

University collaboration with and for communities: Quebec experiences in times of pandemic

Summary of discussions held on November 18, 2021, written by Andréanne Brunet Bélanger. Translated by Ailesh Abrams.

The objective of the seminar was to provide a multi-sector vision of the experiences of collaboration between the university and community, women's groups, and trade union groups in the COVID context. Based on concrete examples drawn in particular from the experiences of Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)'s Community Service Office and Concordia University's Community Engagement Office, the eight speakers at the seminar presented challenges encountered and overcome, general strategies adopted, and lessons learned during the pandemic. The event was facilitated by Annie Camus, Professor in the Department of Organization and Human Resources at UQAM.

This seminar follows the pan-Canadian workshop organized by Amber Fletcher, Lynn Gidluck and Magda Goemans titled *Seizing the moment: Exploring just and sustainable pandemic recovery through community-campus partnerships*, which took place on May 25-26, 2021. The workshop involved a series of conversations led by the University of Regina and Community Campus Engage Canada on community challenges and strategies related to the pandemic, as well as opportunities for research, learning and creative partnerships between community and campus to help find just and lasting solutions to pandemic challenges. Nearly 400 participants joined in the May 21 workshop discussions.

Presentations:

Presentation 1: The Office of Community Engagement: Approaches and Adaptations

Alex Megelas, Programs and Communications Coordinator & Geneviève Sioui, Indigenous Community Engagement Coordinator (Community Engagement Office, Concordia University)

The panelists presented the approach of the Office of Community Engagement at Concordia University, as well as its adaptations in the face of the pandemic. They maintained that anchoring in communities remains the most important work to put forward.

The mission of Concordia University's Office of Community Engagement is to establish and maintain fruitful and mutually beneficial relationships between the university and the various communities of Montreal through work that emphasizes community projects and experiential learning with researchers.

As a research network, the Office has had to position itself in the face of varied issues, at the frontiers between civic engagement, the defense of human rights, and the sphere of autonomy in community contexts. The Bureau supports community groups, for example local non-profit organizations or informal citizen groups, which allows it to have a foothold in the field with groups traditionally not recognized by granting agencies because of work deemed too political.



In the pandemic context, members of the university wanted to put their tools into practice, but from a distance, in order to continue their work of anchoring in communities. The Bureau and its employees have been driven by a desire to continue to support organizations, while being aware of their own privileges (e.g. telecommuting, support from the university, etc.). Within the university, they have seen a drop in requests for support for projects due to the slowdown caused by the introduction of telework. However, they have also observed an increase in demand in community circles, whether in terms of staff reorganization or the political mobilization of these organizations.

One of the projects supported during the pandemic concerned digital gaps, between what is emerging from the artificial intelligence/digital development sector and a certain awareness among university actors to promote committed and anchored research projects for concrete practices. Regarding the Aboriginal community, the Bureau continued its commitment with new adaptations. Many examples were cited, including the search for funding traditionally intended to place students in for-profit organizations in order to redirect these amounts and these internships to community settings. The university made it possible to redirect the funds and to offer various internships in the community with organizations/collectives that were not initially targeted, not having the status of charitable organizations.

The panelists concluded that for community organizations, the pandemic emergency continues and it is important to continue thinking about ways to support them.

Presentation 2: The approach of UQAM's Community Services, before and during the pandemic: some challenges faced

Marcel Simoneau, Director of Community Services and Eve-Marie Lampron, Development Officer at Protocol UQAM/Relay-women of Community Services (UQAM)

This presentation highlighted the Community Service approach. Panelists argued that while the pandemic has been difficult, particularly for already precarious groups, it has underscored the critical role of SAC in meeting their needs.

The mission carried out by the Community Service (SAC) of UQAM for more than 40 years is rooted in a broader reflection on the role of the university in society. The SAC is an interface between UQAM and groups with collective needs, reporting to the Vice-rectorate for research, creation, and dissemination. The SAC's mission is to respond to specific requests from community groups. The Service is their main gateway to UQAM and its approach is based on understanding their needs; it is about ensuring a collaborative and mutually fruitful agreement between teachers and groups. The SAC participates in the creation of new knowledge in order to create social transformations. To do this, the SAC's approach is based on the co-production of knowledge through research, training, dissemination, and knowledge transfer projects.

The SAC's approach is rooted in respect for the temporalities and methods of groups, particularly community, Indigenous, women's and trade unions, hard hit by the pandemic. Many meetings of the project management committees (meetings that took place online) have made it possible to collectively review the work schedules of the partner teams; several projects have been slowed down (by the restrictions associated with the collection of face-to-face data, in particular), some were put on hold (in order to respect the rapid redefinition of the priorities of the groups and populations with whom they



engage, or when the face-to-face dynamic was essential to the success of research or training activities) and new projects have emerged from the needs expressed by the groups in the COVID context. Among many examples, they highlighted the start of research on the working conditions of teachers in the context of the pandemic, at the request of unions noting the worrying situations experienced by their members. Several teams have migrated training content (in particular on the exercise of the right to protest) or dissemination (on intersectional feminist intervention, for example) online, in order to allow for circulation to and appropriation by a wider audience. The partnership teams already formed have also been able to take up new issues that have emerged during the pandemic: they noted in particular the production of materials on the prevention of domestic violence and the necessary measures to protect victims in the new context of telework (likely to make victims even more vulnerable). Flexibility and respect for needs were essential and the adaptations made it possible to meet a number of challenges.

Presentation 3: Transformative Response Funding Program

Elisabeth Cramer, Head of Social Innovation — SHIFT Center for Social Transformation (Concordia University)

Elisabeth Cramer's presentation highlighted the implementation of a temporary accelerated funding program from the Center for Social Transformation (SHIFT) to support social transformation efforts during COVID, in order to be able to respond appropriately to the needs of the community.

SHIFT's mandate is to support emerging and innovative initiatives within the Concordia University community and its partners with the goal of creating a fairer, more inclusive, and globally more prosperous world. To do this, SHIFT orients its governance system towards the participation of all its members in decision-making power. Each funding decision is made by a jury bringing together both university and community actors. The strategies are guided by a committee made up of actors with various profiles.

Prior to the pandemic, SHIFT funding was intended to support high-potential social transformation initiatives, through two tenders per year. Each call invited key individuals, organizations, or groups working in Montreal's social transformation sector to join the SHIFT Center community through partnerships between university and community members. The call for tenders had a fixed deadline and the criteria were drawn up by a jury.

In times of COVID, SHIFT has adapted its programs to the needs of the community by creating the "Transformative Responses to COVID-19" program. SHIFT has allocated \$70,000 to 15 social transformation initiatives that address the effects of the pandemic. To meet the high demand, SHIFT has implemented a new selection process. The changes made have notably enabled:

- Acceleration of the processing of requests in order to offer support more quickly to the community;
- Broadened funding criteria to organizations that do not necessarily have pre-existing projects with Concordia University;
- Increased budget allocated for the "Transformative responses to COVID-19" program, from \$50,000 to \$70,000;
- Alignment of the program with the needs of the community by creating new collaborations.



The lessons learned are many. On the one hand, the panelist supports the importance of putting the needs of the community at the center of the work to generate trust and deep collaborations. On the other hand, relations between institutions and community groups are always on a human scale. SHIFT will continue to prioritize timeliness in awarding funding and keeping open the possibility of creating new collaborations, even if an organization does not have a pre-existing relationship with Concordia.

Presentation 4: Research "with" and the COVID-19 health crisis: the highs and lows of the university institutional response

Jean-Marc Fontan, professor in the sociology department (UQAM)

The purpose of this presentation was to describe the methods of adaptation of the university institution to the situation generated by COVID as it engages with civil society organizations. The panelist demonstrated the impact of COVID on research conducted by academics, based on his experience in connection with different research units. He noted that this impact has been both positive and negative, depending on the situation.

On the positive side, Dr. Fontan highlighted the role of teleworking as a catalyst for availability. In fact, scheduling appointments and meetings was facilitated by the greater availability of individuals. All the projects that could count on actors connected to the internet and comfortable with information technologies did not feel any negative effects, if they were able to adapt their approach and research methodology.

COVID also provided an opportunity to develop new fields of study. Requests have been expressed to monitor the effects of the pandemic and the responses or adaptations of actors or populations. At PhiLab, a theme has been developed on the response of grant-making foundations to the pandemic.

With the crisis, granting agencies mobilized and reacted positively by freeing up resources and promoting more flexibility in accountability. These new practices have been documented and put forward through case studies, carried out from initiatives present mainly in Ontario and Quebec. An interesting dimension of these studies is the ability to follow the development of responses live, to be able to document the experiences and also to have some insight into the impact of these responses. There has also been the creation of new debates, particularly on approaches to inclusion.

On the negative side, the pandemic has severed direct ties with study populations. The transition from face-to-face meetings to online meetings hampered the possibility of observing live behaviors, informal exchanges, and the possibility of properly orchestrating the research-intervention activity during this period. While this ability is slowly returning, the pandemic has affected the quality of the supportive relationship between researchers and respondents. This negative dimension is one of the elements that have caused COVID to reinforce existing social inequalities. Participant observation and research-intervention activities involving people, requiring meetings and accompaniment, could not be held and are just starting to be held again.



Presentation 5: Black communities, solidarities and mental health: building research collaboration in the context of a pandemic

Lisa Ndejuru, PhD. Psychotherapist, Dean's Postdoctoral Fellow 2020-2022 (Faculty of Information, University of Toronto)

Lisa Ndejuru's presentation highlighted the importance of building bridges between Black communities and the university, particularly in this exceptional context. To situate the setting up of collaborative research projects, it is necessary to understand how the pandemic has added to a weakening sociopolitical context for these communities.

The research collaboration presented was rooted in the events following the death of George Floyd and the action of the Black Lives Matter movement. Concordia University has created the President's Task Force on Anti-Black Racism. A report from Concordia's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Task Force was also released, along with concrete measures and hiring to increase the representation of racialized minorities in the university landscape.

The vulnerabilities of people in Black francophone and anglophone communities have been heightened by the breakdown of social cohesion. Requests for access to mental health care have increased within these communities, with long waiting lists for obtaining services from a racialized worker. Community organizations working in Black communities saw this need emerge long before the pandemic. These organizations have mobilized to meet the demand for psychosocial support at the community level.

From this critical juncture was born the project to create peer support. Lisa Ndejuru noted a specificity in the approach, which is not simply pure psychotherapy, but which also has a social and political dimension. To the initially informal work in and with the communities was added the possibility of formal work recognized by the university, via a request for funding connected with the initiative on race, gender, and diversity of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

The proposal was brought forward by three community groups (Black Mental Health Connection, Union United Church, and Black Healing Center) and within the Concordia University community, through an approach based on grassroots needs; as Lisa Ndejuru noted, "for once, we enrolled within this University and we worked together on something that WE think is important!". Concordia University responded in a remarkable way to the proposal, offering assistance in writing the application and in welcoming other professors supporting the project. The knowledge of community organizations was central to the proposal.

Finally, the panelist maintained that the growing demand from communities has demonstrated how great the need is and that it responds to a broader problem. She also raised the importance of refocusing on what has already been done within community organizations and transposing these practices within the University. In this way, the relationships are mutually beneficial for communities and the university.



Presentation 6: Consultation and adaptations for the socio-professional autonomy of survivors of domestic violence in the COVID context

Chantal Lepire, Guidance Counsellor, Lecturer and doctoral student in education (UQAM)

This presentation highlighted how *Chevalière en mission*, a career development program aimed at the socio-professional empowerment of women victims of domestic violence, has adapted to the context of COVID. For Chantal Lepire, the effective collaboration between the various parties (the Alliance of 2nd stage shelters for women and children who are victims of domestic violence, the intervention team, the UQAM Community Service, and the research team) has created new perspectives and practices that can be maintained and refined beyond the pandemic context.

The program aims to empower and engage women who are victims of domestic violence in society. This regaining of power notably involves a career plan chosen by women and making it possible to combine the needs of their family, professional and personal lives. The program includes a training component (*Chevalière en mission*) and a research component, and is offered in 2nd stage shelters (MH2).

Chantal Lepire explains that the three factors that have enabled a successful collaboration are the commitment, communication, and cross-skills of each party. These are the factors that allowed the program to move from face-to-face to virtual mode. Also, since its creation in 2017, the program has faced several challenges, taken up by the team whose adaptability has been increased.

In a pandemic context, various adaptations were necessary:

- Ensure that MH2s have a high-speed connection, the necessary tools and the space to respect the confidentiality of virtual meetings between the program intervention team and the women ;
- Increase women's digital literacy by promoting their access to virtual tools, which becomes a transferable skill in professional life;
- Make sure to be able to transfer the meetings to the telephone if the women were not comfortable with the means of telecommunication offered, which forced the program and the team to be flexible in terms of intervention;
- Ensure that women continue to have access to program activities; since the program was first designed face-to-face, it was necessary to adapt quickly. Here too, it was necessary to listen to women and favour hybrid tools (a physical tool and digital support).

These adaptations have fostered several positive spin-offs. The adaptation experience has forced a change in the program which, first offered in Montreal, can now be offered in all MH2s in Quebec, all aimed at supporting socio-professional autonomy. The transfer of the program to virtual has also allowed for greater schedule flexibility for workers and women. The collaborations developed by implementing these adaptation strategies have also enabled the partnership team to open up new areas of support, whether in terms of training, research, or policies and services offered to women.



Q&A with speakers and audience

Question 1: How do you overcome/describe the difficulties in reaching vulnerable populations? Has there been a break between individuals providing support and these populations since COVID?

Difficulties in reaching vulnerable populations are partly explained by the overstretch caused by the pandemic. They can also be understood by the gap between university research and the needs in the field. Indeed, this discrepancy can be explained by institutional positioning, favouring a quantitative vision of research rather than a qualitative one, which leads to a distancing, especially for students, from the role of engaged researcher. However, carrying out a survey requires both understanding the particular context of one's field, but also being able to access it. The field survey also requires being credible in the eyes of its respondents, which requires time and trust. If this research positioning is beneficial in reducing the fracture effect caused by the pandemic, it must be supported by the institutions. A mutual relationship between the researcher and the field is necessary.

However, it is important to mention that the pandemic experience has not always been synonymous with difficulties. Indeed, when the collaboration was effective beforehand between the different actors, the divide was less significant. Chantal Lepire cited the *Chevaliere en mission* program as an example. She explained the success of the partnership program through the alignment and constant collaboration between the intervention team and the research team. The women participating in the project were supported throughout their journey by people working in close collaboration. However, she mentioned that this was not the case in another research program in which she collaborated; young people are particularly difficult to reach, despite the communication between researchers and workers.

Question 2: Although politicians are already mentioning "post-pandemic", the reality of community organizations remains difficult and rooted in the effects of the pandemic. How is this issue present over time? After the adaptation work during the pandemic, how do you see the rest of things? Are you going to keep certain adaptations in your current practices?

For some community organizations, there has never been a "normal" situation. This "advantage" ensures that practices are constantly being adapted and that work continues to be done, whether it is subsidized or not.

Regarding pandemic temporality, it is possible to observe a certain detachment (or distancing) from institutions. The post-pandemic period will have to put forward a recomposition of identity and (distended) links with the university. This detachment has been observed in settings where telework and physical ties have been lost. Yet the pandemic has also enabled the creation of broader relationships, particularly at the response level. If the link with the institution has been dissolved, several links with users in the field have been created, due to the openness generated by the transfer of activities online. This has created a relationship with communities that would not have been reached otherwise, even if the link remains limited all the same.

Regarding the adaptations, some will undoubtedly remain after the pandemic. In particular, certain types of projects between the university and the communities have been strengthened, whether in terms of the recognition of these collaborations or the work of the various units that can provide funding to maintain these collaborations.



Also, the recognition of university departments to invest in community internship environments remains a success to be maintained after the pandemic. Even if work placements have resumed, with their ability to accommodate a large number of students, it is important to continue to discuss with peers in order to promote the relevance of community placements, both for students and for the organizations themselves. The promotion of a non-extractive methodology in research is another success; the relational approach should be retained and put forward, with the necessary supervision to train committed researchers.

To close the discussion, four wishes for the future, with regard to the recognition of the respective roles of all, are put forward:

- First, knowing that the role of interface and mediation officers serving communities has been crucial during the pandemic, we hope that the resources to consolidate the respective teams can also be improved, since some services are still precarious and underfunded;
- Second, we want to maintain this speed of execution by the granting authorities and this flexibility in order to meet specific needs, beyond the pandemic ;
- Third, we want the needs of community circles, which have greatly increased with the pandemic, to be heard and supported by institutions and leaders;
- Finally, we want the various approaches created to be shared and better known, in order to be able to respond to future crises in an adequate and consolidated manner. Recognition of the work done must not be forgotten.

Question 3: About recognition, do you think there is enough in the work you do?

We must recognize the work done. That said, recognition must also go through the support of the institutions for the work carried out in the field. Issues of support and recognition are often linked to the priorities of institutions, in line with their political agenda. However, the institutions must endorse the projects and the subjects, even when these are judged to be too “political”. Otherwise, collaboration between research and the field loses its meaning.

