

Strategic directions preliminary draft

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Draft

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PREFACE

What will make Concordia great in the decade ahead?

The primary focus of our strategic directions process this spring has been to gather a sense of possible answers to this question. We've posed this query in different ways and received some inspiring responses, with a notable degree of alignment. One of the common refrains was a call for Concordia to be bold in cutting its own unique path.

For younger institutions like Concordia, it can be difficult to resist pressures to replicate the patterns and practices of elite institutions. But we have good reasons to trust in our distinctiveness.

We are a university of opportunity for first-generation and returning students. We have a fresher take on research than our more established peers. We marry a deeply felt connection to our city with a sense of global connectedness and ambition. We attract people who want to be part of a place that's still becoming rather than one that has been. We are an emergent university, and we should embrace this fact by claiming emergence as a central feature in our strategic direction-setting.

To build toward greatness, we need to be self-possessed and play the long game. Our intent is to be a university that thrives in the landscape to come, tethered to the core values of critical thinking, free inquiry, and respect for diversity while answering the perennial question of how to be a university in daring and transformative ways.

Embracing emergence does not prevent us from borrowing and appropriating—we do not need to cut new cloth for everything we do. And it does not mean devaluing conventional forms of success. But it does mean aspiring to new ways of being and doing.

Concordia is 40 years young and has great bloodlines. This university has been a truly admirable engine of opportunity and social mobility for the diverse array of tens of thousands students who have walked across the stage holding our diplomas and smiling for cameras. It has been a staging ground for some stupendously bold research endeavours and creative work. Concordia is already a great place to think and make and learn, and as an urban institution in a magnet city, we are well positioned to thrive.

It is up to us now to realize Concordia's potential in the new postsecondary landscape. We honour our past as we work together to make Concordia great, and to do ourselves proud.

CONCORDIA'S PRIORITIES

Below are articulations that provide a design template for forging the institution we want to become over the next decade.

1. Double our research

Over the past decade-and-a-half, Concordia has made remarkable gains in research. We have added 11 PhD programs, attracted 38 Canada Research Chairs, established 20 university-level research centres, increased our success in external grant competitions by 50%, and effectively doubled our external funding. We have the talent and ambition to go even further.

Building on the world-class work already being undertaken at Concordia, our most important challenge in research is creating more high-profile, distinctive clusters of research, scholarship, and creative work that allow us to ratchet up our influence and help make Concordia into a key node in national and international networks. An important effect of increased scale and influence is the ability to attract the resources needed to better fund graduate students. Supporting the work of individual researchers, scholars, and creators still matters immensely, and their achievements are deeply satisfying endorsements of the quality of our faculty. The emphasis on continued cluster development is based on a recognition that achieving critical mass helps us become greater than the sum of our parts.

We also have opportunities for developing distinctive expertise and model practices for research with public impact, drawing on Concordia's DNA as an institution with porous boundaries and deep connections to the city and the world. This work helps to make the value of university research more demonstrable and creates important opportunities for students.

Efforts to redouble Concordia's research are not about pursuing this objective for its own sake. University research has profound social and economic impact, and it acts as a talent magnet that helps build thriving cities and regions. Providing broad access to a research-oriented university education is a vital mission, and it is part-and-parcel of the kind of forward-looking education discussed in the next section. Rooted in Concordia's educational mission and paired with a strong commitment to public and community engagement, research is the engine that drives our emergence as a great university.

2. Teach for tomorrow

A "teach for tomorrow" orientation focuses on the knowledge and skills students will need as they face the complexities of work and citizenship in a world that in many ways will be dramatically different from today's. The aim is offering a next-generation "real education" that's transformative, connected, and fit for the times. Research-oriented universities with faculty who are passionate about path-breaking, boundary-spanning, and leading-edge research are especially well-placed to deliver this kind of education.

Students tell us they want purpose-driven, hands-on learning. They want to develop multidisciplinary ways of thinking and collaborating. They expect digitally savvy pedagogy that

helps them practice and connect and learn rather than teaching technology used for its own sake. They need to learn to work well in teams, with a keen social intelligence. They need to think computationally and communicate multi-modally. They need global competence and environmental intelligence. And they need practice in the kind of informed problem-solving techniques that are uniquely fostered in research university environments.

University students also are likely to seek out new kinds of flexibility in how they undertake their learning. Beyond accommodation for part-time study, this could entail more modular and ‘stackable’, degrees or certificate offerings that are available wholly or partly online for appropriate student populations, intensive or block-style degree components, or credentials that make visible the discrete skills they’ve acquired in their conventional degree programs or in their lives outside university. These are our era’s forms of accessible higher learning.

Building on forward-looking practices across the institution, the challenge for Concordia is to experiment in a rigorous and evidence-rich ways with high-impact, flexible learning experiences, to make them pedagogically effective and financially viable at scale, and to remove or lower hurdles that prevent wider adoption of successful trial runs.

3. Get your hands dirty

The call to “get your hands dirty” is about deepening Concordia’s capacity to support the active, immersive, hands-on learning that is central to a “real education.”

This kind of learning can take various forms—co-op placements, internships, action research, community service learning, field learning, project-based capstones, and other kinds of multi-dimensional educational activities. Much of the work of community and public engagement is driven by this ethic, as is burgeoning interest in entrepreneurship and makerspaces on university campuses. Research shows that the active problem-solving, collaboration, and integrative project-based learning associated with these practices are strongly linked with students learning more, persisting in their education, and achieving positive life outcomes.

At its richest, hands-on experiential learning is approached as a kind of co-creation between faculty, students, academic support staff, and other collaborators like community and industry partners or alumni. Co-created learning emulates research and creative work in this way—it is well-planned and based on educated hypotheses about expected outcomes, but the results are acts of discovery.

Small majorities of students already report that experiential learning is integrated into their educational experience at Concordia. Deepening capacity involves facilitating shifts in individual teaching practices, making space in curricula, managing enrolments to create appropriate class sizes, recognizing faculty workload implications, providing adequate support structures, and identifying sufficient placement opportunities. In other words, it is complex, and it is often time- and resource-intensive. But orienting curricula around high-impact learning

experiences gives needed prominence to the pedagogical practices that make university education unique and transformative.

4. Mix it up

Some of the most gripping societal challenges of our age occur at the intersections where conventional academic disciplines meet. Some of the most exciting intellectual challenges emerge when received understandings within disciplines get provocatively shifted off their footings. Concordia has a distinct opportunity as a relatively young institution to own these intersections and pivot points, and to be an intellectual path-breaker and risk-taker. Not everything Concordia does needs to be cutting-edge and unconventional in relation to extant disciplines, but the opening for Concordia to forge a distinctive and compelling identity lies in an unabashed championing of intellectual and institutional originality.

Taking inspiration from the kinds of mixing that take place in a cosmopolitan city like Montréal, and building on models for disciplinary synthesis that we already have in place, we seek to develop an administrative ecosystem that does no harm to great ideas. We need structures and practices that can accommodate the velocity and flexibility of the flow of ideas among faculty and students while maintaining a capacity to manage at scale. This kind of idea-centric administrative ethos requires that we purpose-build the kinds of structures we need in order to get the kinds of outcomes we desire.

The active cultivation of disciplinary mixing does not imply a fixation on novelty. The aim is to unblock the energy and interests of faculty to collaborate, probe boundaries, and devise compelling new research ventures and program offerings, which are defining activities for a research-oriented institution.

5. Experiment boldly

Experimentation is common enough, but it takes moxie and ambition to experiment boldly. The financial situation for Québec universities can easily sap these energies, but if we want to move forward as an institution, we need to avoid the trap of resigned inaction. We can't will our way out of our circumstances, though we can learn from those with entrepreneurial experience how to start new ventures in "lean" ways, make faster determinations about their likely success, and channel our energies toward initiatives that show promise. We can also do creative repurposing that better aligns our current capabilities with emerging priorities.

The call to experiment boldly clearly overlaps with the invitation above for disciplinary mixing, but it goes well beyond. Universities around the world are testing different tools and modes for engaging students in learning, using data in new ways to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives, dramatically redeploying underutilized campus spaces, establishing partnerships and branch campuses to facilitate student mobility and access, and launching new programs that closely link to budding research areas. Not all of these undertakings will prove to be durable, but they signal an admirable willingness to think in novel and flexible ways about how postsecondary institutions fulfill their historic missions.

Inspired by the bold experiments of our forward-looking predecessors and the audacity of our contemporaries, here and elsewhere, we'll foster a culture that values experimentation and agility. Though we can't pursue every good idea, we want Concordia to be a place where people have license to spy out promising new opportunities, test possible solutions, and productively fail—anchored at all times by a deep sense of the university as a distinctive place for thinking critically, public-mindedly, and collegially.

6. Grow smartly

Concordia's enrolments have been growing steadily for the past decade, despite projections of steadily declining Cegep populations, and we've maintained consistent entering CRC scores of our Cegep applicants during this span. This kind of sustained growth is an endorsement of the continued attractiveness of our programs. As we look ahead, we need perceptive and shrewd management of our enrolments so that we can make best use of the teaching talents of our faculty and provide students with the kind of transformative learning experiences we want to offer.

The call to "grow smartly" involves ensuring alignment between our research strengths and our program offerings. It involves making pedagogically appropriate uses of educational technologies to create curricular space for high-impact experiential learning opportunities. It requires us to be more purposeful and inventive in order to create the sense of community that is so vital to students' university experience. It entails identifying what we need to do differently, merge, divide up, or, in some instances, let go of, as we see enrolment patterns emerge. And it involves using a budget model that is responsive to our growth patterns, provides appropriate incentives, and doesn't overly inhibit the movement of faculty and students.

7. Embrace the city, embrace the world

Community and public engagement are deeply rooted in the Concordia identity. The key challenges for Concordia today are around identifying ways to amplify our impact.

Accessible advanced education is itself a fundamental form of public impact. Beyond this, teachers, researchers, students and student groups do amazingly creative work in Montréal and around the world that builds, tests, and applies knowledge and approaches learning as a deeply collaborative exercise. This work transforms the social fabric and changes the life trajectories of those involved.

As with research, though, there are clustering and scaling effects that we have yet to achieve. Identifying specific domains for public difference-making, developing appropriate partnerships, and then focusing our research and teaching on these issues promises to net results that are far greater than the sum of discrete initiatives.

Opportunities to impact Montréal seem especially ripe. We can build on models here and elsewhere to fruitfully engage the expertise, ideas, and capacities of the university more fully

for the benefit of Montréal—smartly, appropriately, and in keeping with our core competencies in research, teaching, and learning.

Outside of Montréal, similar initiatives that are either geographically or thematically based hold promise as well. Concordia's global network of research partnerships is swelling, and we would do well to actively seek out opportunities for faculty and students to participate in public-minded change-making initiatives linked to these partnerships.

Universities have clear opportunities to do intellectual work in ways that create public goods beyond the provision of accessible advanced education. Through concerted efforts and deep partnerships, we can be change-makers through learning.

8. Go beyond

"Go beyond" is an overarching call to continuous improvement fueled by imagination and pride.

One facet of going beyond involves building on our reputation as a caring university that goes the extra mile for members of its community. This touches on how we coach and mentor students, integrate new faculty and staff hires, put ourselves forward to contribute and collaborate, and recognize the hard work of our colleagues. Going beyond in this sense is about taking collective responsibility for the quality of the relationships that make up Concordia.

A second facet entails an ongoing commitment to professional development and best-in-class work. Across roles, this means pushing beyond the status quo and insistently adopting a future orientation—future thinking, needs, challenges, and technologies—that pushes us to fulfill our mission in fresh ways. We certainly need to be efficient and to improve incrementally in how we currently operate, but we also need to be thinking ahead to, and experimenting with, a next-generation ways of doing things.

9. Take pride

Concordia is a plural place with a rich history. The particulars are different from four decades ago, but the sense of Concordia as a place that reflects the diversity and texture of Montréal, and that has an educational mission premised on inclusiveness and connection, is still very much central to our self-conception. This is a legacy we very much embrace, and should be a deep source of the pride that we want to foster.

Pride can be seen as a by-product, but there's also an element of will and intention involved. To be purposeful about taking pride means having a decided readiness to recognize and celebrate success. It involves taking proactive steps to build morale and address issues that deflate it—honestly, constructively, and graciously. And it means investing ourselves in work that we can say, ten years from now, was truly difference-making.

HOW WE MIGHT DO THIS

The preceding pages provide a sense of the design priorities for building a next-generation university. Subsequent planning work will focus on defining the particular commitments and initiatives that will be undertaken to put our priorities into action. Below are some preliminary possibilities that stem from the work of Advisory Committee Idea Groups, other conversations about Concordia's future, and inspiring work already going on at Concordia.

Double our research

- Collaborative processes and clearer runways for emergence of new research clusters
- Deployment of additional 'research connectors' that can facilitate network formation, partnership development, and awareness of grant opportunities
- Spaces such as pop-up or temporary 'collabs' where faculty working on emergent clusters might work in close proximity to advance their work more expeditiously

Teach for tomorrow

- A teaching and learning 'skunkworks'
- A cohort-based curriculum redesign studio that includes faculty, learning researchers, students, and academic support staff who work together on curriculum transformations
- Curriculum-integrated and complementary skill offerings from the Student Success Centre and GradProSkills

Get your hands dirty

- An multi-disciplinary elective cluster organized around an extended, immersive community engagement initiatives or city-building projects, perhaps organized in particular for students with extended credit requirements
- A 'city year' or 'gap year' initiative for in-program students who want to pursue in-depth experiential learning opportunities or who want to delay formal entrance to university
- Community-accessible makerspaces or entrepreneurship centres, perhaps at the retail level, which might be called "Metro Concordia" (a kind of vehicle to opportunity)?
- Academic credit for student participation in university governance (committees, Senate, Board, etc.)

Mix it up

- Increased use of structures like schools, colleges, and institutes
- Clearer incubation practices and developmental pathways for emergent disciplinary recompositions, particularly for those crossing Faculty and department lines
- An internal faculty mobility policy
- A small reserve taken from operating budgets to fund emerging cross-unit initiatives

Experiment boldly

- Regular calls for proposals and participatory review methods to spur experimentation
- Organization of triage teams to provide evidence-driven assessments of the effectiveness, scalability, and financial sustainability of experiments

Embrace the city, embrace the world

- A Concordia ‘public works’ initiative, possibly organized around research clusters or themes, that creates learning and engagement opportunities around public interest issues
- An initiative that develops pathways for alumni to have ongoing involvement in these ‘public works’ projects and other university engagement and city-building efforts
- A Global Studies Institute and/or a global studies certificate
- A pathway to tenure for faculty focusing on practice, engagement, or impact

Go beyond

- Adopt a software platform that allows for collaborative development of new ideas and facilitates creative problem-solving across roles and units—and thereby provides an additional venue for making visible the constructive contributions of members of the Concordia community
- Develop an initiative that uses participatory methods for identifying future work skills/capacities that units and individuals will need to develop given Concordia’s strategic directions, and orient in-house training and union-funded professional development around these skill areas
- Develop an informal certificate program that recognizes the investments faculty and staff make in ongoing professional development

Take pride

- Identify aspirational forms of recognition that Concordia as a whole and individual units can strive for, and build strategies to achieve that recognition
- Create a light, collaborative processes for identifying pride points, including communications priorities