classroom community and to the global community. Samantha felt a strong sense of solidarity in the class, a unique feeling that was not normalized in her university experience thus far. She says the class gave the students "the cognitive tools to align their sense of self" and showed them that they don't have to travel to exotic corners of the world to help people. As she pointed out, "The global really is the local."

One important caveat to consider is that many student internships or partnerships with organizations are created with the student's experience in mind, often not considering the needs of the organization or the community it serves. Participants then came together to brainstorm how to create reciprocal partnerships that are mutually beneficial for students, organizations and the community. Several common threads emerged:

Making the partnership more beneficial for the student:
- Ensure the student has a designated mentor at the organization;
- Don't give youth something to do, but something to *be*; and
- Encourage youth to feel like long-term participants in a movement. Even if youth are involved in a project for a short period, organizations should recognize their value.

Making the partnership more beneficial for the community:
- Students should prepare to work with a community by gaining in-depth knowledge about the community's realities and cultural sensitivities;
- Students and organizations should always work with the community, ensuring that the community's voices are at the centre of the project, rather than imposing solutions from the outside; and
- Students should be open-minded and adaptable to workplace dynamics and the community's needs.

The university can act as a better bridge between students and organizations as well, whether it's by mandating more experiential assessments and projects in the classroom, or focusing on expanding their internship / volunteer programs for students based on the organization's capacity and needs.

Jackie Bagwiza, B.A. '17, McGill University shares during the discussion session how universities can help students bridge academia with on-ground experience.

Many participants noted that incorporating SEL into secondary and post-secondary curricula would create a more mutually-beneficial relationship between students and organizations by:

a. arming students with the tools to contribute meaningfully to a community or organization;

b. building resilience to confront challenging workplace circumstances; and

c. promoting greater self-awareness and values alignment with organizations.

12. Expanding the Circle of Action

Our final session focused on empowering under-represented youth to transform their ideas into action. Jennifer Corriero, Executive Director of TakingITGlobal, began the conversation with an artistic activity. She asked participants to illustrate, "What action will I take as a learner, community builder or researcher to expand the circle of action?" With this inspiration in mind, Sabrina Sassi, PhD Candidate at Université Laval and a Senior Social Connectedness Fellow, shared how she is expanding the circle of action through policy advocacy in Montreal.

Sabrina began by reflecting on issues facing communities in Montreal: "If you look into the details, communities are disconnected. We have different equity-seeking paths; we have our own stories but still the same struggle: isolation, and sometimes for the same reasons. How

about standing up for one another? Creating and understanding a sense of community?"

Gabe Hughes, DPhil Candidate, University of Oxford; **Janine Robb**, Executive Director, Health and Wellness, University of Toronto; **Kim Samuel**, Founder, SCSC; and **Jennifer Corriero**, Executive Director, TakingITGlobal show their visuals of what it means to expand the circle of action.

Sabrina runs monthly community gatherings to bring isolated groups together and discuss issues that are important to them. These monthly gatherings serve as a platform to elevate the community voices, unite diverse communities, and to identify best practices and policies on a variety of issues. This is an *"intersectional effort"* to convene identity groups on multi-issue platforms. Sabrina is working to transform the research and policy recommendations into policy proposals for key decision makers, ensuring that community voices are at the centre of the discussion.

Sabrina Sassi, PhD Candidate, Université Laval; Senior Fellow, SCSC, presents her research project 'Bridging Divides'.

"We want to ensure that everyone's efforts are synchronized and elevated together."

Sabrina Sassi, PhD Candidate, Université Laval; Senior Fellow, SCSC

Through this project, Social Connectedness Fellows, MJ Gauthier and Vino Wijeyasuriyar, were able to transform their ideas into action through research and community gatherings. MJ Gauthier spoke about the lack of recognition of neurodiversity in our communities: "People who think, speak or are a way that isn't uniform with society are deprived of opportunities. Minorities exist in every cultural context, and their experiences of belonging, isolation and persecution vary immensely. Because neuro-diversity is still predominantly viewed on a vertical scale, it's hierarchized, when it should be globally internalized as what it is – a spectrum, a piece of the puzzle of human diversity."

MJ explained that neuro-diverse minorities are extremely vulnerable to isolation, which she experienced first-hand in her family and at university. She recommended that researchers and practitioners pay close attention to the unique needs and challenges these individuals face. Universities can help to overcome this neuro-diversity by encouraging and adapting to diverse ways of thinking in the classroom.

MJ Gauthier, B.A. '17, McGill University; Social Connectedness Fellow 2018, talks about the neuro-diversity of young people.

Vino Wijeyasuriyar addressed the impact of inter-generational trauma present in migrant communities. She worked with Sabrina and several other organizations working with this population to organize a gathering for women in Montreal, with the objective of bridging the gap between generations and facilitating discussion on the highly stigmatized subject of mental health. They used tea and henna to create a comforting environment, and adapted their vocabulary to better resonate with the older women.

Soon after the first event, the elders of this community asked for another gathering. By breaking down barriers around mental health, older women were encouraged to speak

openly about the traumas they had endured. This collectively helped the group to cope with these problems and build a stronger support system within the community. Tying her research on inter-generational trauma to the university experience, Vino raised the importance of supporting first-generation students in university who may not have the same support from family or friends as other students. She proposed a peer-matching program for older first generation students to mentor incoming first-generation students.

Sabrina, MJ and Vino showed that there are many equity-seeking groups that share common struggles but are disconnected in their advocacy and action. As researchers, students, administrators and community members, we need to look for people on the margins, especially youth who are disconnected from resources and support networks, to achieve their fullest potential. But all three raised the concern that we cannot approach communities without doing the research first, to understand the context and overcome our own biases.

This approach to expanding the circle of action touched on topics from the previous sessions – universities can do more to reach youth who are disconnected from mental health resources, support Indigenous, first-generation and neuro-diverse students on campus, and conduct outreach off-campus to link equity-seeking groups to post-secondary education.

Jennifer Corriero closed by highlighting a program that can help youth transform their ideas into action. Recognizing the potential for youth to be positive changemakers in their communities, TakingITGlobal (TIG) is partnering with the Government of Canada to provide community-service grants to youth across Canada. TIG is working to ensure that Indigenous youth and other marginalized youth, like refugees and LGBT youth, have access to these grants. More information about this program, RisingYouth, can be found here.

13. Conclusion

SCSC seeks to take these discussions and ideas forward with the individuals and organizations involved, and with our growing local and global networks through research, advocacy and events. We invite readers of this report (whether you attended the event or not) to reach out to our team at info@scscglobal.org with any comments, suggestions, ideas or questions. To stay

up to date with our future events and publications, please follow us on Facebook or Twitter, and visit our website at www.socialconnectedness.org. Applications for our Summer 2019 Social Connectedness Fellowship Program will be launched in Winter 2019.

14. Appendix

Key Words and Terms

- Accessibility
- Accountability
- Action
- Advocacy
- *"Active agency"*
- *"Actively engaged"*
- Authenticity
- *"Believing, belonging, becoming"*
- *"Building bridges"*
- *"A caring, connected, responsible, contributing problem solver"*
- *"Caring classroom"*
- Co-creation
- Collaboration
- Community
- Compassion
- Creativity
- Culture
- Deep listening
- Deliberate diversity
- Destigmatize
- Empathy
- Empowerment
- Engagement
- Experiential education
- Healing
- Holistic

- Inclusivity
- *"Inclusive leadership development"*
- *"Individual to the collective"*
- Inspiration
- *"Intentional communities"*
- Kindness
- Marginalization
- Motivation
- Narratives
- Trust
- Relationship
- Resilience
- Resources
- *"Respect, Recognition, Reciprocity"*
- *"Safe and brave spaces"*
- Self-awareness
- Shame
- Silence
- Self-actualization
- *"Social and emotional learning"*
- Social isolation
- Stigma
- Storytelling
- Support
- Values
- Vulnerability
- *"With, not for"*