Chapter 12

Learners as Leaders: A Collaborative Process for Building Student Capacity in Public Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines a collaborative process in which two student-led initiatives were used to help build capacity in students for publicly engaged work, thus building capacity for broader student public engagement. A set of foundational competencies and core skills emerged from this process, which situated a core team of five students and two administrators as collaborators in program planning and implementation. Through a reflective lens that examined the process, three broad competency areas emerged—project management, communication, and self-awareness—each encompassing a core set of skills. Through collective reflections, it became evident that the process itself provided a framework to highlight key competencies and essential skills that are critical for best practices in public engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

The province of Newfoundland and Labrador sits at the eastern edge of Canada and is home to Memorial University, the province’s only university. Newfoundland is a large island situated in the North Atlantic, boasting a scenic yet rugged coastline, an unpredictable and often extreme climate. Combined with Labrador, the larger mainland part of the province to the north, Newfoundland and Labrador has a population of approximately 500,000 people, with almost half residing in the capital city region, and the remainder spread out among sparsely populated rural regions. The province was built primarily on the North Atlantic cod fishery, with diverse seafood industries making up a smaller, but still vital role in the overall economy, particularly in the rural areas. The primary economic drivers of the province are oil and gas and other natural resources, such as mining, with ocean technology, aquaculture, and tourism growing in importance.

Memorial University is one of the largest educational institutions in eastern Canada with a student population of over 18,000 and staff and faculty of more than 5,400 combined. The University is acknowledged as an important public resource, contributing to significant cultural, economic, scientific, educational and social development for the province. As a living memorial to the Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who lost their lives in active service during the First World War, Memorial University College was established in 1925 to honour fallen soldiers and their great sacrifice. Shortly after Newfoundland joined Confederation with Canada in 1949, the college was elevated to university status (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2019).

St. John’s, the capital city, has a population of approximately 200,000, and is located on the eastern tip of the island of Newfoundland. The city is home to three campuses: St. John’s Campus, the Marine Institute, and the new Signal Hill Campus. Memorial’s Grenfell Campus is situated in the city of Corner Brook on the west coast of the island, and the Harlow Campus is situated in Harlow, Essex, U.K. In addition to the five campuses noted above, Memorial also maintains an important presence in Labrador through the Labrador Institute and in numerous other locations around the province.

Public Engagement at Memorial University

As set out in its founding legislation, and reinforced in its mission, Memorial University has a special obligation to the people of Newfoundland and Labrador: to educate the people of the province and contribute to social and economic development. Memorial encourages and supports collaboration with individuals and groups from the public to develop and execute projects that strengthen the community, advance teaching and learning and uphold Memorial’s mission as a public university. Engagement is integral to why the University was created and continues to be woven into everyday aspects of its work.

Despite its historic presence as a publicly engaged institution, Memorial was lacking a recognized guiding document to support its public engagement mission. The Public Engagement Framework was developed to anchor public engagement as a core priority at Memorial, together with teaching and learning, research, scholarship and creative activity. With input from almost 1000 stakeholders, Memorial’s Public Engagement Framework, including its vision, values, goals and objectives, was established. Serving as a guiding document to focus efforts and measure success, the Framework was endorsed by Memorial’s Senate on September 25, 2012. These consultations also brought forth Memorial University’s working definition of public engagement as follows (“What is Public Engagement?,” n.d.):