

# Embrace the City – Draft Strategy

## Context

Community engagement is deeply rooted in Concordia's history and DNA. Since the inception of both the Sir George Williams (SGW) and Loyola campuses, staff, students, faculty and alumni have been partnering with the community in innovative ways. Today, the ongoing and ever-evolving legacy of that work can be found throughout the university. As such, the Embrace the City strategy does not seek to start from scratch or to reinvent the wheel. Rather, in the four recommendations outlined below, emphasis is put on identifying what work is already underway, making information about existing opportunities more available, better telling the story of our partnerships and their impact, and putting the support and resources in place to take Concordia's collaborations with the city to the next level.

Before continuing, it is worth acknowledging that the word 'city' means many different things to different people. For the purposes of this strategy, a broad definition is used including everything from the actual municipal government, to public institutions and businesses, to community organizations and individual residents. This strategy recognizes that Concordia can be an increasingly important and indispensable actor in the future of Montreal. Activities under this strategy will no doubt impact individual faculty, students and community-based actors. However, the potential to impact the city as a whole and its citizenry should not be secondary. With its resources and influence, Concordia has the opportunity to involve itself in strategies, projects and activities that make Montreal a better place to live and work.

## Guiding principles

The following five guiding principles are considered key to Concordia's efforts to Embrace the City.

### *Genuine relationships and collaboration*

When students, staff and faculty engage with the city through their work, it is important that the relationships they develop are more than transactional. Partnerships are based on mutual trust, respect and an appreciation for each other's strengths. These types of relationships take time to develop and require clear expectations and continual communication in order to endure. For Concordia to approach research and learning as a deeply collaborative exercise, strong and authentic relationships must be at the core of all of our city-engaged work.

### *Reciprocity and mutual benefit*

When Concordians, work in partnership with individuals, groups and institutions outside of the University, it is essential that the outcomes of these efforts be mutually beneficial. City-engaged initiatives should seek not only to incorporate real-world challenges into academic work, but to address public needs and, most importantly, to enhance capacity within the community. At the same time, a great deal of capacity, wisdom and experience already exists within the community and must be acknowledged and given full credit. In reciprocal partnerships, the role of expert and learner, of leader and follower, will continually shift back and forth depending on the context. We acknowledge that there may often be multiple stakeholders involved and that each must be able to articulate the benefits they will derive from participation in addition to the overall project objectives. Ultimately, this means that Concordia must be willing and ready to change, in some ways, with every partnership. Working in solidarity with others, this is not only an exchange of expertise and meeting of needs but also a mutual transformation into something better.

### *Inclusivity and responsiveness*

Concordia's efforts to embrace the city must be as explicitly inclusive and accessible as possible. This includes everything from making sure our physical resources are more readily available to community groups, to making sure that information about city-engaged initiatives is easy to find, and everything in between. Embracing the city means opening our doors to the diversity of people and institutions that make up Montreal, seeking out who is not at the table, ensuring our partners feel welcome and valued in our projects and collaborations and being responsive to their needs and ideas. In embracing this diversity, it is important to recognize that there is no one-size fits all approach to working with the city. To be a resilient agent of change, Concordia's city-engaged work will have to take on a multitude of forms on many different scales.

### *Support, recognition and leadership*

An array of innovative city-engaged initiatives are already underway at Concordia and have blossomed thanks to the hard work and commitment of staff, students, faculty, alumni and their community partners. If Concordia wants to take these efforts to the next level, there is a need for concrete support, institutionalized recognition and strong leadership. The Embrace the City ethos must pervade the university in every way – from funding opportunities, to promotion criteria, to recruitment materials – in order to ensure that impact-oriented city-engaged work can truly thrive. At the same time, the guidance, mentoring, and support developed to encourage this type of work, must not be directive or proscriptive. This dance between structure and emergence is important as we expand our acceptance of new theories, innovative pedagogies and multiple research methodologies.

### *Sustainability*

Looking towards the future, there are many major challenges and opportunities facing our world, arguably the most significant of which is climate change. Concordia has already established itself as a leader in the field of social, economic and environmental sustainability and this expertise should guide and be incorporated into its city-engaged work whenever appropriate.

## Recommendations

### *Mapping our impact*

From long-standing research partnerships with local institutions, to annual fundraisers for local non-profits, to student-run projects with local social-entrepreneurs, it is clear that Concordians take pride in the work they do in and with the city and its constituents. However, with so many city-engaged initiatives underway, it can be hard to see the whole picture. This makes it challenging to effectively share stories about this work, but, more significantly, it makes it hard for newcomers to Concordia – be they first-year students, new hires or curious neighbours – to access information about these projects and how they might get involved.

To overcome the barriers preventing effective information sharing and storytelling, it is proposed that we build a map. This map will show us where and how Concordians are currently embracing the city, as well as where we currently are not. It will show us who is partnering with whom and how they are working together to make a difference. Mapping partnerships and relationships will inspire new connections and clarify pathways for individuals and groups wishing to get involved in the initiatives that are already underway. This visual representation will enable us to identify gaps as well as opportunities for synergy and strategic investment and involvement. Finally, the map will lay the groundwork to

meaningfully evaluate our collective impact and to follow-up with our partners after a project comes to a close.

In terms of form, Concordia's Embrace the City map will live primarily in the digital realm, with physical copies only being produced for specific space or event-based needs. The interface for data input will be user-friendly in order to ensure that multiple stakeholders can add and update information about their initiatives in a timely way. Built with multimedia content and equipped with searchable tags and filters, the map will be more of an interactive atlas, allowing each person to view the content that most interests them. The design of this mapping tool will be informed by the vast knowledge and creativity of Concordia's faculty and students with particular attention paid to the needs of end-users, which include future and existing students, new and existing community partners, staff, faculty and alumni.

### Identifying city-engaged learning opportunities

The call to 'Embrace the City' in Concordia's Strategic Directions is closely linked to the call to 'Get Your Hands Dirty', which commits to deepening our capacity to support experiential learning as an important component of a holistic education. Already many courses and opportunities exist that approach learning as a collaborative exercise and a pathway for engagement and difference making.

To make sure that information about these city-engaged learning opportunities is available and accessible to the greatest number of students, it is proposed that an identification system be created to denote courses that have a city component ('C' Courses). Acknowledging that community engaged pedagogy exists on a spectrum that ranges from a single assignment with a city focus to an immersive semester long experience, a tiered "hot-pepper" identification system is recommended.

The work of identifying these courses is already underway through the Living Knowledge research project initiated by Concordia's Community Engagement Sub-Committee. The results published in the project's final report will be combined with a web-based self-identification tool for professors. The information will then be made available in a searchable format online and in future editions of the course calendar.

Beyond facilitating awareness of and enrollment in city-engaged courses, the act of labelling these courses will have several added benefits. It will give a clear sense of what courses are available and where they are located so as to ensure that there is a good mixture of opportunities across all departments. It will enable the establishment of incentives to both encourage faculty to offer these types of courses and motivate students to take them. In addition, it will inform the design and creation of targeted resources to support the development of new city-engaged courses. Finally, this exercise will provide useful information to communicate with future and existing students, donors and the potential employers of our alumni.

### Designing a collaborative city-oriented space

A big part of the work involved in embracing the city will be centered on relationship building and testing out ideas. As an urban University in a densely populated city, Concordia is ideally situated to connect with the people, groups and organizations that surround its campuses. To catalyze this potential it is proposed that a city-oriented space be created with the goal of fostering widespread, interdisciplinary, collaborative work with new and existing partners.

Located on the main floor of the Library Building, the Embrace the City space will be a store-front portal bridging the community and university worlds. It will serve as a one-stop hub and easy-to-find resource centre for community members seeking information and partnership opportunities and will be an accessible space on campus where Concordians can connect with each other and their partners.

Both the design and the use of the Embrace the City space must be flexible and adaptable and will continue to evolve as changing needs become articulated. The design and furnishings will be easily reconfigurable and will strike a balance between the availability of both high-tech and low-tech options. The space should have a welcoming, non-corporate, human-sized feel with a functionality that can be compared to that of a public living room: a place where people can meet, greet, eat, work, think and play together.

In order to demonstrate openness to the city and foster a sense of belonging at Concordia, the space will need to be staffed by facilitators who are skilled in the art of welcoming people, of communicating diverse information to a diversity of people, of fostering connections, hosting conversations and encouraging action. The staff will be the interface between the university and the city and will answer questions, manage logistics and coordinate regular programming and exhibitions to draw people in and cultivate relationships. Special effort will be placed, particularly in the early months, on getting stakeholders into the space so as to initiate partnerships, ideas and opportunities for connection. What is most important is to open the doors and invite people in to create, research and disseminate ideas, to think, work and play together, to develop genuine relationships and to engage in the sometimes messy work of collaborating on real-world projects.

#### Supporting transformative partnerships for the future

If serious commitment and grounded efforts are in place, the Embrace the City strategy has the potential to drive many of the other nine strategic directions (Teach for Tomorrow, Double our Research, Get Your Hands Dirty, Take Pride). One of the first steps would be to scan what is already happening in the city and how other universities are engaged in these projects with the ultimate goal of learning from others and working alongside them. While the bulk of the Embrace the City strategy focuses on acknowledging, supporting and celebrating all of the exciting initiatives that are already underway at Concordia, taking pride in this work and better telling the story; this is also an opportunity to move beyond our current efforts and create transformative partnerships for the future.

It is proposed that Concordia reinforce its efforts to embrace the city by appropriately resourcing an institution-wide Embrace the City/Community Engagement unit. More than a committee, this cross-institutional unit would be tasked with mapping existing initiatives, promoting stories of impact, creating a public archive of city-engaged research and projects, developing resources and programming, stewarding funding opportunities, incentivizing and celebrating achievements, connecting stakeholders and building relationships.

Staff reporting into this unit will have the ability to facilitate the long-term, boundary-spanning relationships that are needed to cultivate meaningful partnerships and genuine collaboration. They will dedicate their time to connecting the resources and expertise of the university with the rich knowledge and real-world experiences of our city partners. In addition, by de-mystifying how the city works at all levels, how decisions are made and what projects are underway, this unit will enable Concordians to get involved, influence policy, and co-design strategies to address the major challenges of our time. Finally,

by demonstrating the University's commitment to embracing the city, Concordia will be better positioned to recruit students and faculty with a commitment to city-engaged research and learning, which will further propel this work into the future.

### Proposed objectives

1. Design and populate an interactive online map of Concordia's city-engaged initiatives
  - Equip with a user-friendly interface making it easy for multiple stakeholders to update
  - Include searchable tags and multiple filters, which will allow each user to see the types of initiatives that most interest them
2. Identify existing city-engaged courses and make information about these opportunities more available and accessible to students
  - Use a tiered "hot-pepper" identification system to identify the spectrum of city-engage courses within Concordia's curriculum
  - Display information in the course calendar and make it available and searchable online
  - Initiate discussions about incentives for the continued growth of city-engaged courses
3. Design and open a street-level space to bridge the community and university worlds
  - Ensure a flexible and re-configurable set-up to allow for multiple users and uses
  - Foster a welcoming, living-room-like vibe to create an environment where people can meet, greet, eat, work, think and play together
  - Staff the space appropriately
4. Appropriately resource a cross-institutional Embrace the City/Community Engagement unit
  - Task with mapping existing initiatives, promoting stories of impact, creating a public archive of city-engaged research and projects, developing resources and programming, stewarding funding opportunities, incentivizing and celebrating achievements, connecting stakeholders and building relationships.