Engaged Scholar Journal
Community-Engaged Research, Teaching and Learning

Lessons Learned at Community-University Institute for Social Research's (CUISR)

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Volume 10, Number 1, 2024

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111463ar

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Publisher(s)

University of Saskatchewan

ISSN

2369-1190 (print)
2368-416X (digital)

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Cite this document

Sanz, P. (2024). Lessons Learned at Community-University Institute for Social Research's (CUISR). *Engaged Scholar Journal*, *10*(1), 67–78.

Article abstract

The University of Saskatchewan's Community-University Institute for Social Research (CUISR) is celebrating its 25th anniversary very soon. Engaged Scholar Journal's Penelope Sanz sat down with Isobel Findlay, University co-director of CUISR since 2011, to revisit the vision its founders set out 25 years ago and reflect on its achievements. The institute was established to facilitate community-university partnerships to engage in relevant and collaborative social research to gain a deeper understanding of Saskatchewan's communities and to reveal opportunities to improve community quality of life.

Exchanges

In Exchanges, we present conversations with scholars and practitioners of community engagement, responses to previously published material, and other reflections on various aspects of community-engaged scholarship meant to provoke further dialogue and discussion. In this section, we invite our readers to offer their thoughts and ideas on the meanings and understandings of engaged scholarship, as practiced in local or faraway communities, diverse cultural settings, and in various disciplinary contexts. We especially welcome community-based scholars' views and opinions on their collaborations with university-based partners in particular and engaged scholarship in general.

The University of Saskatchewan's Community-University Institute for Social Research (CUISR) is celebrating its 25th anniversary very soon. Engaged Scholar Journal's Penelope Sanz sat down with Isobel Findlay, University co-director of CUISR since 2011, to revisit the vision its founders set out 25 years ago and reflect on its achievements. The institute was established to facilitate community-university partnerships to engage in relevant and collaborative social research to gain a deeper understanding of Saskatchewan's communities and to reveal opportunities to improve community quality of life.

Lessons Learned at Community-University Institute for Social Research's (CUISR)

Penny: Thank you, Isobel, for sparing me some time for this exchange knowing how packed your schedule is these days. You have this upcoming conference on housing and homelessness and other events you are overseeing. So, let's jump in. Can you tell us about how CUISR was established?

Isobel: It started in 1997 when both community leaders and academics from the university were working on the Quality of Life Roundtable. So, it focused on how you can enhance the quality of life of the diversity of populations in our community, how you can nourish sustainable, healthy communities. CUISR started in and with the community. Out of that collaborative work on the Roundtable came a 1999 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) application, a successful application that led to us being one of its first Community-University Research Alliances (CURAs).[1] That's what got us established and that brought credibility and legitimacy as well as dollars to do community-driven research that would make a difference in people's lives and in policy and other

1 SSHRC's CURA program was established in 1998.

decision making. It (and subsequent SSHRC grants) also brought dollars to USASK that it could leverage for Canada Research Chairs.

So, we were established as a type B, university-wide, interdisciplinary research centre in 2000, thanks to the CURA. Among CUISR's founding members were Bill Holden from the City of Saskatoon; Len Usiskin, Quint Development Corporation; Kate Waygood, Saskatoon Health Region and City councillor (1979-2003); Jim Randall, Geography; and Nazeem Muhajarine, Community Health and Epidemiology at the University (Nazeem is still on our board). He is such a distinguished researcher and a pleasure to work with. Others have moved on. Bill Holden who retired in 2021 as a senior planner at the City and long-time CUISR community co-director, was not only a leader in CUISR's Quality of Life research, but also in our housing research. Len Usiskin, retired from Quint and from our board in July 2023, but remains an active researcher with us on the housing file. So, people are loyal.

Penny: I think ESJ had a special issue on the quality of life.

Isobel: Yes, I co-edited that special issue of the journal with Nazeem Muhajarine in 2014. It was a result of the national conference that we hosted here at the University of Saskatchewan. Bill and Nazeem were the leaders of the quality of life research in Saskatoon (there were other sites elsewhere). So, before we and the City ran out of resources to fund, they had led five iterations of one of the most developed longitudinal studies of quality of life at the municipal neighbourhod level in Canada at the time. So, it was important work.

In that national conference on the Quality of Life, we launched our book *Journeys in Community-based Research*, which was a co-production of the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit (SPHERU) and CUISR. Both institutions were established around the same time by many of the same people with similar goals. And so we have continued to work on and off with SPHERU. The 2014 book, which was published by the University of Regina Press, was one of the outcomes of that relationship. And then the special issue of the Engaged Scholar Journal, and the national conference,

Penny: So, when did you get on board with CUISR?

Isobel: I first started working on quality of life in 2002 as part of the CURA and on the housing file in 2008. It was life-changing for me. I had done community-based research in the Arctic, but to do it right here in the city, that was something that I hadn't done before. So, it was pretty exciting and just learning from community expertise is amazing. I totally valued the experience. I helped execute the first CUExpo (now C2UExpo or Community-Campus-Exposition) in 2003 which was held here in Saskatoon at the Bessborough Hotel. The expo was so innovative. It drew about 500 participants from across Canada, the United

States, and elsewhere. That was very exciting. The roster of speakers was amazing. And now we have a national legacy. C2UExpo is now administered by Community-based Research Canada and different institutions, as you know, apply to host it.[2] And, so one of these days we will apply again.

Penny: I hope so. We were hoping to do that in 2019 and then the pandemic happened. We considered it late last year, but by then we had little time to pull together an application. What other alliances or initiatives has CUISR been part of?

Isobel: We're also members of Community-Campus Engage Canada (CCEC), which some of us at CUISR also helped establish after we completed the Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE) SSHRC-funded research with people at Carleton (Principal Investigator Peter Andrée) and elsewhere. Several of us, including Lisa Erickson (formerly manager of USask Outreach and Engagement at Station 20 West), Colleen Christofferson-Cote, coordinator of Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership, and I worked for a year or so afterwards to help establish CCEC. So that's part of how we have invested in infrastructure to support engaged scholarship. That's been a big part of how we have operated; it's about building capacity here, but it's also about building capacity regionally and nationally.

Penny: That's amazing. Just like C2U Expo, CECC is another legacy of CUISR. Come to think of it, you were also there when ESJ was still being conceptualized. I remember that you and Nazeem were on the Advisory Committee, which was giving guidance and directions to Natalia Khanenko-Friesen, who later became ESJ's founding editor in 2014. I was just a student and designated to research existing journals and scholarly publications on engaged scholarship in the summer of 2013.

I am just thinking about the timeline here. CUISR was established in 2000. You came in 2002 and the first CUExpo was in 2003. The literature on community-university engagement with Ernest Boyer publishing "The scholarship of engagement" in the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* was only in 1996. So, while community-university engagement in practice is not new, scholarship in this field is still in its early stages at that time. And there's CUISR being formed as an outcome of the engagements of community figures like Bill Holden, Len Usiskin, you and other academics around that time.

Isobel: It was very important that CUISR had that unique governance structure. Yes, we were and are a university research centre, but we are co-governed, so it's half faculty and half community. And that has been the case since the beginning. And the CURA allowed us to

2 C2UExpo is a national movement in Canada that brings community and campus together. It is also an international conference which provides leadership and space for both academics and community members to showcase community-campus partnerships that tackles local and global societal issues.

do community-driven research. Community groups would submit short proposals saying what they wanted us to do and we'd build on that. The same was true in 2006 when we partnered with the then Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (now the Canadian Centre for the Study of Co-operatives). We got a SSHRC partnership grant from 2006 to 2012 on the social economy (Principal Investigator Lou Hammond Ketilson), the largest such grant USask had ever received. And that was an incredible source of learning again because we at CUISR led the community-driven research. Community organizations would submit one-page proposals to us to describe the project that they wanted us to do and why. And we took it from there, working with them and sometimes contributing community stipends so that members of the organizations could work directly on the research projects.

So the social economy research at CUISR was focused on the province, the whole province, and not just the city—and in the larger project we linked with and learned from community-university researchers in Manitoba and Northern Ontario. Suddenly we needed to think in a more intentional way about urban-rural linkages, and remote communities. It was early on in the process that the Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association Co-operative came to us and asked us to work with them on a governance project. They had just formed as a co-op in order to rethink and retell their story, what they meant. But they also wanted to understand how to integrate co-op governance and traditional trapping governance.

Penny: Was this in 2000?

Isobel: It was in 2006. We worked with them for about 10 years on multiple projects, researching, presenting, writing, and publishing together (especially with Clifford Ray, longtime president),. And it was a huge source of learning. It significantly pressed us to Indigenize and decolonize methods and practices and rethink ethical protocols. What did it mean to do research ethically in an Indigenous community? And what they taught us was the importance of three things: food, fun, and friendship. Imagine that! So far from the old "disinterested" researcher, bopping into the community, collecting data and leaving. No, it was about building long-term relationships. It was about participating in the community protocols and valuing what was important to the community and listening to their stories and understanding their priorities. The learning that came out of that was stunning. We learned about the meaning of trapping not only very importantly as a livelihood (pimácihowin) and way of life, but also as a source of land management, medicine, education, justice, understanding how to be in the world not only with other people, but with all the creatures that Creator had given. So, that was a really important learning about expanding and rethinking our notions of ethical protocols and our understanding of land-based knowledges.

Penny: That's so awesome. What about working with the government?

Isobel: Yes, another thing that I might mention from the same time was working with what is now Inclusion Saskatchewan and their lead Judy Hannah who was a generous and creative partner and advocate. We worked together on the funding of people living with intellectual disabilities. Individualized funding had been an occasional option, but it was not by any means a program. We did four studies. It was after the third one that the Ministry of Social Services became a partner. and we actually got the policy changed. Again, it was huge learning about the community, its energies, and its advocacy. We sat, as CUISR often does, at policy tables. So, we sat at the individualized funding provincial advisory table and also at the national table. So, there was a lot of learning across the country around what we were doing and vice versa. I mean, we learned from researchers at UBC, for example.

Penny: If you look back at CUISR's history, what challenges did you encounter that might still be ongoing today?

Isobel: I would say among the biggest challenges are university culture and the investment in disciplines and the investment in departments. Despite the rhetoric about the importance of cross-unit collaborations, the way the university budgeting works, the reward system works, or did for the most part, worked to undermine interdisciplinary and cross-unit research. You really had to be committed to make the choice to do interdisciplinary cross-unit work at CUISR rather than disciplinary work within your department that your department would value.

So, most of the work I did at CUISR was for me the most important work I did along with the work at the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives. But was it valued in my college? Not at the time, when it was seen by some in leadership as "community involvement," not the community-engaged scholarship that I valued. So in terms of interdisciplinarity and cross-unit work, I valued SSHRC, and that was why we always applied to SSHRC. I also sat on SSHRC committees, and I knew it was more than rhetoric there about the importance of engaged scholarship, the importance of interdisciplinarity. I think many of us worked to build that infrastructure that gave legitimacy so that others could do what we were doing. And I'm sure, as you know yourself, that like me, you did an interdisciplinary PhD. Well, I can't tell you how often I was told, well, that wasn't very wise. You should have done interdisciplinarity much later in your career. But I could not have done what I've done without having an interdisciplinary PhD. That's what taught me how to understand these diverse fields and the linkages among and between them.

Penny: Yes, I agree. As an interdisciplinary person, we get to traverse the lines between disciplines and between departments. So, you have this unique perspective of seeing and understanding where they're coming from, and, at the same time, also getting frustrated because of the disciplinary and departmental boundaries. Would you mind elaborating on your experience at the university?

Isobel: So even the way the university budget system worked, the way it's assigned dollars earned through research, even that worked against it. So those were among the challenges. Also, in the early years, the challenge of all the reporting requirements. So how do you pay for all of that? You need staff to support the financial reporting, the midterm and other reports, the self-studies, and the external reviews, these are all massive investments that require staffing. But by doing social research, how do you build up enough annual budget to be able to support that? So that was always challenging. I would say that it is much better now because we get to keep the overhead percentage on research projects. That has made a huge difference. It has given us some discretionary money to pay for staffing to do some of the reporting and other work.

Penny: When did that happen? Was it only about 10 years ago or so?

Isobel: Maybe within the last eight years, something like that. Before that there was a different percentage, and at first the university kept the percentage, then for a time it was shared 50-50. And then the university gave up that share to the research centres.

Penny: Was that through negotiations and making them understand CUISR's perspective that you were able to achieve that?

Isobel: I'm not entirely sure, but there was some advocacy. But I think it was more efficient and effective to do it that way.

Penny: The university does have its financial management system and expects all departments or organizations to conform to the system. But at least you now have some kind of an arrangement with USASK.

Isobel: That's still a work in progress, though I would say there has been more support in recent years. I know there's a group working on budgeting and more participatory budgeting.

Penny: How would you address those departmental and disciplinary boundaries so that community-university engagement would not be undermined and help others also to gain some traction in their work?

Isobel: Well, that's part of why we have invested at the national level in supporting Community-Based Research Canada, which has its advocacy role and also Community-Campus Engaged Canada. It's also why Nazeem and I were among those that worked to establish the *Engaged Scholar Journal*. We were not alone. We were two of the founding advisory members. So that's how you change a culture by investing in institutions and infrastructure that support others to do what you do, what you do in very real ways.

Penny: So, how did you receive the news that USASK's community outreach portfolio was ended during the pandemic?

Isobel: Not well. I argued against it. The elimination of Outreach and Engagement at Station 20 West was tragic. It was absolutely tragic for community-engaged scholarship because I know we at CUISR worked there lots because there was little parking on campus snd it was not readily accessible to community partners. So, are you really going to ask community partners to come on campus for meetings? It was way more convenient for our partners to meet at Station 20. We would have office and meeting space there, including for our community partners, so they could actually work out of those offices too. We could have research team meetings there where we were all separated from our office phones and computers and could concentrate on really productive meetings.

Penny: I like that space as well.

Isobel: At the time during the pandemic, it felt like there was a regression. And now that it seems like everything is back to normal. But, it's not quite, right? Because I mean, how would we rechart community-university engagement after what happened during the pandemic and rebuild?

It was a very difficult time. I mean, we did have major funds and major projects through that time, but was it easy to collect data? No, not at all. And especially from vulnerable populations.

Penny: How are you seeing community-university engagement post-pandemic? How is it shaping up locally and nationally as well?

Isobel: We at the university, again with community partners, I think, have done a good job of tracking the impacts of COVID. I think it has renewed our sense of urgency about growing inequality, affordability issues including housing affordability and its impacts on health, on social outcomes, social marginalization, precarious living, and what that means for people's health, their social positioning, their economic opportunities. So I think it's renewed our passion for the work we do. It's never been more important to learn from diverse knowledges in the community and diverse knowledges in the university working together, learning from one another.

Penny: Apart from COVID, if you look back, are there events that also renewed that sense of urgency, and to approach things differently?

Isobel: I did mention the social economy research. That was a decisive moment when the liberal government led by Paul Martin before Harper made that investment. The Harper government put a chill on diversity itself, defunding diverse groups, and chilling and their

ability to advocate. And so that was another decisive moment that really underlined the importance of Idle No More as a movement, saying, no, we don't have to put up with this. None of us should be idle anymore. We should be fighting back, trying to put the record straight, countering those narratives about diversity that were so popular under Harper, making sure that the diversity of voices was heard and supported in what they were doing.

And then soon after that, and we were already in 2013, I was at a conference and talked about the cultures of reconciliation at CUISR because it is about reconciling knowledges. And then the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) came in 2015. That was another incentive to research and act on the TRC's calls to action. So, our work around justice, housing, educational institutions, child welfare… so many of our projects came out of that commitment to research and act on the TRC calls. Similarly, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report Calls for Justice. I'm very proud that we worked with Sexual Assault Services of Saskatchewan (SASS) and the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN) Women's Commission and produced the research that prompted the first provincial action plan on sexual violence.

We then followed that up just this last year with the Sexual Violence Education Initiative. Again, this was in partnership with SASS and FSIN. It has been a privilege to get to work with so many inspiring community partners, who contribute so much to our communities, to learn with them, and help change the landscape. Another investment in recent years has been to work on social return on investment (SROI) studies to better capture the impact of organizational initiatives. With Suresh Kalagnanam, who's my colleague in the Edwards School of Business, we have completed six studies now, including one on child welfare and the costs and downstream benefits of ending the movement of kids into child welfare rather than supporting them in the community, in their families and cultures, wherever possible. The most recent study was on a national basic income guarantee. Right now, it's already been cited in the Senate committee discussing a basic income guarantee in Canada. So that one was national and international in scope.

Penny: That's a lot of fantastic multi-level engagements which also ensure that community voices are listened to and accompanied with advocacy.

Isobel: Two of our most recent Partnership Grants, the SSHRC Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) ones are on housing research and they are national in scope (Principal Investigator for People, Places, Policies, Prospects: Affordable Rental Housing for Those in Greatest Need, Catherine Leviten-Reid, Cape Breton U; Principal Investigators for A Safe and Affordable Place to Call Home**:** A Multi-disciplinary Longitudinal Outcomes Analysis of the National Housing Strategy, Liam O'Brien and Jaqueline Kennelly, Carleton U)**.** And again, we couldn't have done them without the community partners. And that's what I wish was recognized and rewarded more.

Penny: By whom?

Isobel: By the University and beyond. Academic researchers get all the kudos. But we couldn't do it without the community partners who also invest resources that are not plentiful. They make choices and they support work that's going to make a difference for the community. So, the quality of life is still part of the story, right? Because safe and affordable housing for all means a better quality of life for everybody in the community.

Penny: Healthy individuals, healthy families. That means we're also investing in the future of the children. We're investing in the Canadian future actually.

Isobel: Yes. In fact, that was one of the first things that Suresh Kalagnanam and I learned doing social return on investment studies of various initiatives around poverty reduction, chid welfare, basic income. Too often these sorts of initiatives are seen as costs—no, we can't afford that—rather than investments where we all feel the impact of the returns, right? It changes all our lives.

Penny: Why do you think that is the case when it comes to social components? It's always a cost and not as an investment. Why do you think?

Isobel: Neoclassical economics and its simple equations that bracket out this and that, and what social return on investment tries to do is put back in the value and track the downstream benefits as well as the costs. We don't ignore the costs; Investments do cost, but we also track what are the benefits and who's benefiting and to what extent. Then we try to make visible the value across domains. So basic income has impacts on the health sector, on employment, on justice, on homelessness, on the GDP, on education, and on food security. There are just so many ramifications.

Penny: The word investment alone is also loaded with economic indicators and bottom lines. I think if there's a re-conceptualization of investment that goes along the lines that include social investments, what should it entail? I'm not so sure if there's really an uptake in that kind of mindset. People should also be part of the investment and not seeing people as sort of just a machine or something that is dispensable. There's the whole worldview that goes with the conventional meaning and perception of investment.

Isobel: Whenever you try to change those mainstream metrics, there's always a pushback. Those mainstream metrics have had such a stranglehold on the narratives. And so even somebody like the Nobel Prize winning economist from a couple of years ago (David Card, University of California, Berkeley, whom we cite in the basic income report) faces backlash. People are still trying to prove he's wrong because what his research shows is that mainstream economics is itself wrong in its assumptions, right? And so, whenever

you challenge their logic, there's pushback and they want to prove that you're wrong. So, I cannot tell you how many peer reviews we went through on that basic income report as a result, knowing what we might be up against.

Penny: The image I have of you and CUISR is that you're not only engaging in the academic sphere but you're also fighting at the national level, busting myths, presenting counter-discourses to change policies. It's like you are chipping away at that big boulder of social inequality and systemic injustice from various angles to produce a kinder and more humane society.

Isobel: Well, I think that's what research is about. It's trying to give us reliable, rigorous evidence on which to base our decisions. And that means bringing a critical lens to the metrics that have been deployed, and developing new metrics. So, there's lots of talk about thinking outside the box, but how much of that thinking is there actually? I think that a big part of our commitment is to lead thinking with those who share our vision and to make a difference, to try to make those metrics different, and make our institutions better.

Penny: If you are going to look at it and assess how much of a difference CUISR was able to make in the last 25 years, I think you have made quite an impressive one.

Isobel: I think we're proud of our record of what we've achieved in terms of the social economy research, the housing research, the individualized funding research. So many projects that I think have made a difference.

Penny: How about on engaged scholarship?

Isobel: But on engaged scholarship, I think it's still a work in progress. There have been changes. Some colleges have taken it very seriously and have integrated it into their tenure and promotion standards, but it's not even across the institution. I think the research ethics board has kept up well with TriCouncil Policy Statement and other requirements. But has it kept up with community protocols? I'm not so sure. But I still use every opportunity I have to promote community contributions and urge that the university celebrate them more.

Penny: If you are going to reflect on how Isobel was 25 years ago, and the many community engagements you initiated and were part of, how did she change over the years?

Isobel: I guess I would say I have equal passion 25 years later. I have not lost that commitment to social justice and to cognitive justice ending the reign of cognitive imperialism, as my friend Marie Batiste would put it. We just thought that was the way the world was, right? That's what we were taught. Here's the map of the world. So decolonizing is still a work in progress, but I do have hope that we are moving much more mindfully toward cognitive justice. And I would point to Nothing about Us without Us, the first voice principles, and

how much we're now learning finally from first voice experts, the lived and living experts. So, when I think back, what motivated me was a lot of the waste: the waste of people, the waste of knowledges, the waste of resources that was created by a dominant research agenda that was heavily invested in quantitative methods, right? We've got the numbers, but what do the numbers mean if you don't understand the stories that produce them? And so that's what keeps me going. All of the allies who are working to change things and make our world a better place.

Penny: How do you see the younger scholars and ensuring the gains that you have at CUISR help pave the way for them? How is CUISR nurturing the younger generation of engaged scholars?

Isobel: We try through supporting the national institutions and supporting the *Engaged Scholar Journal* or in the old days, the Engaged Scholar Days. Remember those?

Penny: Yes, I've learned a lot from listening to senior engaged scholars like you, and also to meet other students who were also engaging with communities.

Isobel: Currently, I co-chair Pathways to Equity, which is an initiative of the Office of the Vice President Research. I think it's important to support initiatives like that. So Sarah Buhler and I from CUISR are on that Research group and it is hosting an event in late January. We at CUISR are also hosting a community event in late February to present updates on our research. But, also we've got a keynote, an early stage scholar Grace Tidmarsh coming from the University of Birmingham who is doing exciting strength-based work with youth homelessness and sports psychology. I think that's going to be interesting.

We have research associates at CUISR. We've had them for a number of years now. And so that's another way we support the younger generation. We invite young scholars to be research associates, which allows them to participate in and lead CUISR research and funding applications. It gives them access to resources, mentorships, staff support, and to partner networks. The most recent SSHRC application we made was to build capacity among faculty and community on social return on investment. So, it's explicitly about bringing them in, mentoring and working with them. We chose the topic of school food programs, because food insecurity and the impact on education is a huge issue. We have Rachel Engler Stringer, who is an expert in that particular area, Nazeem Muhajarine for his health expertise, and then Suresh Kalagnanam and I are leading the actual training and mentorship and so on. Then the whole thing we propose if we're funded will be tracked and evaluated. The training will be for delivery in person, but also hybrid because it's not just for faculty and community here, but across the country.

Penny: Do you have any advice to the young scholars?

Isobel: Get involved in multiple ways, in multiple institutions and initiatives (regional, national, international)! You can make a difference!

About the Authors

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