

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation:

Uniting universities, students and communities in new learning

Discovering new value in education

A university education is considered valuable, although not always immediately relevant, by young students and the communities into which they graduate. However, the initiative of a private foundation may be making post-secondary schooling more effective and stimulating a new era of personal and community appreciation for learning. The innovation launched by The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is also enabling publicly-funded post-secondary institutions to discover new values for themselves in their communities. It is typical of the role that private foundations often play in Canada, fostering creative solutions that no government could achieve as effectively nor the private sector would be expected to provide.

A philanthropic case study: McConnell Foundation and community service learning

In the late 90s, The McConnell Foundation began to focus its funding for universities on initiatives specifically related to the process of teaching, and to strengthening the links between academe and communities. In 2004, based on widespread consultation and international observation, the Foundation funded the entry of several Canadian universities into university-based community service learning. The initial results have been highly positive.

Community service learning is both a philosophy and a style of teaching that integrates academ-



Promoting learning across the country

ic learning and voluntary community service. Its objectives are balanced between additional academic goals such as fostering student leadership, and strengthening civil society through service. As the University of Calgary explains its community service learning approach, "our faculty values learning that is relevant to society, learning that has practical applications in political, social and workplace life. At the same time, through a university education, students are not merely training themselves for careers; they are learning to become life-long learners and valuable citizens." The university offers 11 different avenues of courses linked to community service including bringing fine art experiences to inner-city groups, tutoring marginalized groups, applying survey research

to local groups' issues, and offering urban design solutions to neighbourhoods facing transition. At Nipissing University in North Bay, students are specifically directed to "learn from the community" as well as in the classroom through designated or self-selected and university-approved community projects. At St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, a pioneering school in the field, research indicates students in service learning develop increased motivation, increased ability to apply classroom knowledge to real problems, increased ability to work with others, and a deeper understanding of the complexity of social issues.

The practise of university education which includes communi-

Continued on next page.

Continued from previous page.

ty experience ("curriculum-based community service learning") is well-established in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. But in Canadian schools, before the McConnell initiative, it rarely progressed beyond co-op learning programmes that simply put classroom training into the field. The McConnell Foundation took the unusual step of inviting proposals to explore community-based learning -- and was overwhelmed by the response from nearly four dozen universities. The Foundation granted five-year support to five projects. Within 18 months and after a continued influx of proposals, the Foundation's outside advisors named another five projects, to ensure a diversity of experiences and to attract the attention and emulation of additional universities. Several of the universities and community groups who made unsuccessful proposals to McConnell discovered such value in their new collaboration that they persisted in

seeking alternative funding and established their own programs, on a smaller scale.

The private foundation difference

The McConnell Foundation's overall \$10 million investment is the kind of well-considered gamble on bettering Canadian society that private foundations are uniquely able to take. "It's consistent with our mission to engage Canadians more in their communities. We did it not because we were convinced it was certain to succeed but because it was worth investing in that possibility," explains Foundation president Tim Brodhead.

The exploration of innovative teaching does not attract funding from granting councils, ministries and other sources the way classic research proposals do, says Cheryl Rose, executive director of the now nationwide Canadian Association of Community Service Learning. "If McConnell had not put money forward, motivated people to pull together, assess their own

potential, and commit, ... that nascent potential in Canada would not have been realized as it is today." The Foundation's funding legitimized the concept, induced other funders to consider similar proposals, and has touched off a wave of community service learning programs. At least 10 per cent of all Canadian universities have such programs now, says Rose, and her organization fields continuous inquiries from institutions, community groups and education ministries.

McConnell's Brodhead says his Foundation is particularly gratified by the spontaneous expansion of community service learning, beyond what the Foundation funded. He is delighted with the early signs that when the McConnell funds terminate, the participating universities will themselves sustain the programs for the best of reasons: community service learning has been proven valuable and an essential part of academe's social responsibility and educational opportunity.