

Pathways to Impact

A blueprint for advancing research impact at Concordia University

Office of the Vice-President, Research, Innovation and Impact
August 2025



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Introduction

THE CHALLENGE

Researchers today face a rapidly shifting landscape – one where expectations are evolving, opportunities are emerging, and the pressure to demonstrate real-world impact has never been greater. In this context, there is an urgent need for new, more dynamic support mechanisms that help researchers:

- Navigate the growing **global emphasis** on research impact, fueled by urgent societal challenges and the call to rebuild public trust in science and academia.
- Meet rising expectations from funders and governments to conduct research that delivers **tangible benefits**.
- Embrace a **transformative shift** toward more inclusive, responsible, and meaningful approaches to research assessment.

OUR RESPONSE

At Concordia, we are embracing an ambitious vision: to be a leader in **impact-driven research**:

- **Rooted in strategy:** we're aligning our efforts around a shared institutional commitment to research impact.
- **Powered by support:** Pathways to Impact equips researchers with the tools and guidance to amplify the impact of their work.
- **Guided by values:** As a Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) signatory, we champion diverse contributions that drive real-world change – from policy to practice, innovation to engagement.

RESEARCH IMPACT

It's the **positive change or benefit** research creates – in science, society, policy, the environment, and beyond.



There is an urgent need for research support
systems that are flexible, responsive,
and future-focused

Overview

Concordia has a **long-standing reputation for its focus on real-world challenges**, rooted in a set of core values that define our distinct identity. These include an unwavering dedication to social justice, pioneering leadership in sustainability, deep engagement with our local community and beyond, and a culture of innovation and creativity ([2022 Campaign for Concordia: Next-Gen Now](#)).

As higher education globally embraces the impact turn, Concordia is uniquely positioned as it enters its second half-century, to redefine ourselves as a **Generation 3 research impact-driven university** (Rickards et al. 2020) grounded in a shared institutional vision and strategy for research impact.

We've already begun the important work of reimagining our path forward and setting a course for the future. These efforts have unified around a shared commitment to enhancing our impact



Pathways to Impact

The Pathways to Impact initiative is our next step forward. It aims to:

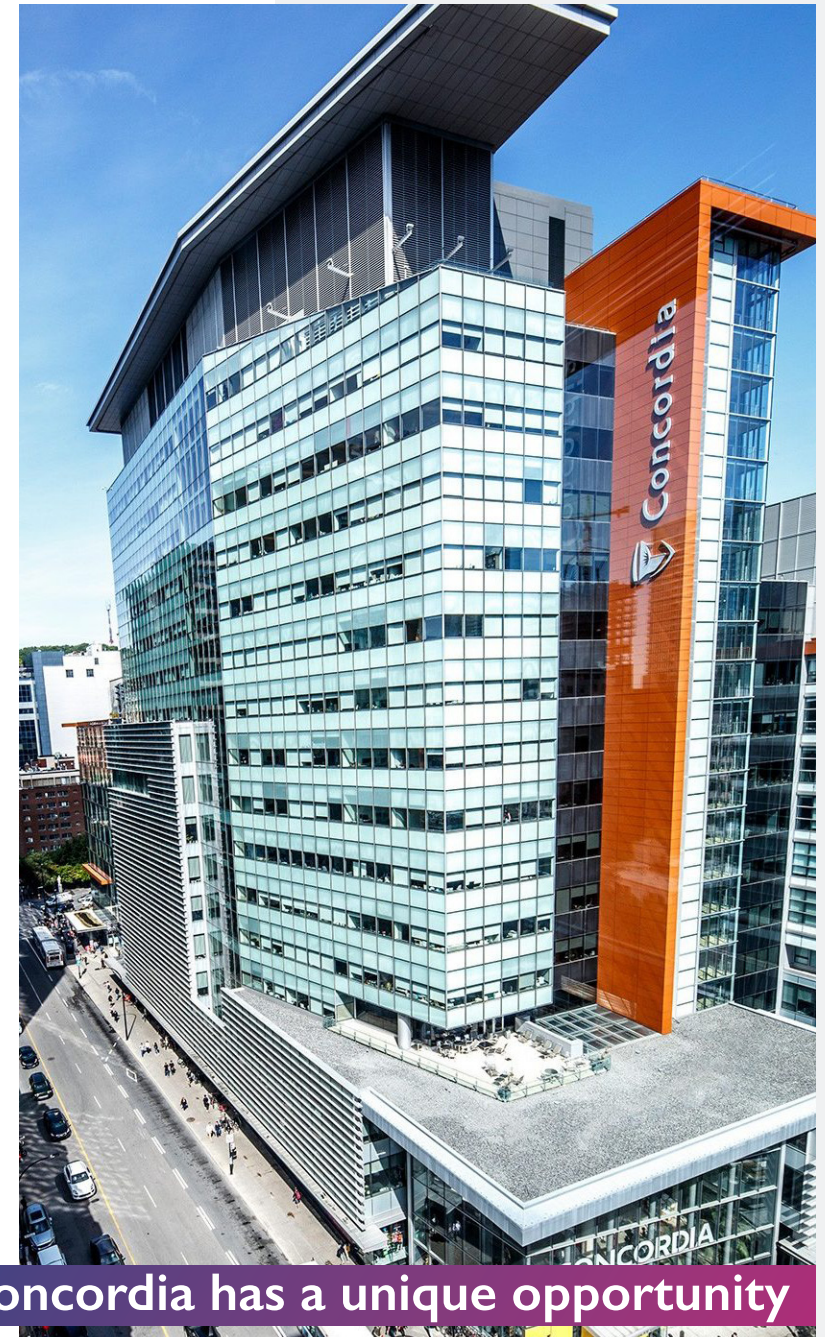
- Support a **whole-university approach to impact***, recognizing that while researchers play a central role in driving research impact, every unit and sector within the university can contribute to amplifying Concordia's overall impact.
- Affirm that **all research has the capacity for impact** – whether fundamental or applied, curiosity-driven, or focused on specific challenges, Concordia is committed to maximizing the impact of all research and all researchers.
- Build an **integrated support system** that draws on existing university structures and resources to support researchers and research institutes enhance their academic, scientific and societal impact.

Our goal is to increase the benefits and overall impact of Concordia research through a systems-thinking approach to cultural transformation. By embedding impact more deeply in our research ecosystem, we aim to make it visible, normalized, and rewarding. The same principles that drive our pursuit of inclusive research excellence – accountability, transparency, and equity – also inform the Pathways to Impact initiative, including the imperative to define, monitor, and communicate our impact effectively.

Today's societal challenges, planetary crises, and the need to rebuild public trust in knowledge institutions demand a fundamental rethinking of how we approach research impact in higher education.

Concordia has a unique opportunity to lead in re-defining research impact. We can be a lighthouse – illuminating new ways of thinking about, supporting, and embedding impact across the institution. We've already begun the groundwork to make this happen.

*As articulated in the [Concordia Voluntary University Review \(VUR\)](#), September 2024



**Concordia has a unique opportunity
to lead in re-defining research impact**

Our commitment to being a Gen 3 impact institution – one that embraces a new paradigm of research impact that is inclusive, intentional, and embedded in society

As outlined by [Rickards et al. \(2020\)](#), the evolution of research impact has undergone a **generational shift** along two key dimensions:

1. **Expanding Stakeholders Engagement** – Early generations of impact were largely confined to academia and policy circles. Gen 3 institutions, by contrast, actively engage a more diverse range of stakeholders – including communities, industry, and civil society – recognizing that diverse perspectives are essential to meaningful, lasting impact.
2. **From Passive to Proactive Involvement** – Impact is no longer seen as a byproduct of research. Instead, Gen 3 institutions embrace co-production and collaboration from the outset. Researchers and stakeholders work together throughout the research process, shaping questions, generating knowledge, and ensuring real-world relevance and application.

This shift marks a transition from researcher-driven, passive dissemination models to more participatory, societally embedded approaches. **Concordia's Gen 3 commitment reflects a deliberate move towards research that is not only excellent, but also engaged, responsive and transformative.**

The three generations continue to coexist in institutional practice.

Article-level bibliometrics, patents, and other indicators still play a role in demonstrating academic and economic impact. What distinguishes Gen 3, however, is its deeper engagement with external actors – while continuing to uphold, and help redefine, what academic excellence means in a changing world.

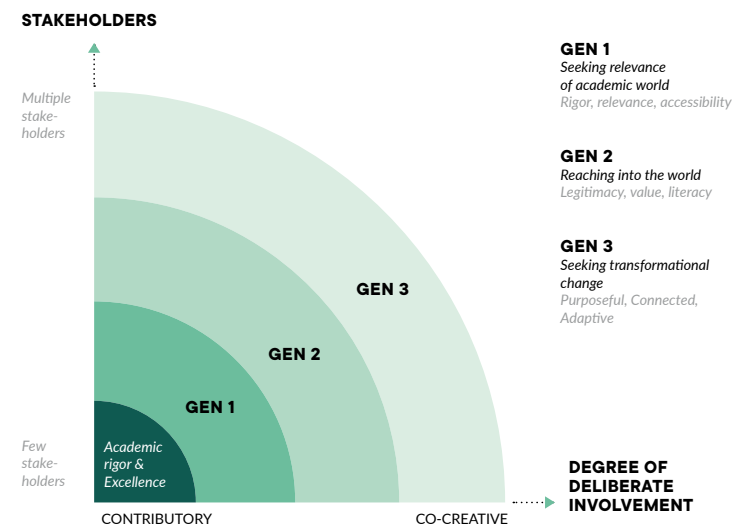
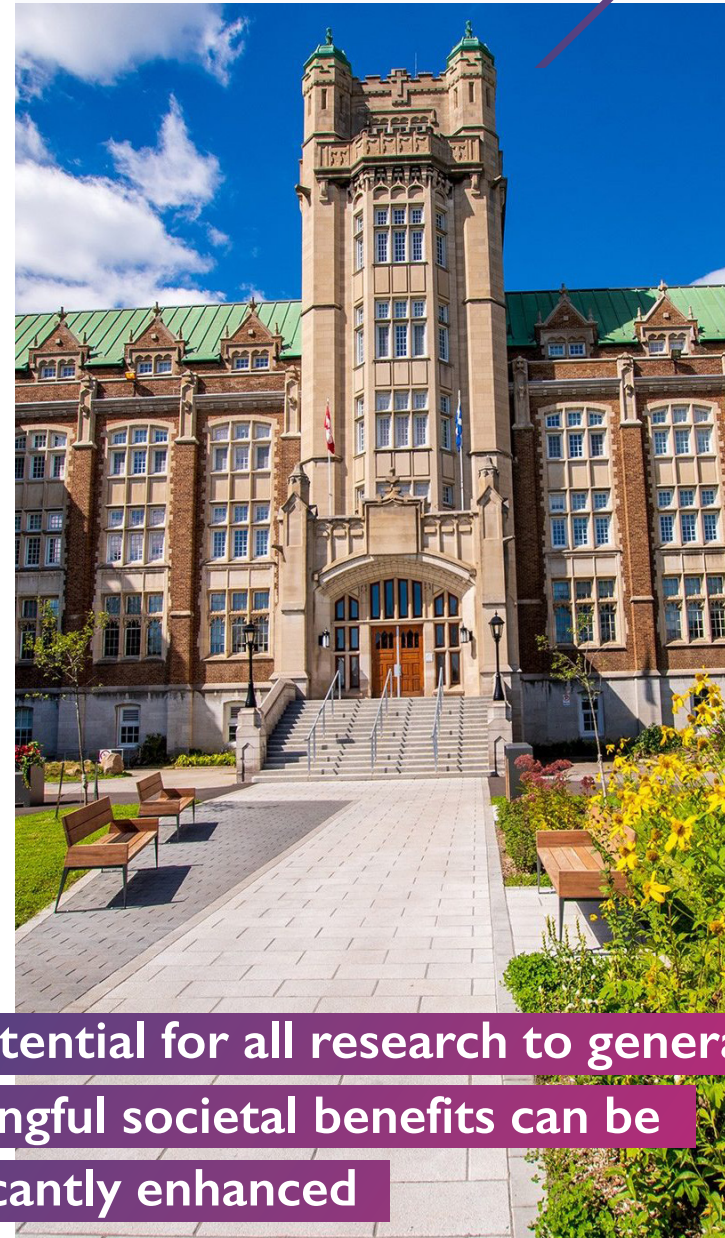


Figure 1 - Representation of the two fundamental dimensions that distinguish the generations of impact (Rickards et al 2020)

Concordia's Research Impact Vision

Understanding and engaging with research impact at an institutional level involves reflecting on how research can benefit society and approaching this with clear **intentionality**. There is **no one-size-fits all** approach to generating societal benefits from scientific and academic knowledge, nor is there a single ideal institutional strategy for fostering these benefits. However, by thoughtfully considering diverse pathways to impact and creating supportive structures, **the potential for all research to generate meaningful societal benefits can be significantly enhanced** ([Bayley and Phipps n.d.](#))

A coordinated approach to supporting research impact is needed – one that acknowledges researchers as key drivers while recognizing that every **unit within the university** plays a role in **strengthening and amplifying our collective impact**.



The potential for all research to generate meaningful societal benefits can be significantly enhanced

Every unit within the university plays a role in strengthening and amplifying our collective impact.

For Example

Communications
units can amplify
our research
and build
relationships with
communities
committed to
social change.

The Office of Community Engagement can advise on how to foster partnerships with local communities and stakeholders;

Our Libraries can inform best practices relating to research data management and open science and scholarship;

The Office of Indigenous Directions can provide guidance on how to establish mutually beneficial partnerships in Indigenous-led research.

Services required
the development
of funded research
scholarship at Co

Respond to
challenges
fostered by
and staff.

Contracts and intellectual property expertise is available to support new types of partnerships and collaboration agreements;

Financial Services can facilitate management of funds, reducing administrative burdens on researchers and societal partners, allowing them to focus on their collaborative research activities;

University Communications Services' teams can enhance the visibility of our research contributions and foster meaningful connections with stakeholders invested in societal change.

Conduct a broad
wide consultation
understand needs
constitutes support

Services can
and management,
administrative

Recognize the diversity of
disciplines, methods, peoples
and projects. Localize

Expand support for relational
work; assist our researchers
in creating their communities;

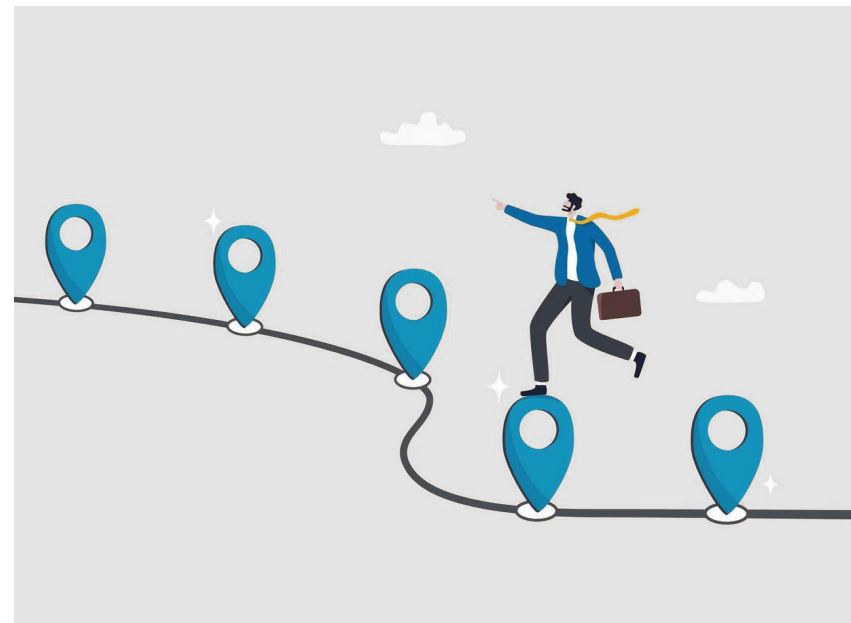
Provide researchers with time
to conduct quality research
by connecting research to

Streamline project
fund management,
administrative



Pathways to Impact: the future we anticipate

1. **Researchers are supported** to maximize the diverse impacts of their work.
2. **Multiple pathways to impact** are recognized and strengthened.
3. **The full range of research impact** is valued and made visible.
4. **Institutional units collaborate** to offer tools, resources and training that meet the needs of researchers and their societal partners.
5. **Research impact aligns with broader institutional goals**, advancing Concordia's core commitments and priorities.
6. **Achieving research impact is made easy, normative and rewarding.**
7. **Societal stakeholders know and value** our research contributions.
8. **Our researchers are well-positioned for success** in funding competitions.
9. **Concordia is a recognized leader** in research impact.



Pathways to impact: an integrated support service

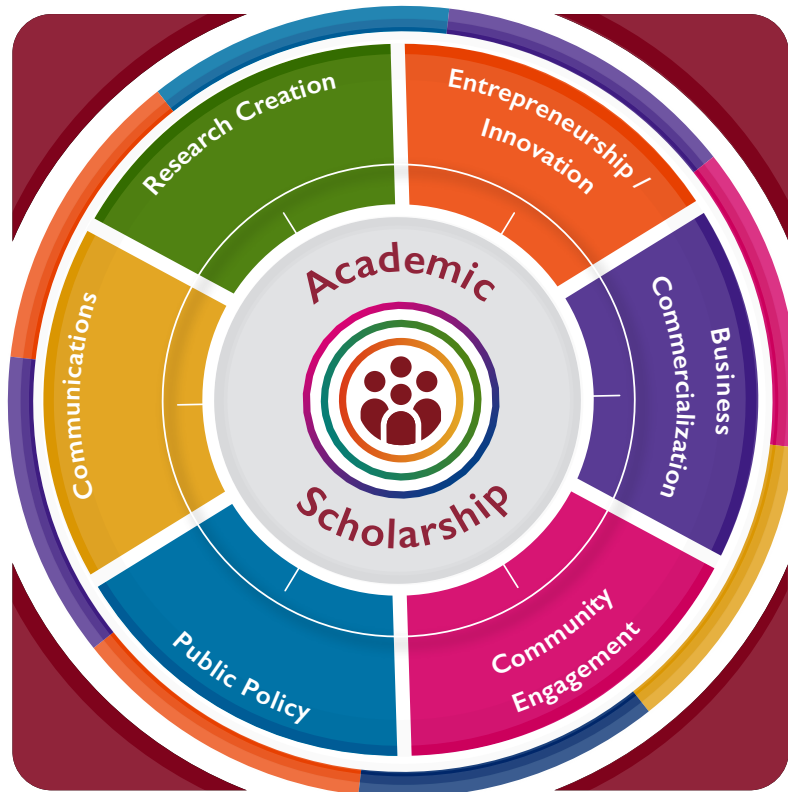


Figure 2 – The 7 Pathways to Impact at Concordia

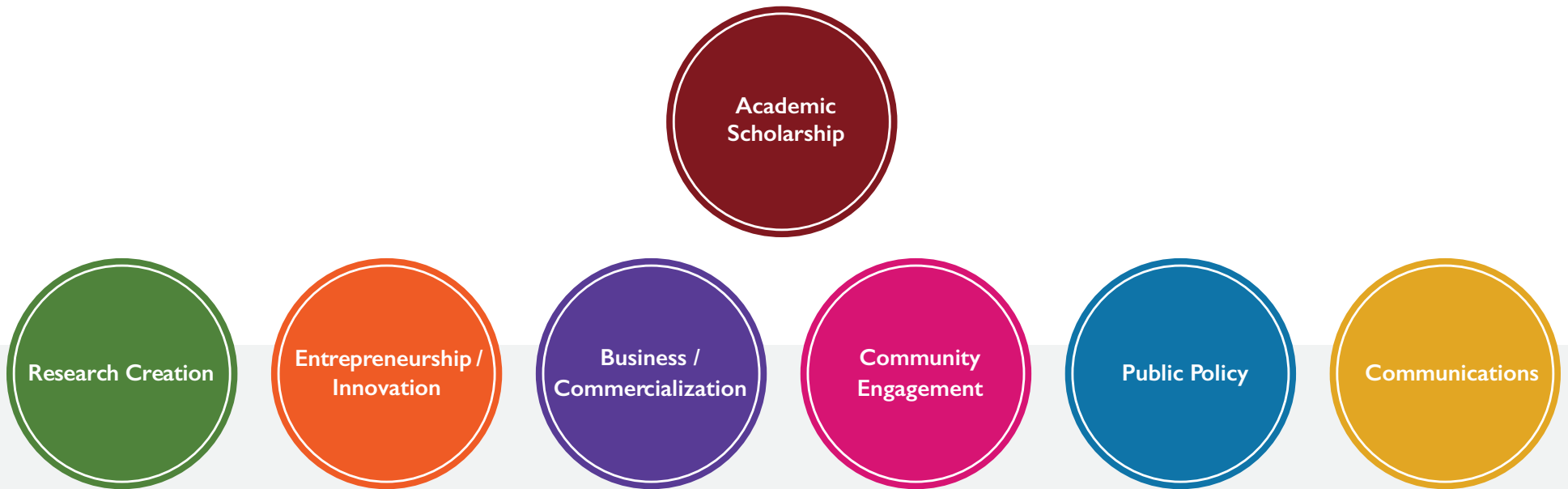
We've already begun the important work of reimagining our path forward, uniting multiple institutional units around a shared institutional commitment to enhancing impact through the development of the **Pathways to Impact** initiative

Units currently involved in the integrated support service :

- District 3
- 4TH Space
- Office of Community Engagement
- Partnerships, Intellectual Property & Security (PIPS - Office of Research)
- Research Development (Office of Research)
- University library
- University Communication Services (UCS)

The 7 Pathways

Pathways to Impact builds on Concordia's research strengths and expertise. In its first phase, the project is making resources and supports available to researchers in an integrated, carefully curated web-based platform. The design of this platform (from a back-end perspective), is centered around seven established impact pathways that leverage our capacity.





Pathway goals and sample services

1. Academic scholarship:

Impact approaches through research development and amplifying impact through open access practices.

Sample services: [crafting a compelling narrative CV](#);

Open Science/Open Scholarship best practices; research data management guidance

2. Research creation:

Recognising experimental artistic or creative practice that is often more attuned to impact through processes than outputs or products.

Sample services: arts for social change initiatives; sustainable art practices

3. Community engagement:

Maximising impact through co-creation based on the development of trust and meaningful relationships.

Sample services: research co-design, My Relations guide workshop

4. Innovation / Entrepreneurship:

Amplifying impact through fostering innovative ideas and ventures.

Sample services: foresight workshop, exploring how research can transform into innovative ventures

5. Business / Commercialization:

Strengthening impact through business partnerships and managing intellectual property.

Sample services: developing business partnerships; managing Intellectual Property and agreements

6. Public policy / Advocacy:

Increasing impact through policy networks and supporting policy relevant outputs.

Sample services: technical writing; public affairs and government relations support

7. Communications:

Expanding impact through spreading ideas and enabling public scholarship.

Sample services: storytelling training, strategic communication, media engagement, and public scholarship

Key Pillars of Concordia's Institutional Impact Vision

Our attention to research impact presents **an opportunity to advance several institutional commitments**, which serve as six foundational pillars for our emerging vision of research impact (figure 3). The process of engaging with both the research community and society should reflect and embody our core values and priorities.

The considerations for each pillar in relation to research impact are outlined below:

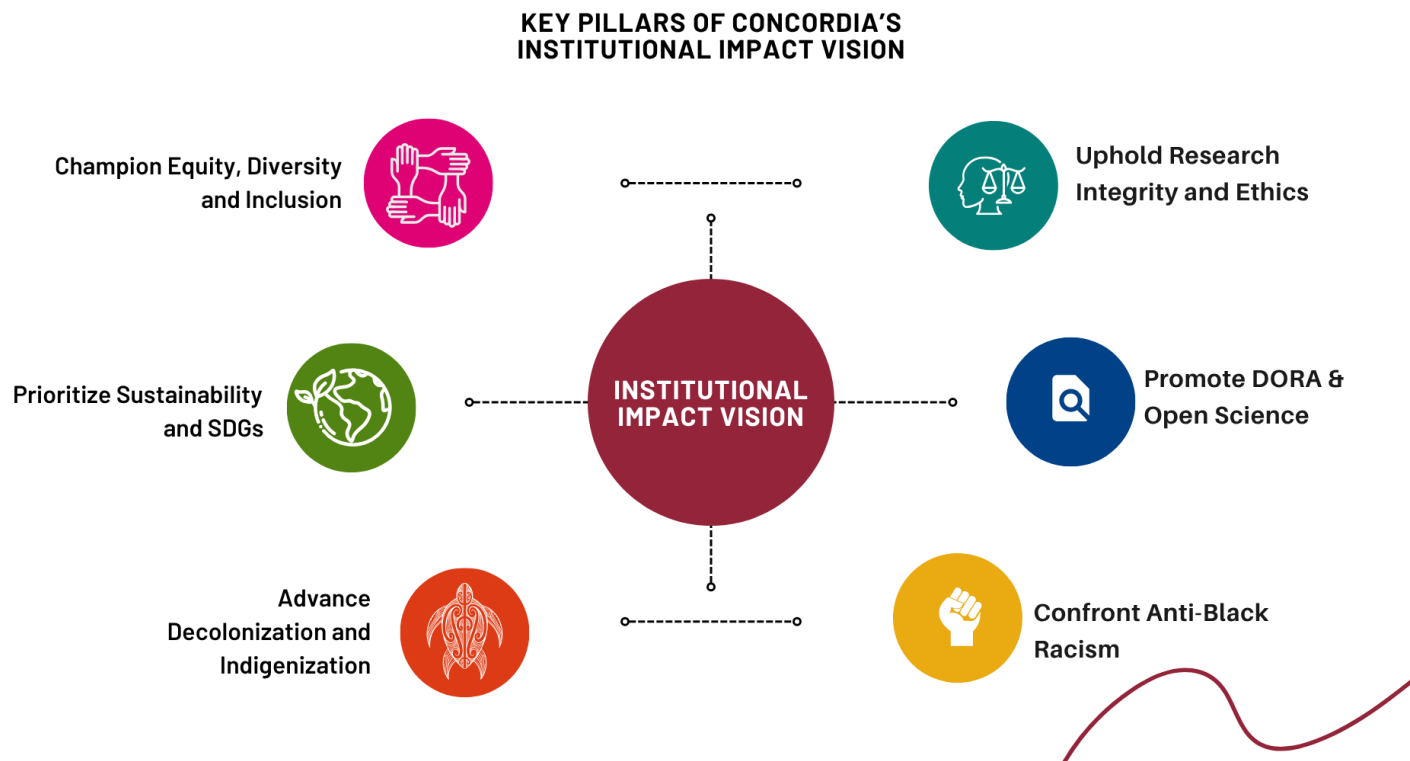


Figure 3 - Pillars of Concordia's Impact Vision



Champion Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Enriches the research process by fostering an inclusive research environment, while also ensuring that research outcomes have a broader and more meaningful impact on society.



Prioritize Sustainability and the SDGs

Enhances the vision by providing a comprehensive framework that can guide research priorities, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, enable effective measurement and monitoring of impact, and promote ethical and responsible research practices.



Advance Decolonization and Indigenization

Contributes to addressing historical injustices, centering Indigenous knowledge, fostering meaningful and equitable partnerships, and reimagining research practices to prioritize community-led initiatives, ensuring that research outcomes benefits and serve Indigenous people.



Promote DORA and Open Science

Advances responsible research assessment practices that recognize and reward accessibility, transparency, reproducibility, collaboration, and stakeholder engagement.



Confront Anti-Black Racism

Fosters inclusive research, addressing research biases and gaps, supporting Black scholarship and communities, and advancing social justice.



Uphold Research Integrity and Ethics

Builds trust and credibility in research, ultimately contributing to positive outcomes for science and society.

Pathways to Impact - origins of the initiative

Pathways to Impact traces its roots to a 2021 proposal from Concordia's Research Sustainability Stream (Sustainability Action Plan), initially conceived as a sustainability research incubator. Through three university-wide consultations, it evolved into a broader commitment to amplifying Concordia's impact.

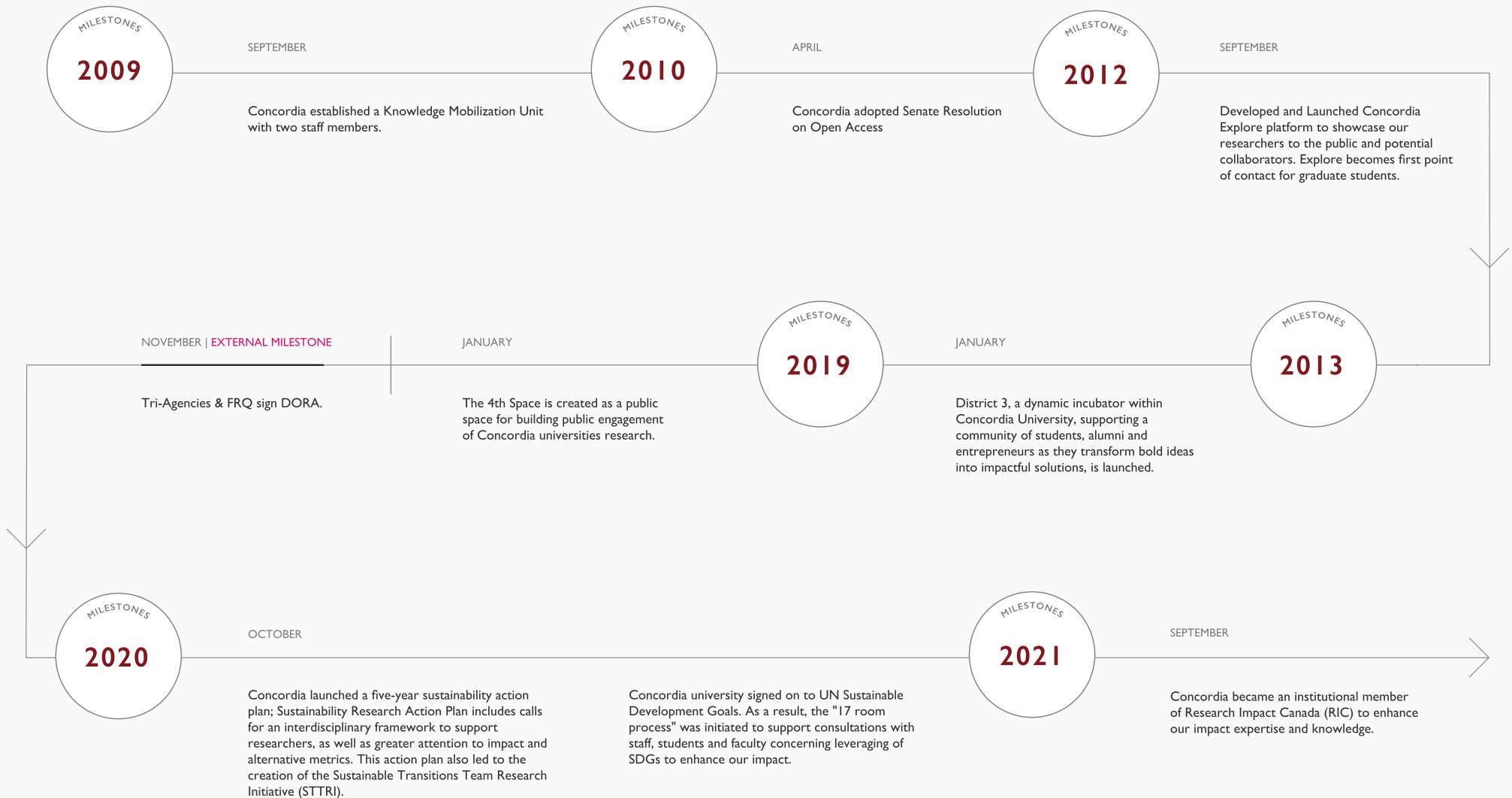
Key consultations included:

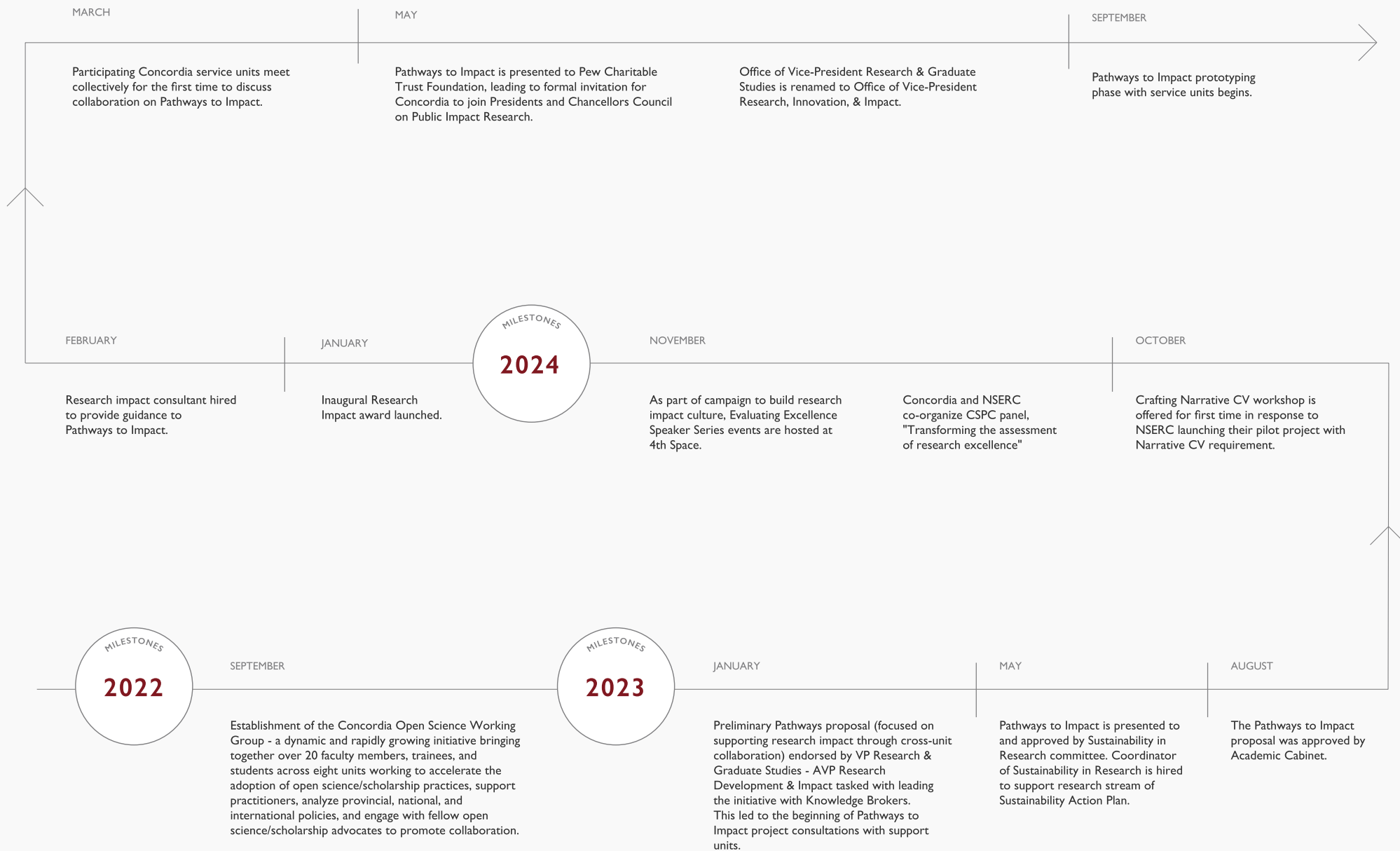
- The [Strategic Research Plan 2023-2028](#), shaped by cross-Faculty input, which formalizes Concordia's commitment to fostering ground-breaking research, diverse ways of knowing, and high-risk, high-reward endeavours. Enhancing impact and engagement (Objective 4) is central to all four strategic research themes, subsequently reflected in the revised title of the **Vice-President, Research, Innovation and Impact (VPRII) and the launch of a University Research Impact Award** (RIA) program.
- A [Voluntary University Review](#), informed by a university-wide [17-rooms exercise](#) linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which catalyzed discussions on a sustainability-focused "impact agenda" for Concordia.
- [Future Concordia](#), a visioning exercise that proposed a radical restructuring of the research ecosystem, advocating for more inclusive support across a more diverse spectrum of people, projects, and methods ([Future of Research](#)).

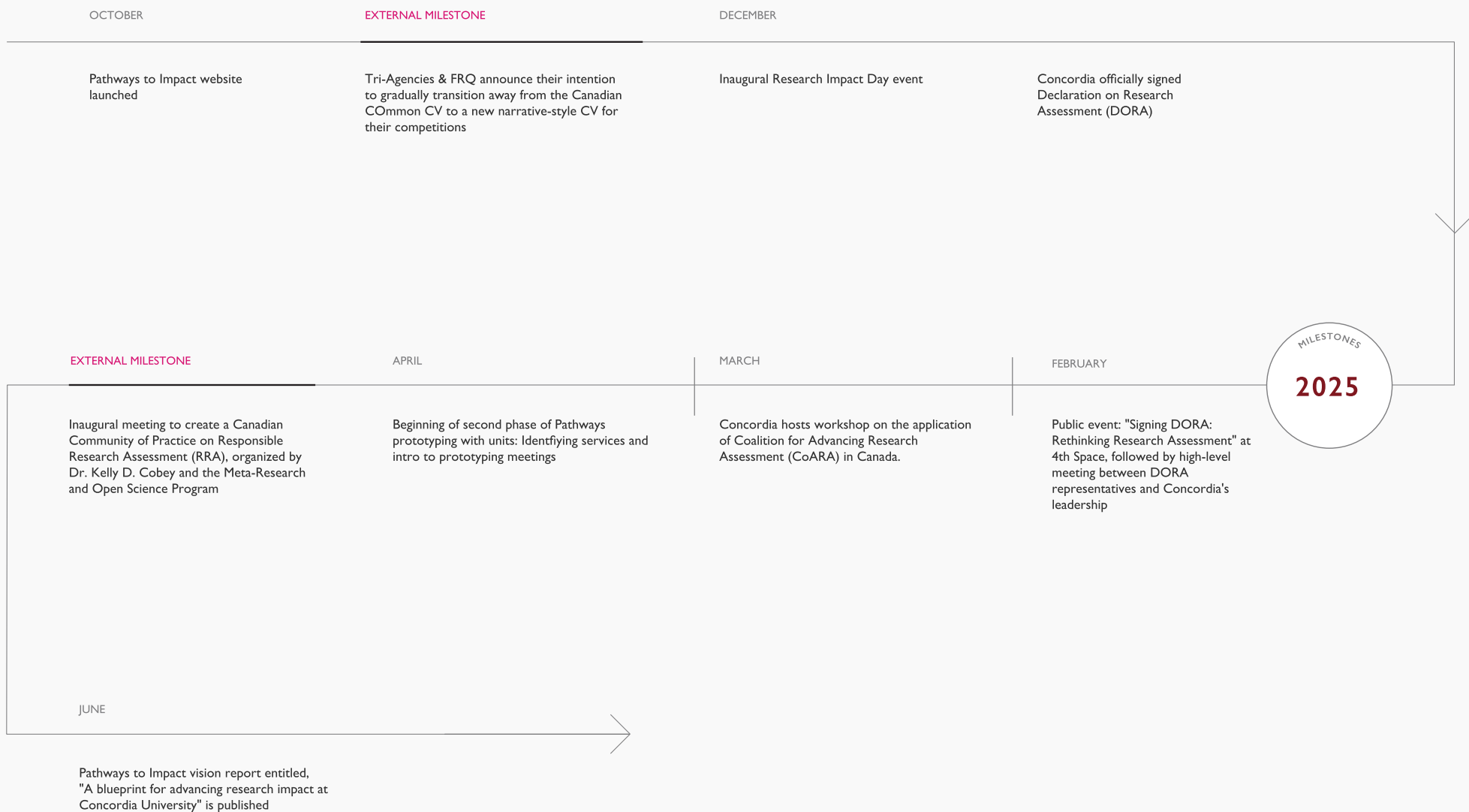
Enhancing impact and engagement (Objective 4) is central to all four strategic research themes

History of the Pathways to Impact Initiative

The intention of this timeline is to track key milestones that have contributed to the creation of the Pathways to Impact initiative, and the related efforts to transform research assessment practices in line with DORA principles at Concordia University.







Our distinctive approach to research impact

Impact-driven research is already a reality at Concordia, with many researchers actively pursuing ways to create meaningful impact. Our research not only generates scientific and public value, but many of our researchers and research units are tackling pressing issues that impact our communities and our planet.

Examples include:

- [Volt-Age](#) focuses on electrification of society research, exploring renewable energies and in collaboration with the Next-Gen Cities Institute (NGCI), finding ways urban communities can reach a sustainable zero-carbon infrastructure;
- Research on Artificial Intelligence (AI), including initiatives at the [Applied AI Institute](#) focused on demystifying and enabling real-world applications of AI, and the exciting [Abundant Intelligences Research Program](#), exploring new ways to conceptualize and design AI based on Indigenous Knowledge (IK) systems;
- [engAGE Centre for Research on Aging](#) is working with older people, community groups, health care practitioners, and other partners to change the way society thinks about and supports aging.

Impact is not new for Concordia researchers.

With a whole university approach, we have the opportunity to **cultivate intentionality**, that is the instinct to think about impact early on – rather than associate impact solely with communications and dissemination of results. The creation of societal value from research is a comprehensive process; simply generating knowledge is insufficient for creating meaningful impact (Muhonen et al. 2019).

Our commitment is to enhance and support the impact of all research. Responding to the recommendations of the Future of Research and the VUR, we will ensure all our researchers, regardless of their field or career stage, receive institutional support and recognition to maximize their impact.

Pathways to Impact: Advancing our commitment to DORA

As a [signatory to DORA](#), Concordia is committed to responsible research assessment that prioritizes the quality, relevance, and impact of research over journal-based metrics.

Pathways to Impact advances this commitment by:

- Promoting inclusive and meaningful indicators of success
- Increasing recognition of a broader range of research contributions
- Supporting diverse pathways to impact across disciplines, sectors and career stages.
- Encouraging intentionality in planning for impact in the development of research proposals and projects
- Providing guidance on crafting narrative-style CVs, aligned with revised Tri-agency and FRQ templates



Promoting inclusive indicators of success

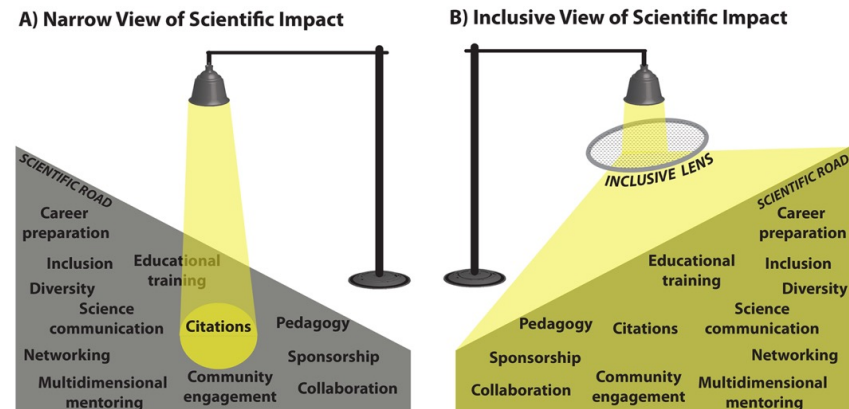


Figure 4

Source: [Promoting inclusive metrics of success](#)

Increasing the visibility of contributions



Figure 5

Source: Presentation by Dr Rochelle Fritch - Science Foundation Ireland, 21 March 2022 presented by Giovanna Lima "Evaluating Excellence: Demonstrating Scholarly Impact", Workshop, Concordia 16 Nov 2023



Our responsible approach to research impact

Grounded in our six foundational pillars, we embrace a responsible approach to impact:

We acknowledge both the positive and potential negative consequences of our contributions to society.

We foster, support, and enable a diversity of impact types and categories.

We recognize all types or categories of impact as meaningful and valuable.

We understand that impact can take time, and that it derives from both the process and outcomes of research.

We proactively plan for impact, identifying pathways that align with each research team or project's context.

While we act with intention, we acknowledge that impact extends beyond our full control.

We champion diverse and impactful research careers.

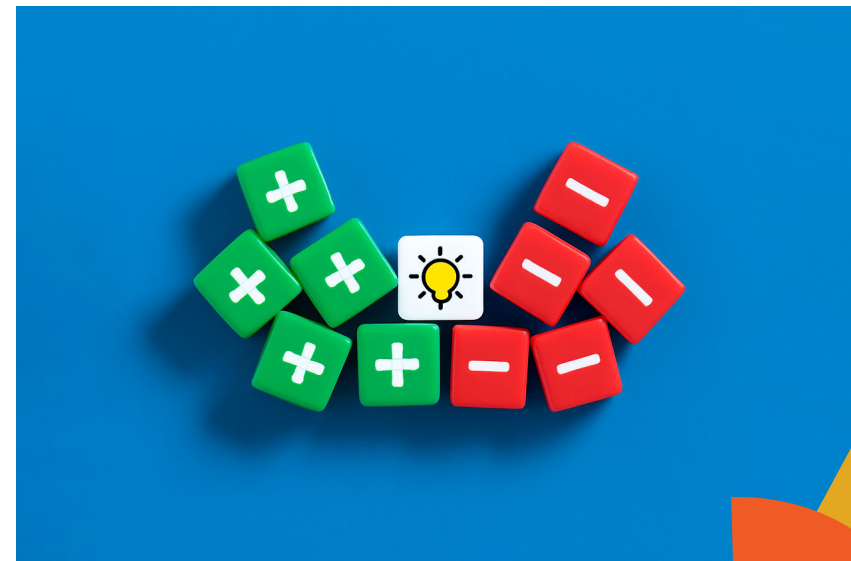
We acknowledge both the positive and potential negative consequences of our contributions to society.

The impact of research can be broadly defined as **the consequences or effects of research perceived in and by different actors in the knowledge system, including society**. These consequences of our research, or impacts, can be defined to: (1) be positive or negative, (2) be of different types or natures, (3) occur at different times and scales, and (4) result from the research process itself, as well as from its results (This section benefits from the article Understanding the social impact of research, by our consultant Dr Giovanna Lima, originally published in Portuguese at <https://metricas.usp.br/>.)

Positive and Negative Impact

The impact or effect of research can be characterised as **positive** when it generates a contribution, a benefit, or a positive change. This can be within academia, when we advance the frontier of knowledge, but also within society—such as improving life expectancy, reducing costs, or enhancing public understanding of complex issues. However, **negative** impacts also exist, as seen in cases like the MMR vaccine controversy, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and the 2008 financial crisis.

Defining impact as positive or negative is often subjective; for instance, facilitating oil extraction may be seen differently by various groups. Prior reflection on the potential negative impact of research is particularly important considering we want to maximize our impact; in an environment where the impact of research is actively promoted, potential negative impacts can be exacerbated, and the scientific sphere may not be adequately prepared to deal with these situations ([Derrick et al. 2019](#)).



We foster, support, and enable a diversity of impact types and categories.

Research can generate a variety of different types or categories of impact:

Types or categories of impact

Impact can also be viewed thematically, categorized as socio-economic, environmental, policy-related, or health and well-being. This classification helps identify the sectors and stakeholders benefiting from research.

Different frameworks exist, each with indicators to capture how impact is perceived. For example, Campus Engage (2022) outlines 10 categories, detailing beneficiaries and examples. Its first category highlights the core role of knowledge creation and mobilization.

Both fundamental and applied research have impact potential—the difference lies in the nature of their impact, not in their ability to create it.

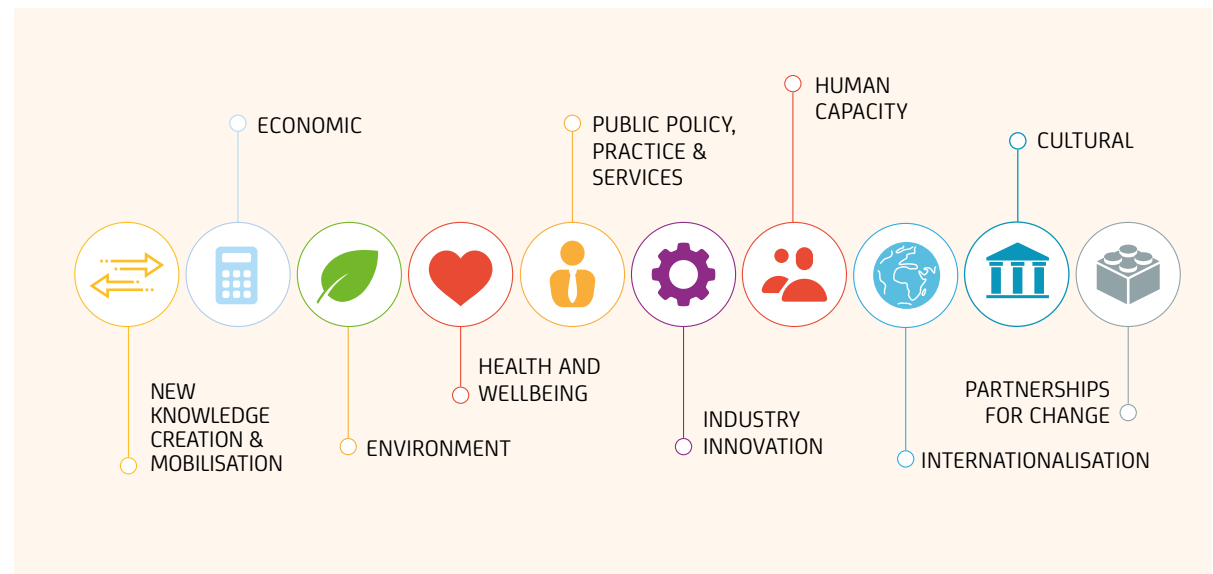


Figure 6 - Research categories of research impact

Source: Campus Engage (2022). Engaged Research: Planning for Impact – A How to Guide. Available at https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Guide-IUA-Engaged-Research-Planning-for-Impact-Framework-2022-Update_V5-25.pdf

We recognize all types or categories of impact as meaningful and valuable.

Societal impact can take a variety of forms

Research contributions can also take various forms, from helping society better define or understand an issue to actively supporting its resolution through instrumental or capacity-building approaches, as shown in Figure 5.



Figure 7 - Different types of societal impact Source: Erasmus University Rotterdam (2023). Defining Societal Impact at EUR. Available at

<https://www.eur.nl/en/media/2023-09-36109societalimpactfurtherdefinition3bonline>

We understand that impact can take time, and that it derives from both the research process and its outcomes.

Time and scale of Impact

Research impact **varies in timing and scale**—it may unfold gradually with lasting effects or emerge quickly with short-term benefits. Its reach may be local, national, or global, affecting few or many. While extraordinary impacts are often highlighted, recognizing routine or incremental impacts is equally important.

Different disciplines, projects, and beneficiaries experience impact differently. As Concordia develops its assessment framework, we must see impact as **a snapshot of an evolving process** – one that can shift in unexpected ways. Premature assessments risk overemphasizing short-term gains while overlooking the lasting value of foundational or non-applied research.

The first generation of impact tends to focus on immediate, short-term outcomes, and direct cause-and-effect. Later generations shift toward long-term change and **more complex, indirect, and sometimes unpredictable pathways to impact**.

At its core, research is about exploring the unknown. A mindful approach to impact assessment must reflect this complexity and unpredictability, ensuring that research with long-term or transformative potential is not undervalued.

Process or results

Impact was once understood as stemming from its results – such as publications, patents or other outputs – and measured by how these were adopted or applied by societal actors. Impact was seen as the benefit derived from the use of research findings. Today, this view has expanded. **Impact can also emerge from the research process itself** when it involves the co-creation of knowledge. In these cases, the research can have an emancipatory effect for those outside scientific and academic communities. This broader understanding of impact – encompassing both process and outcome – has important implications for how we define, support, and evaluate research influence.

Many researchers actively pursue ways to create meaningful impact

We proactively plan for impact, identifying pathways that align with each research team or project's context.

Impact refers to the change we can identify, measure, and communicate, while pathways to impact - such as knowledge creation, community-engagement, communication, and commercialization – are the processes that facilitate these changes. These pathways are shaped by context and supported through meaningful interactions between researchers and various partners.

Within the research cycle, impact-related activities vary depending on the projects' goals, available support, and the researchers' expertise and skills. Impact ambitions of a research project typically describe:

- **The scientific and societal challenges addressed**
- **Intended beneficiaries, intermediaries, or partners – including academic audiences where relevant**
- **Strategies for engagement and interaction**
- **The intended change or outcome**

The impact vision outlines what needs to be done, with whom, and for what purpose. Tools like a theory of change (ToC) or a logic model are often used to describe how and why change is expected to happen in a specific context - helping to plan, monitor, and communicate a project's contributions.

Both curiosity-driven and challenge-driven research can generate impact, and their pathways can be intentionally planned. In mission-oriented projects, for example, mapping desired impacts can help identify beneficiaries and engagement strategies. Importantly, planning for impact is possible – and valuable – for any research, whether fundamental or applied.

While we act with intention, we acknowledge that impact extends beyond our full control.

While researchers can directly manage their research activities and outputs, they can only influence how others use them. For example, they can't control media coverage or policy uptake. And they have even less control over the societal changes that may result from use. Despite this, researchers can and should take active steps to steer their work toward positive impact.

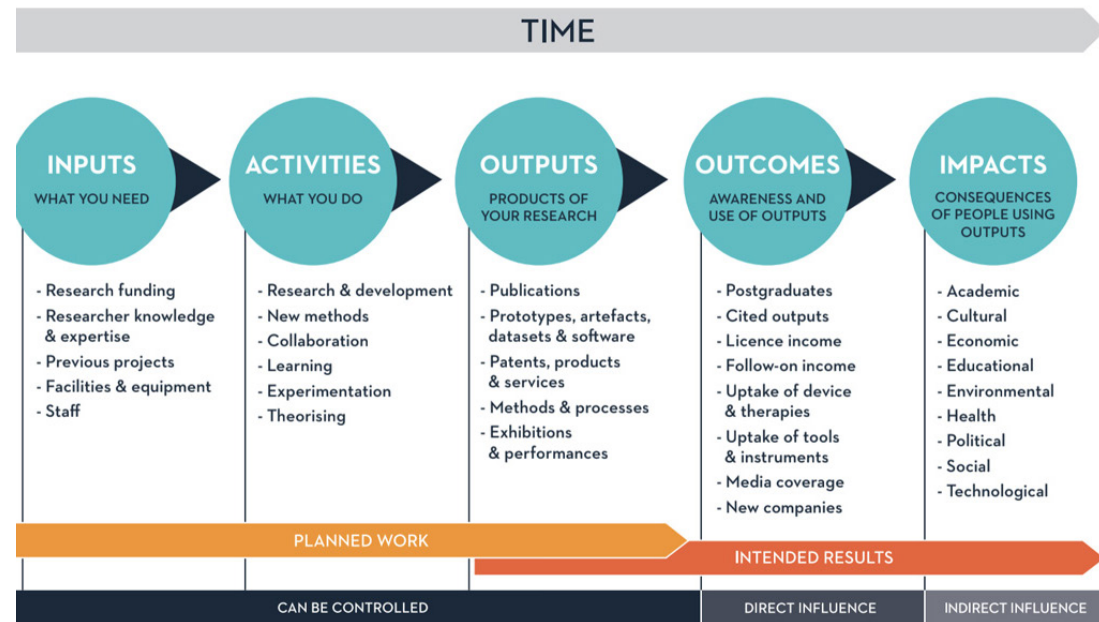


Figure 8 – Impact journey, based on the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Logic Model.

Source: UCD. Research Impact Toolkit: Impact Journey. Available at

<https://www.ucd.ie/impacttoolkit/plan/impactjourney/>

We champion diverse and impactful research careers.

Some scholars – sometimes referred to as **I-shaped** researchers – may be more inclined toward disciplinary work, following a traditional path of deep specialization within their field. For these academics, impact is often achieved through direct contributions to the discipline, such as transformative methodological advances, as well as through collaborative and leadership roles that help cultivate future generations of scholars.

Other scholars – referred to as **T-shaped researchers** – have deep expertise in one area (the vertical stroke of the “T”) while also possessing broad traversal skills and the ability to collaborate across disciplines (the horizontal stroke of the “T”). They may prioritize engaging with contexts outside academia, dedicating their efforts to applied research that directly addresses real-world challenges. For these scholars, impact might take the form of benefiting society or the environment through collaborations with policymakers, industry, or civic organizations.

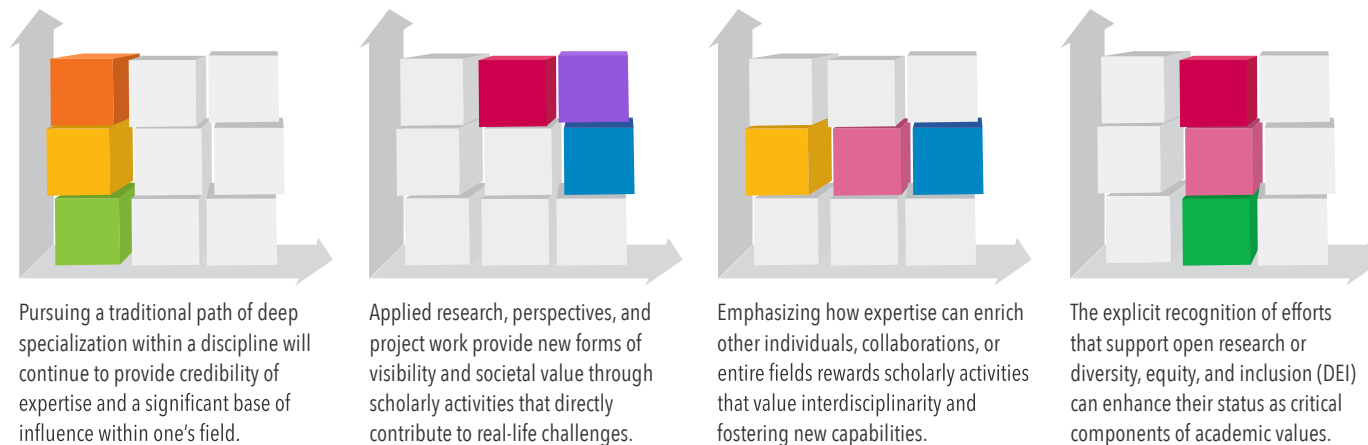


Figure 9 – Diverse impactful careers

Source: Schmidt, R. (2022). Building Blocks for Impact. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.7249187>

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Acknowledgements

Pathways to Impact: A Blueprint for Advancing Research Impact at Concordia outlines Concordia's vision for research impact, the motivation behind the Pathways to Impact initiative, along with its history and distinctive aspects of our approach to research impact. The document is a supplement to the Pathways to Impact webpage, intended to provide a more comprehensive overview of the initiative.

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Project Management and Supervision

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