

# From the Ground Up: Critical Reflections About Co-Constructing A New Non-Profit Sector Undergraduate Certificate

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Résumé de l'article

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## From the Ground Up: Critical Reflections About Co-Constructing a New Non-Profit Sector Undergraduate Certificate

Gloria C. DeSantis, Angela N. Tremka

**ABSTRACT** Community-university engagement is a growing field and takes many different forms. We explain and reflect critically on a community-university developmental process that we created to design a new non-profit studies undergraduate certificate. A steering group comprising students, non-profit organizations (NPOs), and faculty guided our process. We adopted a community-based, emergent, multi-tactic process that went from testing an idea, to collectively designing and co-constructing the certificate to building momentum to operationalize it, over an 18-month period. Our strategy was based on the convergence of three main bodies of literature—community-engaged scholarship, citizen participation, and naturalistic inquiry—and included seven tactics: community-university dialogues, e-communication, interactive booths in public places, presentations and learning circles, student research projects, student and NPO surveys, and pilot-testing undergraduate courses. The outcomes of our process revealed strong community support for a new certificate, which was then co-constructed and later approved by the University Senate. Today, five years later, we reflect on the ebb and flow of our process, in particular: emergent design challenges, the space-in-between, community/university black boxes, ownership, and facilitation work. This exploration contributes to the knowledge base on co-construction processes.

**KEYWORDS** community-university engagement, emergent design, knowledge exchange-creation-mobilization, non-profits, curriculum design

We embarked on a community-university engagement (C-UE) process to answer the question, is there interest and support for a new non-profit sector undergraduate certificate and if so, what should the certificate look like? Now that the certificate has been in place for five years and continues to have students enrolled in it, we thought the time was right to reflect on our co-construction journey.

Today, the certificate comprises five courses including a list of core competencies deemed important in Saskatchewan by non-profit organization (NPO) participants. Statistics show there were 64 students enrolled in the certificate (as of January 2022) and that 46 students have graduated with this credential (as of October, 2021). These numbers are credible for a small liberal arts institution like Luther College at the University of Regina. Thus, this program continues to thrive, be guided by a steering group, and have ongoing C-UE activities.

This process to design a new undergraduate certificate was based on an understanding of the benefits that occur when universities and communities interact. This paper illuminates our community-based journey from exploring an idea to collecting design ideas to co-designing curricula to then building momentum to implement these new ideas in Saskatchewan. This article is a macro-level overview of our journey—the process we undertook to develop the certificate.

“Community-university engagement is one of the strongest trends cutting across our university campuses” (Hall, 2011, p. 5). In Canada, community-university relationships are now considered vital. There is recognition of the benefits of “eroding barriers between the ivory tower and the community surrounding it” (Ratsoy, 2016, p. 77). When we contemplate eroding the barriers between communities and universities, we can imagine the value of being porous wherein both can benefit from the presence of the other (Castle, 2014). Interestingly, both have always been present to each other—often sharing the same physical space—but closed off from each other because of perceived impermeable walls. Siemens (2012) and Anyon and Fernández (2007) note that the university can be perceived by communities to be a “black box” of complexity and confusion given the many players, departments, tensions, politics, and processes. However, for many university faculty who have never worked in/with communities, the same perception of communities as “black boxes” can exist. C-UE provides the opportunity for interaction to better deconstruct these “black boxes”. There is much literature espousing the benefits of C-UE for universities, students, and communities (Barth, 2018; Harkavy & Hartley, 2012; Renwick et al., 2020). It is to each one of these that we now turn.

Some scholars note that community engagement may be both a “matter of survival” for universities as well as “an urgent responsibility” given the complexity of societal problems requiring resolution (Petter, 2017, p. 1). Universities are uniquely positioned to enable transformation to a socially just and sustainable world (Strandberg, 2017, p. 6). Some argue that universities have an obligation to the public; universities should share knowledge about best practices but also create spaces for diverse groups of people to gather to dialogue about public issues (Ratsoy, 2016; Stein, 2007). Indeed, universities are increasingly concerned about being sensitive to, and involved in, local and regional issues (e.g., medically underserved neighbourhoods) (Powell, 2013; Vogt, 2016). With this trend, university researchers are now viewing community members as active partners, co-participants, and knowledge-holders as opposed to passive subjects to be studied (Lewington, 2017; Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Many universities in Canada today (e.g., University of British Columbia and University of Alberta)—including ours—articulate the importance of these community relationships in their strategic plans.

The benefits of C-UE for students are also widely cited in existing literature (Barth, 2018). Student capacity building is noted in our university’s strategic plan. Within this strategic initiative is the need to develop engaging volunteer opportunities for students, but more specifically to offer these opportunities within the context of full-credit courses so that students can develop real-world knowledge and skills. Community-engaged learning is known to create students who have a sense of agency, who are empowered to build their own livelihoods and those of others, who become active in their communities, and who have a sense that they can make progressive societal change (Hicks Peterson, 2009). Community-engaged learning encourages

a shift “from knowledge as self-interest and private good to knowledge as civic responsibility and public work” (Hicks Peterson, 2009, p. 543). Further, students want meaningful real-world experiences that support their learning (Lewington, 2017) but that also prepare them for careers (Vogt, 2016).

Finally, the benefits for communities are clear. When universities and communities work together, community problems can be solved (Powell, 2013; Vogt, 2016). Community people working in non-profit organizations (NPOs) experience real-world problems and therefore have intimate knowledge of them. Their experiences and knowledge when combined with those of university faculty members and students can result in the resolution of problems. Communities today are asserting their expectations that their universities serve the public good by reconfiguring the ivory tower (Lewington, 2017).

This kind of C-UE work matters because community engagement is a requirement in most universities’ and funding agencies’ (e.g., Tri-Council funders) strategic plans, thus sharing experiences and knowledge is important. Further, there is a vast literature on C-UE (e.g., community service-learning, partnership development, and fixing local problems such as food insecurity) and in many disciplines (e.g., engineering, business, nursing, etc.), but there is a dearth of material on building undergraduate programs with and specifically about the non-profit/charitable sector in Canada. In addition, in our literature review we found little information about the involvement of students on curriculum advisory groups in C-UE processes. We believe that if we want NPOs to participate in our courses (e.g., as co-instructors or co-creators of student assignments), then they should be involved from the beginning. Today, this undergraduate certificate continues to be guided by an advisory group comprising students, NPOs, and faculty, which seeks to ground the evolution of the curriculum in the real world.

### **The Project**

The rationale for our community-university project was three-fold. First, we understood the multiple student-community-university benefits described above. Second, we knew there was not a non-profit studies undergraduate certificate offered at any Saskatchewan universities or colleges despite the fact that NPO academic programs exist across Canada and the USA. Third, we were aware of a looming labour force deficit in the non-profit sector (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, 2010), thus there was a need to educate students about the non-profit sector with the hope that some would eventually seek out careers in this area.

Our project began with seed money from Luther College in 2015. Over the course of 18 months, a diverse group of NPOs, students, and faculty participated in a series of community-university dialogues with the goal of testing the idea of creating a new non-profit sector studies undergraduate certificate and envisioning what it should look like. We understood that by creating opportunities for conversations among these three groups dynamic and mutually beneficial relationships as well as reciprocal learning could ensue (Nasmyth et al., 2016). It is noteworthy that our process was *not* about securing “partnerships” with NPOs. Partnership building was seen as premature as this was an ideas testing and design process.

A twelve-member steering group formed to guide our process. The steering group comprised equal numbers of students, community members, and faculty (i.e., four of each). The steering group shaped and guided the work at monthly meetings; it was the glue that held the process together. Our project ended with University Senate approval of a new undergraduate certificate in June 2016.

Before going further, it is important to explain our positionality in this developmental co-design process. We were a coordinated pair whose main function was to both serve and inspire the steering group; our tasks were to build momentum, keep it going and tend to the logistics of our multi-pronged process (e.g., organize meetings, transcribe meeting notes). We were simultaneously facilitators, participants, observers, and writers. Gloria DeSantis was a pracademic—a “boundary spanner” (Hollweck et al., 2021) who worked in NPOs for 20 years before returning to university to complete a doctoral degree and begin a faculty position. Angela Tremka was an undergraduate student who chose to do a practicum with this project. She has since graduated and now works at a non-profit in Regina. We both had a fundamental belief in the important role the non-profit sector plays in our society, which underpinned our motivation to undertake this co-construction process.

### **Context**

Our C-UE work focused on the non-profit sector. NPOs—also known as the voluntary sector, the third sector, or the community-based sector—exist to serve a public benefit through the work of both staff and volunteers, are self-governing and operate independently of governments and the private sector, and do not distribute profits to members (Hall et al., 2004). Saskatchewan has a diverse non-profit sector comprising 14 different types of organizations (e.g., art/culture, social services, etc.); there is an estimated 8,000 registered NPOs in Saskatchewan serving a population of approximately one million people spread over 600,000 square kilometres (DeSantis, 2013).

Literature and webinars/podcasts produced over the past decade in Canada reveal concerns about the future of the non-profit sector especially with the recent impacts of COVID (e.g., Akingbola, 2020; Barroll, 2022). Our project was ultimately about supporting the healthy evolution of a sector that is known to provide public benefits in ways that neither the private sector nor the government sector do (Mulholland et al., 2011). Over the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in labour force and human capital development by those working and volunteering in the sector as well as those that fund these organizations. Some literature points to the need for a more formal and co-ordinated approach for enhancing the sector especially given demographic and other trends in Canada (e.g., a large cohort of staff are expected to retire from the sector within the next decade, Indigenous people make up a growing portion of the labour force) (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, 2011, 2012; McIsaac et al., 2013). Finally, there has been an increase in awareness by all levels of government about the importance of the sector in society, governance, and democracy (Laforest, 2011; Mulholland et al., 2011). With this growth in awareness has come interest in educating and training CEOs, program managers, and front-line workers as is currently done in both the public and private sectors (Hall et al., 2005; HR Council, 2010).

While three pillars constitute our society—the government sector, the private sector, and the non-profit sector (Mulholland et al., 2011)—the non-profit sector has traditionally lacked a formal, coordinated academic presence in Saskatchewan. While there are currently strong University of Regina links to the business community (through the Paul Hill School of Business), to government (through the Johnson-Shoyama School of Public Policy), and to some NPO sub-sectors such as human services (through the Faculties of Social Work and Nursing) and sport/recreation (through the Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies), there was no academic program specifically focused on the non-profit sector.

### **Our Journey**

The following three sections—engagement strategy and key concepts, co-construction strategy, and some outcomes from our journey—describe our process. These sections provide the philosophical foundation for our work and the choices we made as well as the practical aspects of the strategy and tactics we employed. We also provide some highlights, at a macro-level, of some outcomes of our process. We explain the methods that we wove together and the people that participated in our C-UE process.

#### ***Our engagement strategy and key concepts: Operationalizing co-construction***

Our community-university project blended multiple tactics in a community-based strategy that prioritized the participation of NPOs and students, not just faculty. Our strategy embraced democratic engagement instead of the long-standing technocratic-oriented, university engagement model “of academic expert-centered, deficit-based, hierarchical relationships” (Kniffin et al., 2020, p. 2). Rather, our relationships were “grounded in democratic values and commitments that position everyone involved as co-educators, co-learners, and co-generators of knowledge” (Kniffin et al., 2020, p. 2)—the focus was on co-creation and co-learning among equals while recognizing that relationships among participants are complex and dynamic. Operationalizing this approach to co-production required us to make trusting relationships a priority, for all participants to be involved at the earliest stage of a process, for all voices to be heard equally, and for value to be placed on all perspectives (Tembo et al., 2021). We adopted the term “co-construction” as used by Vaillancourt and Aubry (2017) to label our process; they used the term democratic co-construction to refer to their participatory process wherein hundreds of NPOs worked together with government staff to design new legislation.

Our student-NPO-faculty steering group was the central entity that guided our process. This process was emergent, non-linear, and synergistic with multi-way dialogues taking place throughout the project. The Steering Group was tasked with ensuring all voices, but especially those from NPOs, were heard equally throughout the process and included in the final framework for the undergraduate certificate. This was a major challenge that we confronted at the outset because we were aware “that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 304).

Before presenting our community-engaged mixed-tactic process, some foundational material and key concepts require explanation. The foundation of our C-UE project was

formed through the union of three main bodies of literature: community-engaged scholarship, citizen participation, and naturalistic inquiry. The key concepts were: emergent design, power and voice, knowledge exchange-creation-mobilization, diversity and sensitivity, and time/timing. Taken together, these formed the foundation upon which our co-construction journey unfolded. It is to each of these that we now turn.

First, community-engaged scholarship (CES) informed our work. CES is a systematic, rigorous, documented, and replicable process of collaborative discovery that is entrenched in the real-world and results in mutually beneficial relationships as well as collectively created products that are public, peer-reviewed, and made available to others for use and adaptation for positive change (Hatala et al., 2017; Seifer, 2003). These products can include public policies and programs, students' videos, and artistic works. The five main values that our steering group worked to embrace are: empowerment that encompasses self-determination and features increasing control and voice for those who are usually silenced; supportive relationships are inherently co-operative and based on a belief in equality among everyone involved in a process; social justice oriented in that knowledge that is co-produced is action-oriented toward positive and equitable social change; ongoing reciprocal learning among all participants; and respect for the diversity of "various perspectives, beliefs and norms" (Ochocka et al., 2010, p. 5).

Second, the much older literature on civic engagement and citizen participation as traditionally defined in urban planning literature also informed our work. In urban planning literature, governments are known to "consult" communities about public policies, public programs, and more recently municipal budgets but consulting does not require governments to adopt what communities recommend. Before C-UE became a trend, universities too were more involved in "consultation" than collaboration and power sharing. In a classic work by Arnstein (1969), "consultation" was described as a type of participation wherein citizens are invited to meetings to voice their perspectives, but "they lack the power to ensure that their views will be heeded" and there is seldom any follow-up or meaningful and ongoing interactions (p. 217). This process was the midpoint on Arnstein's classic "ladder of citizen participation" (p. 216). Those with the power to organize meetings had the power to decide what information from citizens to keep and what to discard. Arnstein promoted the notion that at the top of the ladder, authentic citizen participation embraces full citizen power, control, and decision-making. Our steering group was interested in reaching beyond consultation to listen carefully, especially to community voices, to create feedback loops and post dialogue proceedings on our website (<https://www.luthercollege.edu/university/academics/luther-programs/voluntary-sector-studies-network/research>) that explicitly contained community voices in order to encourage ongoing conversations—essentially creating space for the co-construction of ideas. Recent renditions of citizen participation strategies include additional elements such as trust, collective problem-solving, co-learning, and governance (Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015).

Third, naturalistic inquiry informed our work (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Emergent design is a central element of naturalistic inquiry. Adopting an "emergent design" means the design of the project will unfold as time goes on because not enough can be known *a priori* to completely map out the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 208). Emergent design requires

that a process be fluid, non-linear, and based on iterative loops. Negotiated outcomes is also central to naturalistic inquiry. “Negotiated outcomes” refers to “facts and interpretations that will ultimately find their way into a report [and] must be subjected to scrutiny by respondents who earlier acted as sources for the information”; critical feedback loops are required to ensure that reality has been reconstructed appropriately (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 211). Finally, and linked to negotiated outcomes, is “trustworthiness” of the results and the requirement for “member-checking” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is where credibility is established; when a provisional report is written and released for public scrutiny and checked for accuracy (e.g., errors are corrected, clarifications are added, new information is invited) before finalization.

A number of concepts were central to the implementation of our C-UE strategy, including power and voice, knowledge exchange-creation-mobilization, recognition of diversity, and awareness of time and timing:

- Our process explicitly called into question power, control, and voice. As already noted, Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) state that typically university faculty have the power and voice to identify, define, design, analyze, and conclude projects. Often, this is not questioned as faculty head out into communities to do their work.
- From the beginning, our goal was knowledge exchange-creation-mobilization among the three main groups of participants (e.g., faculty, students, and NPOs); “knowledge creation is not the monopoly of academics” (Hall, 2011, p. 13). Our C-UE process was built on the notion that knowledge can be co-constructed by all participants throughout various phases in a process.
- Our process required sensitivity, humility, and for us to know that communities comprise diverse people with unique cultural traditions and ways of knowing.
- Time and timing is not often deemed worthy of scholarly discussion; however, creating time and space to develop relationships and centralize reciprocity at the beginning and throughout a process is essential (Goulet, 2011; Nichols et al., 2014).

We reflect in more depth on these concepts in the critical reflections section below.

### ***Our co-construction strategy comprised multiple tactics***

This foundation and these key concepts formed our co-construction strategy. Seven main tactics were operationalized over an 18-month period: community-university dialogues, e-communication, interactive booths in public places, presentations and learning circles, student research projects, student and NPO surveys, and pilot-testing undergraduate courses. Table 1 provides a summary of these tactics.

The emergent nature of our project is best demonstrated with an example. We initiated e-communication and set up a website at the beginning of our project; these were in existence until the end of the co-construction work when the undergraduate certificate was approved by



the University Senate. The Koffee Klatches ran for eight months in the middle of the process and then surveys were completed during the last few months given the results of the Klatches and student research projects.

Triangulation of information, based in qualitative research methods, was a technique we used to analyze collected material (e.g., Koffee Klatch discussions). Triangulation incorporates evidence collected from multiple avenues (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We operationalized Lincoln and Guba's (1985) process of continuously building on new information each day using inductive techniques so that insights and gaps could be pursued on subsequent days. This is the essence of our iterative loops.

**Table 1. Summary of tactics**

TACTICS	Brief Description
1. Community-university dialogues	A public launch was held at Luther College at the University of Regina (N=60 participants) followed by eight intentional dialogue opportunities (i.e., Koffee Klatches) held primarily in community locations using iterative feedback loops. A Koffee Klatch, kaffeeklatsch, is a German word, that is "an informal social gathering for coffee and conversation" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). Koffee Klatches were gatherings that provided the opportunity for students, NPOs, and faculty to dialogue. Some of the same participants attended numerous Koffee Klatches, but new people also attended. Each of these community dialogues had between five and 35 participants. Transcripts of each dialogue session were created and posted on the website for transparency purposes. Thematic analyses were completed on these transcripts; these reports were posted on the website. These became the basis for the next dialogue session.
2. E-communication	Regular e-updates occurred: on our website, on social media, via monthly e-newsletters and via announcements sent out to those on our e-list (N=220 on the e-list after one year). E-communications were important tools for transparency; everyone who was interested could stay informed about all aspects of our process. We tracked social media metrics each month and e-newsletter growth, which gave us a sense of our community reach.
3. Interactive booths	The booths focused on informal discussions about careers and search engines for volunteer/job opportunities. We took notes about the number of conversations and topics that occurred. These took place at the University of Regina Career and Volunteer Fairs, Heritage Saskatchewan Trade Show, and Neil Squire Society Job Fair.

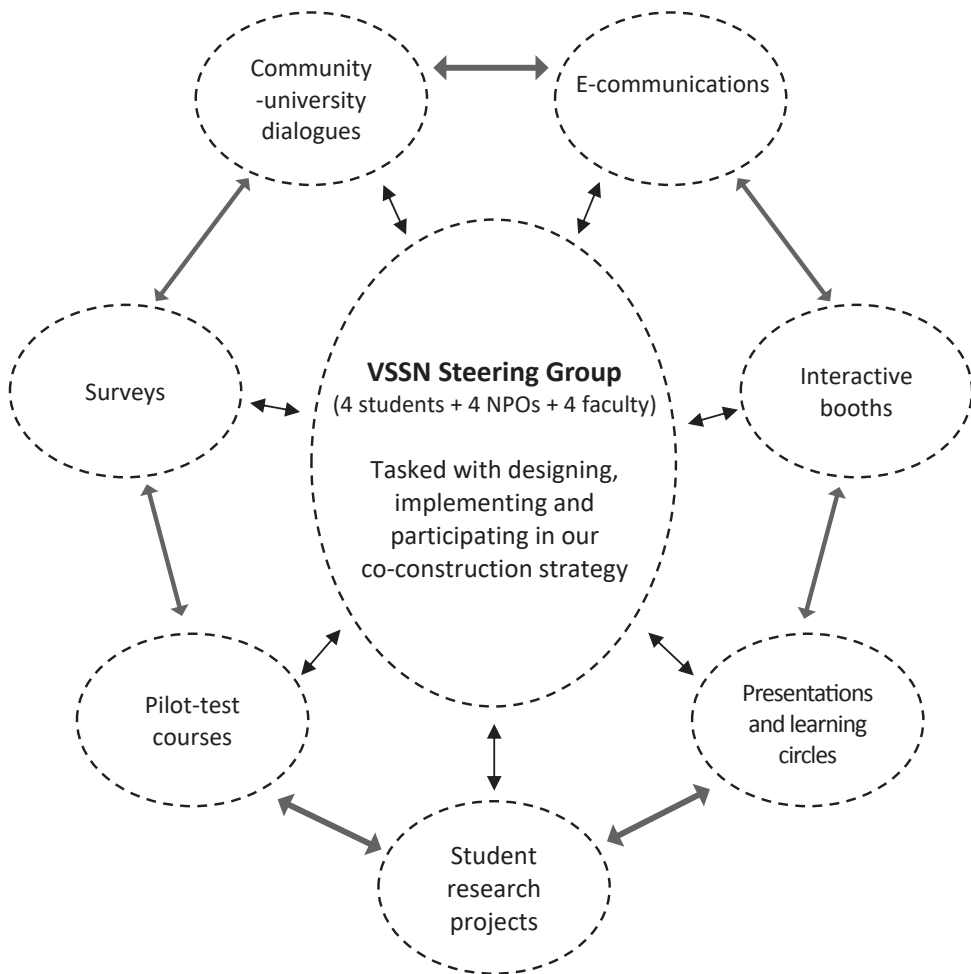
4. Presentations and learning circles	Steering group members—including students—presented some preliminary ideas about an undergraduate certificate based on the Koffee Klatch results, asked participants questions, and invited them to become engaged in our process. The following took place: meetings with provincial government Assistant Deputy Ministers and Ministry of Parks Culture & Sport Executive Directors, Learning Circles for faculty, SaskCulture Inc., and Museums Association of Saskatchewan. Field notes were written and analyzed for themes.
5. Student research projects	In pilot-testing of courses, students completed: an environmental scan of 70 programs offered at post-secondary institutions across Canada (students used the Charity Village list); an environmental scan of professional development courses offered by non-profits in Saskatchewan; and scans of literature in the fields of non-profit labour force trends, millennials, trends in higher education, curricular standards.
6. Pilot-tested undergraduate courses	Interdisciplinary liberal arts courses using real-world-real-time NPO projects were pilot-tested. Focus groups were held with students at the end of the courses. Course instructors analyzed both the procedural and substantive nature of weekly modules as the courses unfolded. Analyses were discussed at steering group meetings.
7. Surveys to collect data	Collected data from students on campus and NPOs off campus included face-to-face surveys with 100 students conducted at the Student Centre and an online survey of NPOs staff/volunteers (N=59) who participated in one or more of the Koffee Klatches with a focus on rank-ordering possible new courses, the skills and knowledge required of students, etc. Both quantitative and open-ended questions were included.

Figure 1 below shows our conceptualization of our C-UE strategy. Each circle contains one tactic and is formed by a dotted line because we viewed each tactic to be porous and blending with the others; they appear as separate entities in the figure for the sake of explanation. These dotted lines also signify transparency, from all angles of the process, which we believe reflects our philosophy.

The middle of the figure contains the steering group, which comprised equal numbers (four each) of students, NPO staff, and faculty. This circle too is dotted to reflect the transparency the steering group practiced.

The two-way arrows demonstrate flow among the tactics and the steering group. These arrows reveal the dynamic non-linear process that unfolded. These two-way arrows indicate information and advice sharing, flows of ideas, feedback loops, and postings of reports and proceedings on the website. For example, what was found in the student research projects was posted on the website and results shared at subsequent community-university dialogues as well as at the steering group table.

Finally, and most importantly in Figure 1 is the “space-in-between”. In diagrams, we often explain the visible parts but not the invisible parts. We believe it is essential to make visible the space-in-between in our process. The “space-in-between is where knowledge is constructed and shared” among people interacting with each other (Goulet, 2011, p. 180); it is a place where synergy happens. Being in, and interacting in this space, paves the way for the formation of relationships, power-sharing, and the recognition of unique contributions from diverse groups of people. Fundamentally, C-UE is about inviting people to enter the space-in-between (adapted from Goulet, 2011). This space is simultaneously individual and interpersonal and it can be physical, virtual, social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. Trust, reciprocity, and collaboration evolve in this space and usually go hand-in-hand (DeSantis, 2014; Nichols et al., 2014).



*Figure 1.* Our community-engaged strategy was grounded in multiple tactics

### *Some outcomes from our process*

In the preceding sections, we provided an overview of the C-UE process that we created to collectively explore the question: is there interest and support for a new non-profit sector undergraduate certificate and if so, what should the certificate look like? Despite the fact our focus in this paper has been on our process/journey, we offer some highlights of some outcomes here.

Based on all the community-university dialogues, no one said “don’t do it”, but that we should move forward carefully to ensure we did not duplicate anything that was already being offered by NPOs in the community (e.g., some NPOs offer professional development courses). Additionally, our analyses indicated there is student demand, that students will take courses and will enroll in an undergraduate certificate if it is made available (DeSantis, 2015). It was early on in the process—approximately five months into our community meetings—when we realized we could start designing this undergraduate certificate because those who participated said we should, but that it should be shaped by the results of the engagement process. Table 2 highlights some of the outcomes.

**Table 2. Some outcomes from the various tactics**

Tactics	Outcomes
1. Community-university dialogues	Community-university dialogue found: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it best not to duplicate what the NPO sector is already offering in Saskatchewan.</li> <li>• a diversity of NPOs indicated interest in participating in knowledge sharing through new courses (e.g., team teaching courses, mentorships, and co-creating assignments).</li> <li>• thematic analysis led to a list of seven core competencies required of students finishing an undergraduate certificate: general knowledge about the NPO sector; capabilities in areas such as governance and administration; methods and analytic capacities; personal capabilities such as adaptive capacity to work in complex, messy environments; cross-cultural, interpersonal and communications capabilities; cognitive and critical thinking including the ability to think reflexively and independently; generic skills.</li> </ul>
2. E-communication	Posted all Koffee Klatch proceedings, research reports and career links on our website as well as sent out monthly e-newsletters and announcements to our e-list (N=220 on list after one year); used social media almost daily.
3. Interactive booths	Information about careers and job website search engines were shared and field notes were taken at each booth. The booths had a total of 194 visitors.

4. Presentations and learning circles	Six meetings took place with a total of 191 participants, thus government representatives, NPO staff/volunteers and faculty learned about the NPO sector and offered suggestions about the undergraduate certificate. We were then invited to present at additional community meetings after our project was approved by the University Senate.
5. Student research projects, literature reviews, and curricular standards	Four major environmental scans were completed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a scan showed 70 NPO programs offered in post-secondary institutions across Canada. Some appear to have been suspended while others were successfully restructured and new programs opened, but none were in Saskatchewan (Tremka &amp; Karman, 2015).</li> <li>• a scan of professional development courses offered by NPOs to NPO practitioners in Saskatchewan showed there were many.</li> <li>• a scan of literature of the following fields was completed: labour force trends in the non-profit sector, characteristics of millennials, trends in higher education.</li> <li>• reviewed Non-profit Academic Centres Council standards.</li> </ul>
6. Pilot-tested courses	Twenty students enrolled in two undergraduate courses that were pilot tested. They engaged in cross-disciplinary, real-world-real-time NPO projects for course credit. Students' assignments had double impact: NPOs in the community received copies of their assignments to use and students received course credit.
7. Surveys	Two major surveys completed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students surveyed on campus (N=100) indicated: 57% are already involved in working/volunteering for NPOs; 44% are interested in learning more about the sector; 71% said the sector is relevant/very relevant to their careers; and 46% would be interested in enrolling in a new university certificate (Tremka, 2015).</li> <li>• NPO off-campus online survey (N=59) revealed: a prioritized list of new courses; proposed names for the new program; a prioritized list of core competencies; a serious need to understand and adopt First Nations history, spirituality, and treaty rights material (Billan, 2015).</li> </ul>

The results indicated there was much interest in a new undergraduate certificate. The events, presentations, and interactive booths that we hosted were attended by people from diverse NPOs (e.g., Multicultural Council and Nature Saskatchewan) who were interested in talking about and contributing to the development of learning opportunities for students. Participants indicated their support for new program ideas—in fact, they offered much advice to this end. Further, the pilot-course students indicated their interest and support. One student stated:

The course opened my eyes to this enormous sector which is essentially invisible even though it plays such a significant role in so many aspects of our lives. I enjoyed

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taking this course for the diverse group of students it brought together. Each of us came from different educational backgrounds and faculties which led to a more enriching learning environment for everyone. This course highlighted numerous career opportunities, which I have further explored as I aim to find employment in the sector upon graduation. (undergraduate student involved in pilot course, 2015)

In summary, given current literature as well as participants' sharing during community dialogues, it is a sector with important sustainability challenges. In general, we heard about the lack of stable funding, a decreasing number of volunteers, a projected labour force deficit, and ageing infrastructure, which cumulatively threaten the survival of the sector. However, the sector is also very resilient and adaptable to change. Further, we learned about demand for professional development and university courses. Based on the Koffee Klatches, steering group meetings, the cross-Canada environmental scan, and student surveys, there is a demand for learning opportunities in Saskatchewan. However, we also heard that the certificate must ensure it is building on a network of learning opportunities that already exist in the province—its aim should be to fill the gaps.

Our work coalesced into a proposal for a new undergraduate certificate that was publicly circulated on campus and in the community. The proposal made its way through seven university committees to the University of Regina Senate where it was approved in June 2016. Further, our project won a sustainability award from the Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development. Our project was awarded its highest award, Outstanding Flagship Project, for its role in “Enabling Policy and Contributing to Capacity Development” in higher education.

### **Critical Reflections and Lessons Learned**

We chose to design this undergraduate certificate from the ground up, thus we confronted many challenges articulated by others when universities and communities decide to work together (e.g., who is defining the problem, who is the knowledge expert, etc.) (Key et al., 2019; Wenger et al., 2012). The ivory tower can be transformed and more porous walls can be constructed when reciprocal and truly mutually beneficial interactions are sought during C-UE processes. In this section we reflect on our experiences, share our learning, and offer suggestions to others wishing to embark on a co-construction journey.

First, we reflect on emergent design. Our emergent design process was grounded in the real world and we took our cues from and often prioritized community voices. Our process was a multi-layered collection of tactics (as per Table 1), many of which unfolded simultaneously, while others were implemented sequentially, yet were informed by each other. We learned that given this emergent design, ongoing individual and collective reflection was essential; we needed to be flexible and adaptive, yet facilitate a collective sense of moving forward. This dynamic nature with “numerous ebbs and flows over time” included shifting relations among participants (DeSantis, 2014, p. 65). We suggest to others pondering a similar undertaking that steering groups adopt what Pratt (2017) refers to as a “plan-act-reflect” approach wherein active listening is a key element. Hatala et al. (2017) state that respect, humility, and the

ability to listen are central characteristics in this kind of work—these shape behavior. Without intentional listening, participants would have left the process and not returned; we know this from previous experiences.

This emergent design process taught us a lot about letting go. But emergent design is paradoxically and simultaneously about letting go of control while still facilitating forward movement. Our project was about maximizing the community's sense of control as Arnstein (1969) described it. Our emergent mixed-tactic process capitalized on the multi-way sharing of ideas during dialogue sessions. We learned about how to share, collaborate, and grow ideas that were simultaneously about collective information gathering and thematic analyses as well as relationship building. We encourage faculty contemplating a C-UE process to learn about emergent design and spend time practicing “letting go” in other areas of their lives (e.g., being more spontaneous in their classrooms) before heading out to the community.

But with this letting go and multi-way sharing came some unanticipated moments. First, when we do not assume control, people will not wait until the end of a project to act on good ideas. For example, after one of the Koffee Klatches, one NPO modified its bylaws in order to permit students under the age of 19 to sit on its board of directors for shorter terms of office than what is typically expected (i.e., students' windows of commitment are often based on the eight-month university cycle of classes whereas board members terms of office are usually 2-3 years duration). A problem with control also surfaced as some Koffee Klatch participants did not want their proceedings posted on our website and we struggled with this because we wanted to hear their ideas, but we felt they had a right to privacy even though this did not fit the public and transparent process we had created. After further reflection, we now see that we should have created an option for them to withdraw their consent to participate, thus releasing them from the need to post their proceedings.

Letting things go while sitting shoulder-to-shoulder among these three groups—students, NPOs, faculty—influenced our thinking about “peer review”. Peer review is a process to validate research. It is a process where our peers review and assess our academic work, including the creation of knowledge. In our work, our peers were NPO staff, students, and faculty. Further, knowledge exchange-creation-mobilization by this group of peers was central to our project. Knowledge was created and re-shaped again and again by many different people during the life of our project; “knowledge creation is not the monopoly of academics” (Hall, 2011, p. 13). We learned that our series of iterative loops of knowledge-making became our “peer review” process. Public reviews by participants of both the dialogue proceedings and the thematic analyses were a form of “member-checking”, validation, and an indicator of “trustworthiness” (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We suggest that ample time be built into these kinds of processes for “peer review”.

Given the ebb and flow of our emergent design process, e-communication via the website, social media, e-newsletter and e-list was essential for keeping both participants and non-participants informed about past and future dialogue sessions as well as the progress being made. For example, all dialogue agendas, goals, and timelines as well as results were posted quickly (usually within two weeks) so that the feedback loop was short. Information was

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provided in advance so potential participants could inform themselves and plan to attend dialogues. Given the number of unique hits on our website as well as the other analytics noted above, our interest in creating an open door to the university seems to have occurred. We learned that our e-communication served four functions: it was a tool to aid transparency and accountability during our process; it portrayed the university as an open, approachable place; it supported participants' search for each other and relationship building; and it assisted in making the non-profit sector more visible. Thus, e-communication that is accessible to diverse groups, including rural/remote participants, should be prioritized in these C-UE processes.

Second, we reflect on the space-in-between and many questions about diversity/inclusion, participation, power/control, institutional culture, the formation of relationships during knowledge exchange, time and timing, and limitations. Given the inherent diversity of communities, we had to be open to daily listening and learning. Accompanying this listening and learning was our need to understand our own social location and the implications this had for our interactions with community members and how we drafted and shared reports. For example, we never filled in gaps in the notes from dialogue sessions, but rather took these unfinished reports back to the next community meeting and invited participants to complete the discussion while we captured their voices verbatim. Participants needed to see that we did not advance anything on the agenda without them.

We were aware that leaving our power/control at the door when we headed into the community would likely be problematic because in our society, community members often defer to academics in meetings (Fay, 2003). Power varies in degree and changes over time depending on the context, participants, and issues; this can be either positive or negative (Grabb, 2007). We learned that, similar to community-engaged scholarship literature, C-UE is collaborative: "community members and researchers share control of the research agenda through active and reciprocal involvement in the research design, implementation and dissemination" (Ochocka et al., 2010, p. 2). We suggest to other C-UE practitioners that they work to ensure all participants—not just faculty—see their voices and suggestions captured verbatim in written proceedings and then used in formal reports going forward (Pratt, 2017). When people see their words being used in concrete ways this is one form of power sharing and inclusion.

We learned that institutional culture helps to contextualize the space-in-between. Institutional culture (e.g., values, motivations, and behaviours) supports certain initiatives and collaborations to emerge as well as influence student development (Nichols et al., 2014; Taylor & Kahlke, 2017). Our project was directly influenced by the attitudes, values, and interpersonal skills of the people involved in the steering group (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Thus, steering groups for these kinds of C-UE projects should comprise people who are willing to learn, can see themselves as equals in the world (not people at the top of a hierarchy), and are willing to roll up their sleeves and help out with any task along the way.

Recall that in this space-in-between, knowledge can be exchanged-created-mobilized and relationships can be formed. We sat together in community meetings, exchanged knowledge with each other from our own perspectives, created new knowledge as discussions unfolded,



and then decided what all of this meant for moving forward. For example, in the discussion about the design of courses, NPOs offered information for curricula (e.g., service models and case studies) based on their front-line experiences with various groups, faculty offered thoughts about how to conceptualize material into four-month-long courses, while students pointed out the need for the course assignments that may be co-created to actually be do-able and affordable (e.g., students do not have to travel far from campus to complete their assignments). This approach is most closely aligned with focus group theory. Focus groups promote “among participants, synergy that often leads to the unearthing of information ... [and] facilitate the exploration of collective memories and shared stocks of knowledge that might seem trivial” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903), but end up being crucial building blocks. Further, with the emergent nature and iterative feedback loops built into our process, we learned about the inherent reciprocity of building on each other’s words and ideas throughout the process and that when C-UE processes are action-oriented, participants are highly motivated (Lantz et al., 2006, p. 239). For C-UE to be successful, faculty need to understand they are not the center of knowledge-making, but rather, part of a dynamic circle of diverse people engaged in iterative loops of creation.

In this space-in-between, we learned to pay attention to time and timing. We took time to form bonds, to talk about power/voice issues, to understand the local context, and then to collect and analyze information together. Taking time to share stories, share information, listen carefully to others’ perspectives, laugh together, work hard together, and celebrate were all important. The timing of various elements of work plans, rolling out different activities, and connecting with people who could help influence change, all required careful thought. When time and timing is handled well, it can enhance trust/rapport building among participants and pave the way for reciprocity and authentic collaboration (DeSantis, 2014; Nichols et al., 2014). Now we know that if we want NPOs to participate in our courses (e.g., as co-instructors, as co-creators of student assignments), then they should be involved from the beginning; we understand that co-creating something from scratch can lead to a sense of co-ownership and longer term, healthier relationships for ongoing work together.

Despite all of this, we remain curious about limitations, in particular, who did not fully enter—physically and psychologically—this space-in-between. Upon further reflection, we see that some of the very structures and engagement processes that we created may have excluded people from fully entering this space-in-between. For example, we did not create Koffee Klatches in campus locations where students may have felt more comfortable psychologically, but rather focused on using off-campus community locations in order to maximize the engagement of NPOs. There are student-run NPOs on our campus that we should have engaged in our process. We also did not engage Indigenous students specifically. Western ways of inviting and engaging students by hanging posters/flyers and spreading information through word-of-mouth via mainstream student groups and social media were likely not effective in engaging Indigenous students specifically. We should have intentionally worked at establishing relationships with Indigenous students via the ta-tawâw Student Centre on campus. Most of our C-UE work was completed shortly after the Truth and Reconciliation

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Commission of Canada (2015) released its 94 calls-to-action—many of these actions would have been instructive to us in the development of our engagement strategy. Finally, even though evaluations were completed after each community-university dialogue we believe we did not pay enough explicit attention to what was happening to students, NPOs, and faculty in this space-in-between. What were participants' actual experiences of inclusion/exclusion, the formation of trust, authentic relationships, and our attempt to create a democratically designed engagement process? We suggest that evaluation tools such as the Transformational Relationship Evaluation Scale (Kniffin et al., 2020) should be adopted in future processes in order to more fully understand the impacts of these C-UE processes on all participants.

In sum, as we stand back and ponder the complexities of emergent design and the space-in-between, we can say with certainty that our process was rife with skepticism, mystery, and “black boxes”. NPOs harboured skepticism about the university being able to design and implement a new undergraduate certificate within a year or two given its complex bureaucracy. One NPO participant stated in their evaluation form: “When I read the notes from the December dialogue, I was worried that the process may be ethereal or bogged down in minutia, but I was pleasantly surprised when it was practical” (February 2015 Koffee Klatch). This concern was not without merit as “given the size of university structures and processes, they are known to be very slow in decision-making and adopting change” (Horowitz Gassol, 2007). But 18 months after our process formally ended, a new undergraduate certificate had been approved by the University Senate! Additionally, some faculty harboured skepticism about the worthiness of the NPO sector as a scholarly field. We had to create a list of non-profit scholars in Canada (e.g., Jack Quarter, Laurie Mook, etc.) and a list of peer reviewed journals (e.g., International Journal for Third Sector Research, Canadian Association for Nonprofit and Social Economy Research Journal, etc.) that focused specifically on non-profits. These lists were presented at a faculty meeting as evidence that the non-profit sector is indeed a scholarly field. Thus, these black boxes are now likely a little less mysterious to participants.

As we draw our reflections to a close, we are left struggling with the question: might we be able to test our university's seriousness about eliminating the ivory tower by asking questions about ownership? Who actually owns the undergraduate certificate that was generated through a community-based process? Yes, the university is formally and legally responsible for administering the new undergraduate certificate, but who should be involved in its ongoing evolution and how? The university has a moral commitment to ensure the steering group continues with engagement of all three groups—students, NPOs and faculty—and that ongoing community-engagement processes carry on with a strong commitment to intentional listening. At this time, the University is showing its commitment to the certificate by continuing to fund a full-time coordinator whose job is to continue working with NPOs on the ongoing evolution of the certificate.

Finally, “facilitation” was an interesting concept upon which to reflect as co-authors. We set out to facilitate a wide open, community-university process that saw all participants as equal and contributing members of a complex process with many activities that ebbed and flowed over time. Respectful collaboration with community members was seen as primary. In order

to facilitate a process of “plan-act-reflect” (Pratt, 2017) with diverse participants, we had to juggle multiple roles and apply multiple skills. Throughout our process, we were supporters, translators, writers, negotiators, nurturers, celebrants, bridge-builders, co-ordinators, analyzers, and listeners. In our facilitation work we had to find the balance between process and product, between thinking and acting, between the needs of communities as well as students and faculty, between chaos and linearity, and between noise and silence. Others contemplating a C-UE process should think carefully about their talents/skills and their ability to juggle them as they prepare to enter the dynamics of emergent design and the space-in-between.

### **Conclusion**

Our process was grounded in our local community and fulfills a moral obligation of the modern-day university to serve the public good; this was our attempt to create a more porous academy. We began with an intentional goal of listening to community voices and ensuring those voices had a primary place in our dialogues, subsequent analyses, and the design of a new undergraduate certificate. This was an intentional effort to minimize power and control usually held by universities. A steering group continues to exist and community meetings continue to happen. A diversity of NPOs continue to be interested in and participate in C-UE activities regarding the evolution of the certificate, which is a good sign. As we move forward, lessons shared by others such as Clifford and Petrescu (2012) are instructive regarding the need to pay attention to key dimensions in C-UE processes: internal (institutional), external (community), and personal.

As universities continue to move toward greater engagement with their local communities, there will be a growing importance on interrogating the concept of governance. “Governance is a means of organizing, shaping and steering a course of decision-making ... [it] is a critical component in the organization of knowledge production” as well as action on complex societal issues (Runnels, 2011, p. xi) and advancing the public good (Strandberg, 2017). C-UE governance will require careful attention to the space-in-between where people gather to co-construct things, especially during this era of reconciliation in Canada. How do we transcend existing colonial relationships and recognize “the mutual autonomy of the communities involved” (Evans et al., 1999, p. 190)? It is time for us to incorporate insights from scholars developing curriculum (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017) as well as those who have synthesized recommendations for creating authentic, trust-based, relationships with Indigenous communities (Lin et al., 2020). Working in and with the radically different world views of Indigenous people and settlers is the knowledge exchange-create-mobilize challenge before us—embracing this work will lead community-university engagement to a better place.

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