

# **Strategic Directions Revised Draft**

**As of May 20, 2015**

## **PREFACE**

Universities are distinctive places where curiosity and conscience drive the pursuit of knowledge. Anchored by commitments to critical thinking, free inquiry, and respect for diversity, universities are hubs of learning where, for centuries, faculty and students have undertaken intellectual work in close proximity.

Concordia's strategic directions process has focused on how we can thrive as a university in a changing landscape, tethered to our core values and historic mission while eyeing a future in which the status quo is unlikely to be sufficient.

The postsecondary environment is brimming with challenges. Universities in Quebec and across the Western world face serious funding pressures, sobering demographics, and increasing expectations around practical outcomes and economic returns from research and learning. Technological advances and heightened interest in measuring learning test assumptions about teaching. Structural shifts in global marketplaces for higher education presage new enrolment patterns for international students. Environmental concerns compel universities to rethink everything.

In light of these challenges, universities need concrete and careful planning, but planning needs to be guided by an animating sense of purpose. That is what this document aims to provide for Concordia.

The nine items that follow are not objectives so much as orientations that are necessary for our success. At the heart of these orientations is a commitment to be a place that combines intensive knowledge-making, deeply connected learning, and high-impact public engagement.

This vision of Concordia is, in many ways, a reaffirmation of our existing values. At the same time, this document calls for a more focused pursuit of the ideal, and for acts of translation to propel our core commitments forward into a new era.

During our process, a host of ideas for what we might do has been generated, and a large amount of input has been submitted about enabling work that needs to occur at the institutional level. This material has been aggregated and will circulate as we begin the work of goal setting and action planning around the broad orientations articulated here.

Concordia has been a truly admirable engine of opportunity and social mobility for many thousands of students who have walked across the stage holding their well-earned diplomas. We have a fresher take on research than longer-established institutions. We marry a deeply felt attachment 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 that seeks out meaningful new ways of being and doing. All of these things make Concordia a great place to think and make and learn and work.

Facing a changing postsecondary landscape, it's up to us to realize Concordia's potential. We honour our past as we work together to make Concordia great, and to do ourselves proud.

## **CONCORDIA'S DIRECTIONS**

### **1. Double our research**

Over the past decade, Concordia has made remarkable gains in research. We have the talent and ambition to go even further.

Doubling research suggests an ambitious external funding target, which is important given the pressing need to increase our financial assistance to students, especially graduate students. Beyond funding, doubling also signals our intent to broaden the reach and deepen the societal impact of Concordia's research, scholarship and creative work; to increase opportunities for undergraduate involvement in research activities; and to strengthen the interconnections between research and teaching.

One important method for doubling research is to continue the work of building teams and clusters, with the aim of winning larger-scale grant competitions. Increasing scale through teams and clusters helps to establish Concordia as a key node in national and international networks. This emphasis does not diminish the important work of individual researchers, scholars, and creators, nor that of faculty who contribute to networks that extend past Concordia's borders. The goal is simply to build for Concordia recognizable areas of expertise. This will allow us to become more than the sum of our individual parts in terms of our ability to attract resources and talent—a vital project for Concordia at this juncture in its development as a research institution.

Concordia also has an opportunity to develop a distinctive proficiency in research with a public engagement focus, drawing on our identity as an institution with porous boundaries and deep connections to the city and the world.

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 an essential part of our mission, and it is part-and-parcel of the kind of forward-looking approach to learning 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 that students will need as they face the growing complexities of work and citizenship in a world that, in many ways, will be dramatically different from today's. The aim is to offer a next-generation real education that grounds students in the academic fundamentals while being connected, transformative and fit for the times. Urban research-engaged universities with faculty who are passionate about doing path-breaking, boundary-spanning, and leading-edge work 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 benefit from digitally enhanced pedagogy that directly helps them practice, connect, and achieve their academic goals, 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 critically and communicate effectively. They need global competence and environmental intelligence. And they need practice in the kind of problem-solving methodologies that are uniquely fostered in research university environments.

University students are also seeking new kinds of flexibility in how they undertake their learning. Concordia already accommodates part-time study, provides entry pathways for mature and returning students, and offers ways for students to customize and individualize their academic programs. Contemporary forms of accessible higher learning may require adaptive reuses of these models, along with pilots of new ones.

Building on progressive practices across the institution, the task for Concordia is to experiment in 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 experiments. The educational goal of graduating creative, critical, and highly skilled students who are difference-makers in their workplaces and communities remains the same; our structures and methods for helping students achieve these outcomes should be open to ongoing evaluation and improvement.

### **3. Get your hands dirty**

The call to get your hands dirty is about deepening Concordia's capacity to support experiential learning as an important component of a holistic education and a top priority for our students. This kind of pedagogy adds important senses of context and dimension to student learning. It also creates opportunities for deep engagement, especially when aligned with faculty research.

Experiential learning takes various forms—co-op placements, internships, action research, community service-learning, field learning, project-based capstones, simulations, and other kinds of educational activities that involve learning through doing. These kinds of pedagogical practices are used widely by educators who seek to increase students' community and public engagement, and they are closely aligned with the burgeoning interest at universities in innovation, commercial and social entrepreneurship, and collaborative workspaces. Research shows that the kinds of active problem-solving, peer collaboration, and integrative projects associated with experiential learning are strongly linked with students learning more, persisting in their education, and achieving positive life outcomes.

A significant number of students already report that experiential learning is integrated into their education at Concordia. Expanding capacity in this area involves facilitating shifts in individual teaching practices, making space in curricula, managing enrolments to create appropriate class sizes, recognizing faculty workload implications, providing adequate staffing and support structures, and identifying sufficient placement opportunities. In other words, it is complex, and it is often time- and resource-intensive. But well-supported experiential learning helps foster deep and transformative learning, civic engagement, and work readiness in ways that complement and extend what happens in classrooms.

#### **4. Mix it up**

The call to mix it up reflects the need for more permeable internal boundaries around program offerings that span Faculties and departments. It is also much more.

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 moments emerge when received understandings within disciplines are shifted off their footings in provocatively new ways. Concordia is well-positioned to inhabit these intersections and pivot points, and to be an intellectual trailblazer and risk-taker with respect to our program offerings around them. Obviously, not every academic program needs to be cutting-edge and unconventional in relation to current disciplinary formations. Nonetheless, an important way for Concordia to become more magnetic—for prospective students as well as for faculty—is to improve our ability to identify and occupy promising new program niches as they are carved out by academic evolutions, something that faculty members and research-oriented graduate students regularly do on an individual basis.

To build on successful models of disciplinary synthesis at Concordia and elsewhere, we need more agile administrative structures and practices that can actively cultivate rather than impede intellectual mixing in our academic programs. The commitment to mixing it up does not imply a fixation on novelty or disciplinary fusion for its own sake. The goal is to foster the continuous development of highly compelling program offerings that more faithfully reflect the dynamism of the research undertaken at Concordia.

In addition to the implications for program development, mixing it up also points to a need for richer forms of internal collaboration and expertise-tapping, as well as more intentional forms of partnership and resource sharing across institutional boundaries. In an era of constrained public funding, pressures to reduce redundancies and make more efficient use of available resources will be the primary external drivers of this work. Concordia should think proactively—in administration, services, learning design, and all other facets of what we do—about how to realize the potential and guard against the pitfalls of varied forms of resource ownership.

## **5. Experiment boldly**

Experimentation is common enough, but it takes courage and ambition to experiment boldly. The financial situation for Québec universities can easily sap these energies, and we can't will our way out of our circumstances. We can learn from those with experience in launching new ventures about how to initiate projects in lean ways, make faster determinations about likely success, and channel our energies and resources toward initiatives that show the most promise. We can also creatively repurpose our existing resources to better align with emerging priorities.

Universities around the world are testing different tools and models for engaging students in learning, using data in new ways to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives, refocusing staff responsibilities around student academic support, dramatically redeploying underutilized campus spaces, establishing partnerships and branch campuses to facilitate student mobility and access, and launching new or repackaged 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 to do the work of the university.

Inspired by the bold experiments of our predecessors and the audacity of our contemporaries, we'll foster a culture that values experimentation and agility, in both academic and non-academic domains. Though we can't pursue every good idea, Concordia should be a place where people have license to spy out promising new opportunities, test possible solutions, and productively fail. This experimental inclination must be anchored at all times by a deep sense of the university as a distinctive place for thinking critically, public-mindedly, and collegially, and it must be intently focused on creating value, particularly in terms of fostering student success and facilitating faculty research.

## **6. Grow smartly**

Growing smartly involves thinking strategically and holistically about where we can add capacity for student enrolments.

Concordia's enrolments have been growing steadily during the past decade, despite predictions of declining CEGEP populations, and we've maintained consistent entering CRC scores of CEGEP applicants during this time period. In addition, Concordia's international student enrolments have also increased at a steady pace. This kind of sustained growth is an endorsement of the continued appeal of our programs. As we look ahead, we need to be perceptive and shrewd in how we manage our enrolments so we can make best use of the teaching talents of our faculty and continue to provide students with transformative learning experiences.

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 space for 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' universities experiences. It entails identifying what we need to do differently, or perhaps let go of, as we see enrolment patterns take shape and new kinds of student needs materialize. And it certainly 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 question is how we can amplify our impact and become a more effective agent of change with respect to the major challenges of our time.

Accessible advanced education is itself a fundamental form of public impact. Beyond this, professors, students and student groups do amazingly creative work in Montreal 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, creating and reinforcing the habits of participatory citizenship.

As with research, though, we can achieve more by concentrating and scaling our efforts. Identifying specific domains for public difference-making, developing appropriate partnerships, and then focusing our research and teaching on these issues promises to produce results that are far greater than the sum of discrete initiatives.

Opportunities to impact Montreal seem especially abundant. We can build on successful models that tap Concordia's expertise, ideas, and capacities to benefit Montrealers and realize the potential of the community sector. Universities are not service providers or development agencies, but they can support and encourage the work of city-building in focused applications of our core competencies in research, teaching and learning. Alumni are especially important allies for moving this work forward.

Beyond Montreal, Concordia's global network of research partnerships is rapidly expanding, and we would do well to identify additional opportunities for faculty and students to participate in engagement initiatives linked to these partnerships.

Universities have clear opportunities to do their 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 research and learning.

## **8. Go beyond**

Go beyond is an overarching call to continuous improvement fueled by imagination and pride, and to long-view thinking.

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, contribute to and collaborate on university-wide initiatives, recognize the hard work of our colleagues, and foster a sense of ongoing connection to our alumni. Going beyond in this sense is about taking collective responsibility for the quality of the relationships that make up Concordia.

A second facet of going beyond entails an ongoing commitment to professional development and best-in-class work. Across roles, this means looking past the status quo and assessing our work against the highest standards. It also means adopting a stance that anticipates, rather than reacts to, new ways of thinking, changing needs, and emerging demands.

Finally, going beyond means thinking past our own time frames as we consider the implications of our decisions. Having a keen awareness of the legacy our work will leave compels us to make a deep and multidimensional commitment to sustainability and to sagacious forms of financial stewardship, in particular.

A commitment to going beyond in all aspects of our work goes hand-in-hand with Concordia's aspiration to be a great university.

## **9. Take pride**

Concordia is a plural place with a rich history. The context is different now than it was for our founding institutions, but the sense of Concordia as a university that reflects the diversity and texture of Montreal, 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 respectfully. It includes not just fêting but finding better ways to learn from our graduates. And it means investing ourselves in work that we can say, 10 years from now, was truly difference-making.