



Living Knowledge Research Project

Project Summary

Prepared by the Office of Community Engagement

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Submitted to:

Embrace the City Leadership Group

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Executive Summary

The Living Knowledge Research Project (“the Project”) sought to determine the extent of community-based experiential learning (CBEL) in Concordia’s undergraduate curriculum. The goal of the project is to provide evidence upon which faculties and the university can begin to assess their current level of community-engaged experiential learning offerings, and to articulate objectives going forward. Data collection and qualitative analyses were conducted in the 2015-2016 academic year.

Key Findings:

Defining Community-Based Experiential Learning (“CBEL”)

In describing community-based experiential learning experiences, respondents referred to a range of pedagogical practices and varied interpretations of the term ‘community.’ The Living Knowledge Advisory Committee opted to retain the broadest possible definition at this early stage of analysis. Thus, for the purposes of this Project, CBEL can be understood as a learning opportunity in which:

- a portion of coursework is completed in conjunction with a ‘community partner’ (the definition of which varies by faculty);
- students can contextualize, cement and troubleshoot classroom learning; and
- the interaction between students and community partners is designed to be mutually beneficial.

Four themes emerged as core values of CBEL activities: sustained relationships, mutual reciprocity, ethical practice and engaged citizenship.

CBEL Curriculum Review by the Numbers

- 5% (168/3207) of courses currently listed in Concordia’s undergraduate course calendar offer students the opportunity to engage in some form of CBEL.
- 68% (32/47) of Concordia’s departments, institutes and colleges offer at least one undergraduate course that uses CBEL pedagogy.
- Fine Arts offers the greatest number of CBEL courses (75), followed by the Arts & Science (68), John Molson School of Business (18) and Engineering and Computer Science (7).
- The majority of CBEL courses, across all faculties, are offered at the 400-level.

Recommendations:

Two main recommendations – with specific recommended actions – are advanced in response to the Project findings and the challenges of incorporating CBEL into teaching practices most consistently cited by participants:

- 1. Increase institutional capacity to develop and maintain community partnerships.**
- 2. Develop or improve existing programs to recognize and appreciate CBEL stakeholders.**

Conclusion

The results of the Living Knowledge Research Project reveal that faculty members are, despite many challenges, committed to community-based experiential learning as a uniquely valuable and inspiring pedagogical practice; one that benefits the intellectual life of Concordians and the communities they serve. The Advisory Committee is hopeful that this Report and its recommendations will assist university-decision makers in developing meaningful responses to these findings, with a view to enhancing CBEL offerings at Concordia.

Introduction

In December 2014, the Community Engagement subcommittee of Concordia's Sustainability Governance Framework endorsed the Living Knowledge Research Project and approved a budget of \$40,000 to support its completion. The goals of the project were: to quantify the extent of community-based experiential learning (CBEL) in Concordia's undergraduate curriculum and to provide a foundation from which to sustainably support and grow these activities across the university.

During the 2015-2016 academic year, student researchers¹ were hired by the Office of Community Engagement (OCE) to conduct this research. Guidance and supervision were provided by the Living Knowledge Advisory Committee (LKAC), which consists of the following members:

- Dr. Catherine Bolton, Vice-Provost, Teaching and Learning
- Dr. Janis Timm-Bottos, Community Engagement Fellow, Office of the Provost
- Dr. Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, Faculty Member
- Enza De Cubellis, Director, Office of the VPDERSG
- Susan Edey, Community Relations Coordinator, Office of Community Engagement
- Christina Bell, Chief Executive Officer, Sustainable Action Fund
- Marion Miller, Vice-President, Academic & Advocacy, CSU

The researchers undertook two streams of analysis:

- The **Curriculum Review** was designed to provide an accurate baseline measure of the number of CBEL opportunities currently available at Concordia, a complete inventory of undergraduate CBEL courses and a quantitative comparison between faculties and departments.
- The **Core Value Exploration** involved face-to-face interviews with faculty members that sought to collect information about the values, principles and practices behind CBEL as well as ideas about what institutional programs and structures might be able to better support this work.

This summary document provides a brief outline of the process the researchers followed and an overview of their findings. This document is organized in four parts:

Part 1: Defining Community-Based Experiential Learning

Part 2: Findings from Curriculum Review

Part 3: Findings from Core Value Exploration

Part 4: Recommendations

¹ The Living Knowledge Advisory Committee would like to thank the student researchers, Elyse MacLeod, Aurelia Roman and Nadra Wagdy for their work on the Living Knowledge Research Project.

Part 1: Defining Community Based Experiential Learning

At the onset of this research project, CBEL was deployed as a catch-all term, referring to a variety of related but distinct pedagogical approaches that connect students with hands-on learning opportunities in the community. The researchers sought to flesh out this definition through their interviews. The results of their efforts provide important context for the result that follow.

Diverse Pedagogical Practices

Interview participants referred to a range of pedagogical practices and activities as falling within the scope of CBEL. The most commonly referenced CBEL model was the internship, through which students are placed within a local community organization —typically an organization with which the professor has an existing relationship—for a specified number of hours per week. The number of hours spent in the community and the types of activities undertaken naturally vary from course to course. Another frequently discussed approach to CBEL was to explicitly design a course around community engagement. In these examples, CBEL was the central pedagogical tool through which the topic of the course was examined. Finally, some professors described their practice of integrating community engagement into pre-existing courses through targeted assignments. This type of engagement has the potential to take on many different forms, but the examples given were primarily fieldtrips with follow-up reflections, or assignments requiring students to interview community members.

While most participants referred to CBEL as off-campus community engagement, just over a quarter argued that CBEL could also include engagement with the on-campus community as well as certain types of pedagogical approaches that invite community members to participate meaningfully in the classroom itself. These broader examples were included in the Curriculum Review.

It is important to note that research projects, graduate courses, co-op programs and non-credit activities all have the potential to engage with the community in significant ways. Interviewees drew on these experiences when answering questions in the Core Value Exploration, however, given the limited time and resources allocated to this project, these activities were not included in the scope of the Curriculum Review.

Varied Conceptions of Community

In addition to referencing a variety of pedagogical practices, respondents offered different interpretations of the term ‘community’. While the responses gathered cannot be seen as a representative sample, trends noted in each faculty are identified below:

Faculty of Fine Arts

Faculty of Fine Arts interview data suggests a general consensus that the term community in CBEL refers to the community sector of Montreal. This was seen to include the volunteer or non-profit sector as well as individual citizens, but excluded the public and private sectors.

Faculty of Arts and Science

General consensus among participants from the Faculty of Arts and Science was similar to that found in the Faculty of Fine Arts. However, Arts and Science respondents expressed some resistance to overly circumscribing the notion of community along strict sectorial or geographical lines. Rather, “community” was used to primarily refer to groups of people coming together to mobilize around some shared social experience: an interest, challenge, identification, etc.

John Molson School of Business

JMSB's two interview participants indicated that within their context the word "community" should primarily be understood as referring to the business community, or private sector. They emphasized work done with small local businesses, entrepreneurs, family businesses and for-profit organizations with a social mission; neither participant considered work done for or with large corporations as CBEL.

Faculty of Engineering and Computer Science

Researchers were only able to interview a single professor in the Faculty of Engineering and Computer Science; this yielded insufficient data to analyse how community is conceived of within that faculty. That said, during the Curriculum Review process, recognizing the limitations placed on the Bachelor of Engineering program by professional designations, a broader definition of community was used that included industrial settings and/or construction fields. These community-based opportunities appeared to provide very little human interactions, but allowed students to apply the skills and theories they were learning in class in real life settings.

These varied conceptions of community informed how participants described CBEL and their responsibilities to their partners. Interview responses received from the Faculty of Fine Arts and the Faculty of Arts & Science emphasized the value of mutual reciprocity and the importance of ensuring that CBEL activities reflect the needs of the community rather than simply the pedagogical aims of the course. Participants from JMSB agreed that students should listen to the needs of their business partner and aim to provide a useful output, however they emphasized that businesses also need to accept the risk that they might not get a lot out of the exchange. For JMSB respondents, the sense of obligation is seen as flowing both ways: Because businesses and the university are both stakeholders in the larger Montreal community, both have a duty to constructively engage with one another. Conversely, the responses from Arts & Science indicated the view that CBEL practitioners ought to work towards diminishing such risk and, furthermore, that the community is under no obligation to engage with the university if they do not perceive that it would be beneficial to them.

A Broad and Inclusive Definition

Faculty members at Concordia understand CBEL differently depending on where they are located in the university and the types of activities they have incorporated into their own teaching mandates. However, despite references to diverse pedagogical practices and various interpretations of what is meant by the term 'community', all participants seemed to agree on the following points:

- CBEL refers to a portion of coursework completed in conjunction with a community partner.
- These experiences allow students to contextualize, cement and troubleshoot the theory they've learnt in class.
- Exchanges with these partners should strive to be mutually beneficial.

Part 2: Findings from Curriculum Review

As a first step, data were retrieved from the 2014-2015 undergraduate calendar (course codes, numbers, titles and descriptions). Analysis of the data was then conducted on a faculty-by-faculty basis. Course descriptions from each department were reviewed during the primary analysis and those that appeared to have the potential to include CBEL were identified. During this first phase, 350 courses were marked as worthy of further exploration.

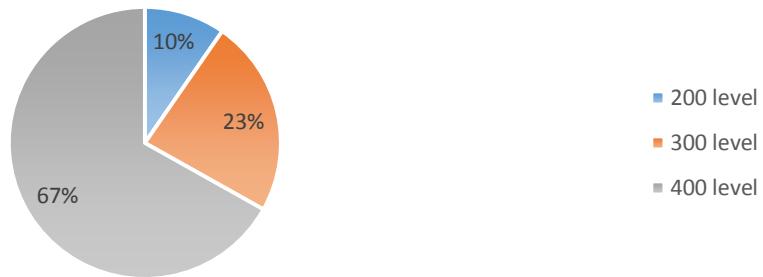
Next, course outlines were requested for the 350 courses that were identified during the primary analysis. The collection of course outlines was pursued first by sending an official email to the department chair and administrator. If this was unsuccessful, a researcher visited the department administrator in person. If necessary, an additional request would be sent directly to the course instructor or through other available channels. In total, of the 350 course outlines requested, 265 were collected (76%). Of the 85 outlines that were not provided, 48 (56%) were for courses that are no longer offered. This leaves a total of 37 (11%) courses, which were identified as potentially including a CBEL component that could not be validated through the secondary analysis.

The 265 course outlines that were gathered were then reviewed in order to validate or refute the CBEL hypothesis. Of these, 168 courses were validated as CBEL. The hypothesis was refuted in the remaining 99 instances. The results of this secondary analysis form the basis for the findings outlined below:

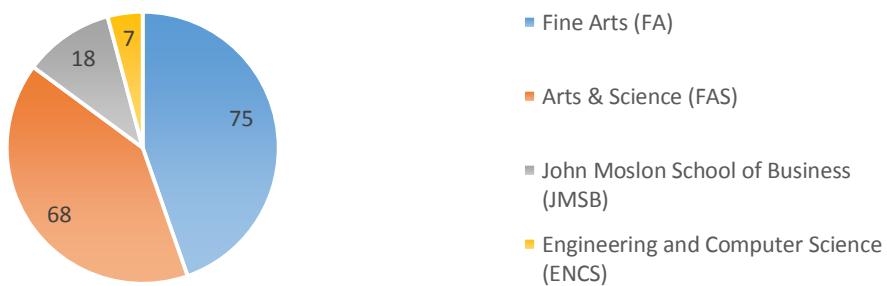
- **Of the 3207 courses listed in Concordia's undergraduate course calendar, 168 (5%) were identified as containing a CBEL component.**



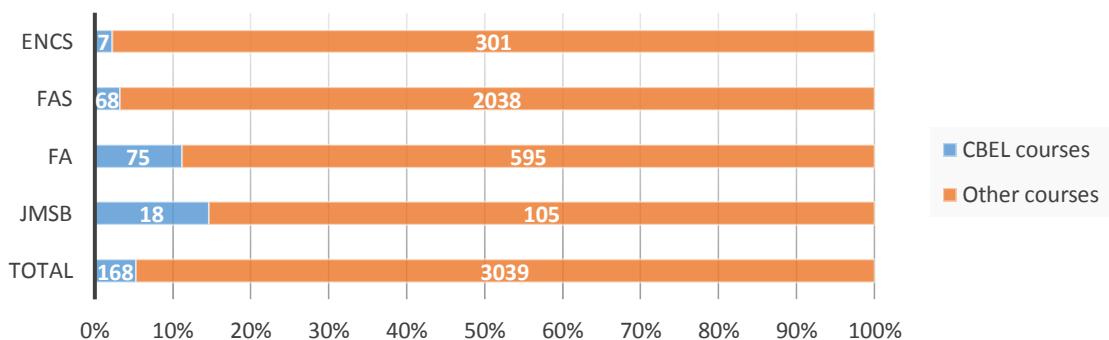
- A full inventory of the CBEL courses identified through the Curriculum Review can be found online on Concordia's [Community Engagement Hub](#).
- 111 (67%) CBEL courses are offered at the 400 level, with only 39 (23%) 300 level CBEL courses and 18 (10%) 200 level CBEL courses available to students earlier in their undergraduate career.
 - Data collected in the interviews explained this trend in two ways: On the one hand, lower-level courses are often much larger in size than upper-level ones, which makes coordinating high numbers of CBEL opportunities with community organizations challenging. On the other hand, lower-level undergraduate students may not yet have the academic background necessary to understand and appreciate all of the issues surrounding successful community engagement. Building up student readiness through prerequisites seemed to be viewed as an important step for ensuring good practice.



- The Faculty of Fine Arts offers the greatest number of CBEL courses (75), followed by the Faculty of Arts & Science (68), John Molson School of Business (18) and the Faculty of Engineering and Computer Science (7).



- Looking at the ratio of CBEL courses to non-CBEL courses offered in each faculty, JMSB has the highest percentage (15%), followed by FA (11%), FAS (3%) then ENCS (2%).



- 32 out of Concordia's 47 departments, institutes and colleges (68%) offer at least one undergraduate course that uses a CBEL pedagogy.
- The ten departments offering the greatest number of CBEL options to their students are as follows: Education (16); Studio Arts (16); Music (14); Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema (13); Design and Computation Arts (12); Applied Human Science (11); Art Education (10); Management (10); Geography, Planning and Environment (9); and Exercise Science (6)

Part 3: Core Value Exploration

Methodology

The Core Value Exploration consisted of 20 hour-long interviews with faculty members from across all four faculties. Each interview consisted of 10 questions. The researcher present at the interview transcribed the responses as they were given. No audio recordings were made.

Distribution of interviews by faculty

Arts & Science (FAS)	Fine Arts (FA)	John Molson School of Business (JMSB)	Engineering & Computer Science (ENCS)
14 interviews	3 interviews	2 interviews	1 interview

Three of the 20 participating Faculty members opted to keep their identity confidential. The remaining 17 participants were: Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, Sebastian Caquard, Don de Guerre, Israel Dupuis, Linda Dyer, Deb Dysart-Gale, Stephen High, Satoshi Ikeda, Warren Linds, Edward Little, Margie Mendell, Monica Mulrennen, Raymond Paquin, Bill Reimer, Kim Sawchuck, Peter Stoett and Janis Timm-Bottos. Interview transcripts were analysed for emerging themes; the exercise yielded a wealth of insight into CBEL practices at Concordia. The interviews helped illuminate and explain certain trends in the quantitative results.

Findings: Core Values

Key findings that emerged about the core values, strengths and challenges related to CBEL together with relevant recommended actions are outlined in this section.

Core Value #1: Fostering Sustained Relationships

Engaging with students requires community organizations to commit additional time, energy and resources. Asking community partners to repeatedly agree to one-off projects risks 'exhausting' partners and potentially leading them feel exploited and overwhelmed. Participants assert that adopting a practice of cultivating sustained relationships could lead to greater community engagement opportunities for Concordia as a whole.

While this view was advanced by the majority of participants, JMSB respondents had a somewhat different take: They asserted that, because JMSB works with the business community and often sends out many more students than other CBEL courses might, fostering sustained relationships with the organizations isn't necessarily a realistic or desirable goal.

Recommended action:
Increase institutional capacity to develop and maintain community partnerships.

Core Value #2: Mutual Reciprocity

All participants indicated that CBEL courses should strive to promote mutually beneficial exchanges between students and community partners. In mutually beneficial exchanges, knowledge dissemination and learning are bi-directional and the activities and projects undertaken reflect both the needs of the community and the pedagogical aims of the course. This requires ongoing communication between all parties, strong feedback loops, clear expectations, realistic goals and timelines and a willingness to adapt to situations as they arise.

While all participants emphasized that CBEL courses should aim to be mutually beneficial exchanges, the interview data suggest a recognition that this goal is not always achieved. Most participants attributed non-mutually beneficial exchanges to either a lack of student readiness, or to the community organization not being equipped to take students on. They also noted that the likelihood of achieving a mutually beneficial exchange depends on the model of CBEL being undertaken. For example, if a course requires students to visit a community organization on a fieldtrip and write a report reflecting on their experiences, it is less likely that the community organization is getting something meaningful out of the exchange. This possibility highlights the importance of expressing gratitude.

Recommended action:

Develop or improve existing programs to recognize CBEL partners and reciprocate their efforts.

Core Value #3: Ethical Practice

Ensuring that CBEL activities are ethical was a value clearly communicated by all participants. A number of important principles were outlined: (a) ensuring all formal ethical protocols have been followed; (b) acknowledging and addressing issues of power dynamics; (c) respecting diversity in all forms; (d) ensuring students and community partners have adequate support throughout the process; and (e) making sure engagement activities occur in accessible spaces.

Given that CBEL involves placing students within diverse community settings, it is particularly important to prepare students to acknowledge and address issues related to power disparity. Engaging in self-reflexivity and recognizing privilege were identified as important strategies. Furthermore, asking students to enter into communities can be overwhelming and emotional experiences for them, so it is essential for professors to support students as they adapt to the challenges of this type of work. Similarly, it is also important that professors provide the community organization with support by helping them train incoming students, address issues, etc.

Recommended action:
Develop pre-departure training sessions for students taking CBEL courses.

Core Value #4: Engaged citizenship

While not all participants mentioned the term “citizenship” explicitly, there was general consensus that one of Concordia’s (and any university’s) fundamental roles is the development of socially conscious and engaged citizens – as opposed to workers – and that CBEL actively promotes this type of development by putting students into direct contact with the various communities that make up society.

Findings: Strengths and Challenges

This section sets out findings regarding institutional practices, programs and structures that participants identified as supporting or hindering the advancement of CBEL at Concordia, as well as recurring challenges inherent in this type of work.

CHALLENGE: Time and recognition

The number one challenge - identified by all participants - is the additional time and energy required to develop and deliver CBEL courses, for both students and faculty members. Related to this, many participants noted the tension between CBEL and career advancement. Although CBEL courses require additional time, energy and often expertise as compared to regular courses, professors do not necessarily receive commensurate workload

Recommended action:

Advocate for the inclusion of community-based teaching in the assessment of faculty dossiers leading to appointment, promotion, and tenure.

credit for them. Furthermore, because research portfolios are weighted more heavily than teaching and service portfolios in decisions about promotions and tenure, many faculty members, especially new hires, feel pressure to prioritize research and publishing over CBEL related activities.

CHALLENGE: Scheduling

A number of participants experienced difficulty fitting CBEL into a 3-credit term and that, although 6-credit terms are preferable, these courses are harder to get approved. Furthermore, conflicting class times and durations make interdisciplinary courses harder to organize.

Resource Allocation

Many participants expressed that time and scheduling constraints are compounded by insufficient resource allotment. An overall lack of funding, the limited diversity of funding options, understaffing in key offices and a general lack of support staff were all said to hinder community engagement initiatives and lessen the incentive for professors to get involved. A number of professors praised the Curriculum Innovation Fund as an important source of support, while others expressed frustration that this fund seemed inaccessible to those professors doing smaller-scale CBEL projects. Having a teaching assistant was also mentioned as an important support for CBEL.

Sharing of Information

Most participants explicitly stated their appreciation for the support they received from their own departments and faculties. This type of support seemed to be largely informal, with faculty members sharing such things as: best practices, ways to troubleshoot, rubrics and other types of class material, networking opportunities and knowledge about external and internal resources. At the same time, a number of participants noted that this type of information sharing doesn't happen as much or as widely as it could and that departments and faculties could do more to facilitate this.

Some participants who were new to the field of CBEL found it challenging to think of how to redesign their courses to incorporate CBEL. They indicated that they would like to be able to work on their curriculum with someone who could offer dedicated support and guidance in developing more community-based projects.

Recommended action:
Work towards a system of centralized scheduling as a means of offering greater flexibility for CBEL courses

Recommended action:
Advocate for more creative ways of promoting of interdisciplinary teaching.

Recommended action:
Identify a major donor to champion and support strengthening of institutional commitment to sustainable and predictable funding and resources (not just funding for new projects.)

Recommended action:
Build and host a database of current CBEL partner organizations.

Recommended action:
Develop and deliver a series of professional development workshops to promote and support CBEL teaching practices.

Recommended action:
Develop a handbook for faculty members on how to integrate CBEL in their teaching practices.

Institutional Support

Regarding specific institutional structures that had supported CBEL efforts, a number of offices, centers, services and funding programs were mentioned specifically: Advancement & Alumni Relations; Center for Teaching and Learning; Community University Research Exchange (CURE); Curriculum Innovation Fund; Explore Concordia; Living Knowledge Community of Practice; Office of Community Engagement; Quebec Public Interest Research Group (QPIRG); Research Units; Student Success Center; Sustainable Concordia; Teaching and Learning Librarian and various Working Groups.

Recommended action:

Host regular community engagement events where students and faculty members present the work they have been doing in their CBEL courses.

Recommended action:

Showcase CBEL initiatives at fundraising events, particularly those hosted by Advancement and Alumni Relations.

Part 4: Recommendations

As a result of its review of the quantitative and qualitative findings of the Living Knowledge research project, the Advisory Committee presents two recommendations:

- 1. Increase institutional capacity to develop and maintain community partnerships.**
- 2. Develop or improve existing programs to recognize and appreciate CBEL stakeholders.**

Detailed recommendations to improve institutional capacity

The Advisory Committee suggests the following actions to increase institutional capacity to develop and maintain community partnerships:

- 1) Develop pre-departure training workshops for students preparing to undertake CBEL activities.
 - a) Draw inspiration from existing materials developed by various internship and co-op programs, the Student Success Centre, the LIVE Centre, etc.
 - b) Explore the possibility of integrating this workshop into First Year Experience courses.
- 2) Develop a handbook or toolkit for faculty members using (or seeking to use) CBEL practices in their courses. This resource could include models for orientation, support and recognition for learners and community partners.
- 3) Deliver a series of professional development workshops for faculty on the benefits, challenges, and mechanics of integrating CBEL into their teaching practices. This could serve to encourage professors who are interested in CBEL but who feel they lack the expertise to do so.
- 4) Work towards a system of centralized scheduling as a means of offering greater flexibility for CBEL courses.
- 5) Advocate for the development of creative ways of promoting of inter-disciplinary teaching.
- 6) Identify a major donor to champion and support strengthening and institutionalizing sustainable community engagement. Needs include: increased staff in key offices, increased support staff and predictable and long-term funding options (not just funding for new projects.)
- 7) Build and host a database of current CBEL partner organizations (indicating stakeholders and the nature and purpose of the partnership). The goal would be to increase the visibility of CBEL at Concordia, to facilitate networking opportunities, and to serve as a platform for information exchanges, coordination and avoiding duplication or redundancies.

Detailed recommendations to recognize and appreciate CBEL stakeholders

Acknowledging that CBEL activities can be onerous for community-based partners, the LKAC suggests the following actions:

- 1) Invite community partners to public events or events relevant to their contexts (and recognizing them publicly when possible and appropriate);
- 2) Provide modest funding for appreciation events for community partners;
- 3) Seize opportunities for knowledge exchange (as participants / contributors)
- 4) Explore possibilities to develop learning opportunities for community partners:
 - a) Waivers for courses (draw inspiration from the Sparklers program that enables seniors to audit courses)
 - b) Revisit the Summer Institute as a possible model

Acknowledging that CBEL teaching generally requires specific planning and ongoing monitoring (that differs considerably from non-CBEL teaching) the LKAC suggests the following actions:

- 1) Advocate for the inclusion of community-based teaching in the assessment of faculty dossiers leading to appointment, promotion, and tenure.
- 2) Host regular and visible events where students and faculty members present various models of CBEL teaching and learning at Concordia.
- 3) Showcase CBEL initiatives at fundraising events, particularly those hosted by Advancement and Alumni Relations.
- 4) Showcase past examples of Concordia-based community engagement initiatives, highlight the enduring legacy and continuing evolution of community engagement at Concordia.

Concluding Reflections

For the Curriculum Review, it is worth recognizing that, even with the resources dedicated to this project and limits placed on its scope, the compiled inventory and statistics cannot be viewed as 100% accurate. Some CBEL courses were likely overlooked. In addition, CBEL is a pedagogical approach that has the potential to change depending on who is teaching a course. Just because Professor A used CBEL when teaching a course in Fall 2015 doesn't mean that Professor B will choose to use the same approach in Fall 2016. As such, the inventory created should be seen as a living document that will need to be updated regularly as new information becomes available.

If training, resources and incentives are deployed to encourage the increased inclusion of CBEL in the undergraduate curriculum, another Curriculum Review could be conducted in 3 to 5 years in order to evaluate any changes in Concordia's undergraduate CBEL offerings. In the meantime, an online tool should be developed to allow instructors to self-identify courses in their teaching load that include CBEL. Once an effective process for maintaining an up-to-date list of CBEL courses is in place, a mechanism to identify these courses in the undergraduate calendar should be introduced. Finally, to provide a more complete picture of CBEL at Concordia, it is recommended that future projects be conducted to focus on CBEL in the graduate curriculum as well as the extent of community-based research and extra-curricular opportunities.

On the Core Value Exploration side, given the small number of interviews that were conducted during the Core Value Exploration, the findings cannot be considered as representative of the university as a whole. If desired, additional interviews could be conducted, with the pool of potential participants expanded to include staff – particularly internship and co-op coordinators – students and senior administrators as well as additional faculty members. The findings of these initial interviews could also be vetted through a survey or a series of focus groups.

On the whole, the Living Knowledge Research Project was successful in providing a more complete picture of the CBEL opportunities available to Concordia's undergraduate students. It also shed light on what makes CBEL an important pedagogical tool, the value it adds to the community and the undergraduate experience, some of the challenges with regards to incorporating CBEL into existing workloads and how these might be addressed at an institutional level. The next step is to mobilize these findings by sharing the inventory of courses widely and implementing a coordinated institutional response to the recommendations.

If there is a desire to read more details about the findings of this project, the OCE can provide copies of the full documentation prepared by the student researchers.