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Community University Research: The Southern Ontario Social Economy Research Alliance

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Community-university partnership research is an important research paradigm emanating from the roots of participatory research in the early 1970s (Hall, 1993). As with participatory research, it generally involves three main activities: research, education and action. It also seeks to democratize the knowledge process, and to situate the research process in the community, workplace or group affected by the knowledge generated (Hall, 1993; Stoecker & Bonacich, 1992). The Southern Ontario Social Economy Research Alliance (hereafter called the Alliance) of the Social Economy Suite, funded by a strategic grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), aimed to operate in this manner through its governance structure and through its many sub-projects.

The Social Economy Suite of grants came about after several consultations by the federal government with social economy actors. The guiding research questions posed under the call for proposals were derived from a participatory process that involved SSHRC, Le Chantier, CCEDNet, academic researchers and other interested parties. The research program called for “research on the social economy conducted by academic researchers in partnership with community-based organizations” (SSHRC, 2005, p. 1). SSHRC’s characterization of the program might be referred to as what has come to be known as “community-engaged scholarship” (Stanton, 2007). Within this framework, it is expected that university participants will have particular strengths and that community partners will have other strengths, and that they will benefit mutually from working together. As such, the Social Economy Suite was more closely aligned with the funder’s Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) program than its standard research grants.

The broad objective of the research program outlined by SSHRC was “to fund teams made up of university-based researchers and representatives of community-based organizations, operating as intellectual partners, to create regional nodes (networks) that will conduct research relevant to the social economy in Canada” (SSHRC, 2005, p. 1). Students and other interested parties also formed part of the team.
More specifically, the research program aimed to:

- contribute to defining policies, including an appropriate regulatory framework, applicable to the social economy;
- improve the performance of organizations and enterprises in areas that are important to the social economy in Canada;
- demonstrate through, for example: inventories, statistics, and comparative analyses, the actual and potential contribution of the social economy to the various sectors and regions of the Canadian economy; and,
- develop Canada’s international contribution to, and visibility in, areas relevant to the social economy (SSHRC, 2005, p. 1).

Originally, the research program contained a provision for additional funding for joint initiatives to address research needs not covered by the Suite, but this was eliminated due to a change in government.

With a very short window and no letter of intent or funding to craft the grant proposal, decisions had to be made with less participation than would have been otherwise preferred. Regardless, the aim of the Alliance was to provide opportunities for meaningful social economy research that supported capacity building and evidence-based policy reform, using primarily a community-university research partnership model.

The governance group responsible for the overall direction of the Alliance consisted of both community and academic partners. Representatives included: the vice president of research of Imagine Canada, an umbrella organization for non-profits with a charitable registration in Canada; the executive director of the Ontario Co-operative Association, the umbrella group for co-operatives in Ontario; the principal investigator of the proposal from the University of Toronto; a PhD student and subsequent post-doc at the University of Toronto; and a faculty member from the Business and Society program at York University. At various times the group also included: the Alliance administrative assistant, the symposium coordinator, and the student representative from the Southern Ontario chapter of the Social Economy Student Network. The governance group met monthly from prior to the submission of the proposal until the end of year five, when the research program ended. (Dissemination work is still being undertaken until at least the end of 2011.)

A distinctive feature of the governance team was that time release was obtained for the community organizations to have representatives participate, not simply in a leadership role, but also in heading research. Interestingly, both of these were apex organizations (coalitions of other organizations) and differed in that regard from most of the community partners whose function was limited to their own organization’s needs. Having apex organizations within the governance seemed suitable for that purpose.
Overall, the Alliance conducted 36 research projects in five areas: Mapping Southern Ontario’s Social Economy; The Impact of Social Economy Organizations; Improving the Capacity of SEOs to Demonstrate their Value; Developing Policy; and Extending Theory (see Table 5.1). In addition, the administrative hub of the group, the Social Economy Centre, took the lead for the knowledge mobilization of the group as a whole, the results of which are discussed further on in this chapter.

Table 5.1: Southern Ontario Research Node

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mapping Southern Ontario’s Social Economy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mapping of Social Economy Organisations I</td>
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<td>Mapping of Social Economy Organisations II</td>
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<td>Mapping of Social Purpose Businesses</td>
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<td>Mapping of Unincorporated Non-profit &amp; Voluntary Organizations</td>
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<td>Mapping of Online Social Enterprises</td>
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<td>Survey of Ontario’s Mutual Insurance Companies</td>
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<tr>
<th>The Impact of Social Economy Organizations</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Social Economy in Organic Agriculture</td>
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<tr>
<td>To Investigate Fair and Ethical Trade and Local Public Procurement Policies in Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>To Analyze the Efforts of the Planet Bean Coffee Co-operative to Develop A New Fair Trade Product (Cotton) with Local Partners in the Indian States of Tamil Nadu and Gujurat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Capital Social Economy Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>To Explore the Successes and Failures in the Greening of the Social Economy within Waterloo, Toronto, Peterborough, Hamilton and Elora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Innovation through Cross-Sector Models of Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Explore the Synthesis between Urban Food Security and Rural Food Producers through such Social Economy Projects as Catering, Community Gardens, Collective Kitchens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Exploration of the Potential Impact of the Co-operative Model on the lives of Minority Francophones Living in Southern Ontario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Learning in the Social Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Enterprise Research on Value Added (SERVA) Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Investigate Cree Concepts of Land and Environment and the Relevance of Social Economy Concepts</td>
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</table>
The Alliance in southern Ontario may have been able to move forward more quickly than some of the other nodes because it was building upon a tradition of community-based research that had existed at OISE and within southern Ontario more generally. Some of the initiatives that might have created a foundation for the Alliance were: the participatory research tradition within the Adult Education department at OISE; the funding of projects through Imagine Canada as part of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, circa 2000; the SSHRC NALL
CURA supervised by David Livingstone of OISE and subsequently the SSHRC Pensions at Work Research Alliance supervised by Jack Quarter. This tradition probably made it easier for the Alliance in southern Ontario to form quickly. In addition, the principals in the Social Economy Centre, where the Alliance was led, had an established working relationship with Imagine Canada and the Ontario Co-operative Association, the two key partner organizations. It is not clear that the nodes elsewhere in Canada had these established relations.

The Alliance had both an ongoing evaluation process and two additional evaluation surveys in year five of the program: one of the community and university partners and another of students. The ongoing evaluations consisted of a proposal that each sub-project lead submitted for review before receiving funding, and an annual evaluation in which each project lead had to complete a survey using Survey Monkey of its outputs and progress at the end of each year. In addition, an online survey of the 36 sub-projects, and an online survey of the graduate students’ experiences were conducted. Overall, there were two goals of the evaluation research: (1) to analyze the research partnerships in terms of structure and process; and (2) to analyze the economic, social, environmental and political impacts for each stakeholder group. This chapter reports on the first goal, as well as the challenges and lessons learned.

In the remainder of this chapter, we create a framework to categorize different models of research involving community and academia. This framework is applied in a case study of the Southern Ontario Social Economy Research Alliance, where we also report on the challenges experienced by Alliance members in sustaining partnership research. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of the Alliance as a whole on the social economy sector, academia and students. Finally, we offer some final reflections on our five-year experience and report on how we used the lessons learned from this project to inform and design a subsequent CURA on social businesses.

**Defining Community-University Partnership**

In line with the theme of this e-book, our chapter seeks to examine the different models of conducting research that arose in the Southern Ontario Social Economy Research Alliance.

After reviewing literature on community-university research (for example, Chau et al., 2006; Hall, 1992, 1993; Savan & Flicker, 2006; Stanton, 2007; Stoecker, 1999), a matrix of possible research models was devised around two key characteristics: decision-making and impact. Both decision-making and impact ranged along a continuum from unilateral to mutual. The matrix was then divided into six cells to highlight differing degrees of decision-making and impact (Figure 5.1).
For community-university research we set out the following criteria for the “ideal” partnership:

**Decision-making:**
- The project involved ongoing and substantial contact with both partners throughout the duration of the project.
- Feedback from both partners shapes the direction of the research throughout the duration of the project.

**Impact:**
- The project was of benefit to both community actors/sector and academic actors/sector.
- Dissemination was geared to both academic and non-academic audiences.

At the other end of the continuum, we find the inverse characteristics.

**Decision-making:**
- The project did not involve ongoing and substantial contact with both partners throughout the duration of the project.
- Feedback from both partners was not used to shape the direction of the research throughout the duration of the project.

**Impact:**
- The project was not of benefit to both community actors/sector and academic actors/sector.
- Dissemination was not geared to both academic and non-academic audiences.

**Figure 5.1: Variations of Research**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Mutual</th>
<th>Decision-making</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutual impact</td>
<td>Mutual impact</td>
<td>Mutual</td>
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<tr>
<td>single actor</td>
<td>consultation</td>
<td>partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unilateral impact</td>
<td>Unilateral</td>
<td>Unilateral</td>
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<td>single actor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unilateral</td>
<td>Mutual</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Keeping these criteria in mind, we thus define the ideal of community-university partnership research as: a participatory process of systematic inquiry by community and university actors in order to advance purposeful knowledge of mutual benefit to the research participants and to larger society. This is reflected in the uppermost right cell of Figure 5.1. This definition is not meant to “romanticize the notion that moving towards maximum participation in all aspects of the research is optimal” (Flicker & Savan, 2006, p. 27). Rather it recognizes that there are varying levels of involvement of actors depending on context, and that a community-university research partnership is but one model of research involving university and community.

What remains for further study, and beyond the scope of this paper, is to analyze the relationships between different models of research and different impacts and relevance.

We used these criteria to evaluate the different research projects conducted through our Alliance. The impact criteria, “of benefit to both the community actors/sector and academic actors/sector” and “dissemination was geared to both academic and non-academic audiences,” were met by all projects. Project proposals had to be approved initially by the governance group consisting of both community and academic actors, and the proposal guidelines called for both academic and non-academic dissemination.

In applying the decision-making criteria, however, it became evident that the task was not as straightforward as it might have seemed. For some projects, there were multiple community and university partners, and the contributions of each partner within the project varied across the continuum. Contact between partners might have been strong in the beginning, but waned over time. This could have been due to staff turnover or to pressures faced by community organizations to devote their time to deal with urgent operational matters. The degree of involvement at each major decision point is still to be analyzed, but we were able to determine which projects with both community and academic partners maintained ongoing contact and which did not. Those that maintained contact and worked continuously together on their research, we categorized as having a partnership relationship. Those that did not maintain contact throughout, and only came together to provide support, periodic advice or research access, were categorized as consultative relationships.

The breakdown of the sub-projects of the Alliance is shown below in Table 5.2. Of the 36 sub-projects in the Southern Ontario Node, 26 reported having both community and academic partners (17 as partnerships and 9 as consultative), while 10 reported as being single-actor projects.
For projects with both academic and community partners, we looked at the degree of involvement of each partner in order to determine if it fit the criteria set out above for a community-university research partnership. Survey responses from the final reports submitted by each project and from the evaluation surveys were analyzed. From these responses, we determined if the partners maintained ongoing contact, and if the contact was consultative at selective points only, or collaborative throughout critical stages in development of the project. To be categorized as a partnership, the relationship had to extend beyond a nominal advisory role for the community or academic partners, and not be limited to involvement in the preliminary stages of the research, for example, as in the provision of contact information or other data of interest to the academic partners. In the latter case, the research relationship was determined to be more consultative than a partnership.

We also looked at who was leading each project. The norm for the sub-projects was that there was a lead or “principal agent,” typically a faculty member but in some cases a community partner or graduate student. Within management studies, there is an extensive body of research on how within an organization with multiple stakeholders, a principal agent dominates. Berle and Means (1932) frame this as a conflict between management and owners, and Jordan (1989) discusses its applicability to multi-stakeholder co-operatives.

The contexts that Berle and Means and Jordan refer to differ from those of the sub-projects within this Alliance; however, the same principle applies: when differing stakeholders function within an organization, one tends to dominate. With respect to our research, academics tended to dominate because, as indicated in our evaluation, they were experienced researchers who had the know-how. Partner organization representatives lacked the research experience. However, the two partner organizations for which the project funded release time took leadership roles for the Alliance and for sub-projects.

Situating the projects in the framework presented in Figure 5.1, the results of this analysis indicated that 17 of the 36 projects were approaching the
partnership model, 9 seemed to have more of a consultative nature, and 10 were undertaken unilaterally by either community or academic actors (Figure 5.2).

**Challenges in Sustaining Collaborative Research**

As with any partnership or collaborative process, managing the expectations of stakeholders is of great importance. For instance, the needs of community partner organizations are practical and might differ in fundamental ways from those of university faculty and graduate students who are expected to produce scholarly work that will be published in academic presses, scholarly journals and conferences, all with peer review processes. We now turn to some of the challenges expressed by Alliance members in managing expectations and in participating in the research process in general. These challenges related to the experience in research, external influences and different cultures of the different participants.

**Figure 5.3: Project Classification: Southern Ontario Social Economy Research Alliance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Decision-making</th>
<th>Mutual</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Unilateral</td>
<td>Mutual impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>single actor</td>
<td>consultation</td>
<td>partnership</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 projects</td>
<td>9 projects</td>
<td>17 projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unilateral impact</td>
<td>Unilateral</td>
<td>Unilateral</td>
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<tr>
<td>single actor</td>
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<td>impact</td>
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<td></td>
<td>consultation</td>
<td>partnership</td>
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**Experience in Research**

The partnerships for the sub-projects were established by the project leads, predominantly faculty members who had a track record of research in the social economy. The community partners who participated ranged from organizations that had an established research capacity to those that had none, with some organizations having some capacity, but for simple applied projects. Only one of the community partners in the Alliance could be viewed as having an established research capacity, and perhaps another six undertook some research, but it was a relatively minor part of their activities. Most of the organizations existed for another purpose – a community service, advocacy, representing a network, etc. Research experience was limited. Therefore, it was not surprising that academic leads became the principal agent for many projects. Even where there was a community-university research partnership, the university member was most
often the lead. However, the work undertaken was of direct interest to the community partner – for example, introducing a social accounting system into a community organization or revising a social accounting tool for another – and therefore the partner stayed involved.

One researcher highlighted the need to provide “ongoing training/workshops for all partners on how to do this type of research.” Community partners, she argued, could benefit from “access to university library resources, including online journals.” Another community partner said that “if you bring capacity building to the organization as part of the Alliance, it will help the Alliance along by enhancing our ability to participate in it.”

The expectations of community partners tended to relate to their level of involvement in the sub-projects. One partner noted that “we weren’t active participants, but more of a supporter.” Another described the ongoing collaborative nature of the partnership with the academic leads, noting that the organization was “really happy to have the professors with us — they are real experts!” One community partner told us that the research alliance was intended to “match up the research needs of sector with academics,” allowing the community partners to engage in “research we couldn’t do otherwise.”

Some of the relationships among team members changed over time due to the shifting interests of the participants. One project lead stated that “any team with eight to ten people will change in terms of involvement of particular members. There was a core of about five of us that became more involved as the project matured. This had to do with the theoretical interests of different people. Not everyone was engaged by each facet.” Another project lead reported that over time, the team members “became disengaged, and felt enough had been said.”

External Influences

The universities that were part of the Alliance had stable funding compared to community partner organizations. Only one faculty member in the Alliance changed jobs, and that was a sideways move to another university that did not affect the sub-project. Similarly, graduate assistants, although a less stable group because they complete their program and move on, had stable funding throughout the five years of the Alliance. However, the same could not be said for the community partners. Their funding environment is complex and can be precarious. Many have a very small staff who function on short-term contracts. For those relying upon government funding, the environment became even more complex in 2006, just after the Alliance began, when the Conservatives became the federal government. One of their first acts was to cancel the funding designated for the social economy. This and other initiatives affected the stability of organizations in the Alliance, not simply the smaller organizations but also the larger community partners.
To use a couple of examples, one mid-sized environmental group lost its government funding, and while the study was ongoing it had to convert itself to a social enterprise that relied more heavily on the sale of services. As a result, that sub-project changed its focus. Another organization, probably the largest in the Alliance, lost most of its research funding from the federal government, and its research staff, at one point in the 20s, dwindled to a few people, and eventually its research lead and participant in the Alliance parted ways with the organization.

In the evaluation, many community partners indicated that addressing some of their budgetary and time constraints could allow them to devote more time to the Alliance’s activities. As one community partner told us: “It would be easier for community partners to take the lead if they received some funding.”

The compensation of community partner organizations is a fundamental issue. As noted above, only two partner organizations in the Alliance were compensated for time release. Four community organizations were the lead on research projects, but the compensation for this was in part covered by time release for the leadership group. For those that didn’t have this coverage, the funds were allocated towards hiring a graduate student who would work with them on the research. The remainder of the funds were allocated to project supplies, travel and dissemination. Faculty researchers did not receive compensation through the grant; however, they were paid salaries through their institutions.

**Different Cultures**

The organizational culture of universities and partner organizations differs. Tenured university faculty have job security and are used to autonomy and working at a self-defined pace, with scholarly research being a priority. The staff of partner organizations often lacks the security of universities, and have many demands including reporting to funders. Therefore, it is challenging for these cultures to mesh.

Several academic and community partners noted that timing issues and timelines posed significant challenges to the partnership and often impacted the course of the research. As one researcher stated, “It has been a push to get it finished. Another challenge from a research point of view has been timing. We had to modify our research question in a few respects because the timing was off with respect to the availability of information and policy development.” Another project lead told us that the project’s partnership consisted of a faculty member along with “a researcher who worked full-time in a non-profit organization. The main challenge was for him to take time away from his full-time job for research.” One community partner stated: “The main challenge for me was finding time to participate. For non-profits, the constant challenge..."
is to bring in the funding to do our work, so finding time to participate in the research was the greatest challenge by far.” However, the partner noted that she was able to “carve out time” for the project by making regular appointments with the academic partner and frequently reviewing the progress of the research. An academic lead described her partnership as “a very good collaborative experience.” From the beginning of the project, she was aware that “the organizations worked differently from our timelines.” The academic partner overcame this challenge by acknowledging this discrepancy and simply “giving priority to their timelines.” Most academic-community partnerships will face similar issues related to timing and time commitments, as well as divergent deadlines and budgetary cycles.

One community partner emphasized the need to “build stronger relationships, clarify the expectations of both sides, and understand that we come from different worlds. Researchers may need to explain things like the process of the ethics review, and we need to help you to understand the day-to-day reality of our organizations.” Similarly, another community partner argued that “both sides must communicate effectively and learn from each other. There is a big difference in language, and this isn’t always navigated as well as it should be.” Another community partner told us that it was “important to take the time to understand what each party wants to get from the research. Map out the strengths and resources the participants bring to the project so you can capitalize on them and support one another. Be truly collaborative in terms of design and execution. And keep the lines of communication open throughout. If you are truly collaborative, it might be a longer process than you imagine.”

The importance of collaboration was referred to often in the interviews: “The research parameters need to be designed in conjunction with the community agency. Community organizations may have practical ideas about what is useful, and can help design a study so that it has useful outcomes for them. The research is not the only thing the community organization is working on. When you take this into account in terms of the timing of the research, there will be greater satisfaction on both sides down the road.”

In the evaluation, none of the participants indicated that interpersonal conflicts among team members (or between academic and community partners) significantly interfered with or derailed their research. However, lack of clarity regarding expectations, timelines, and guidelines for collaboration was often, to varying degrees, a source of tension. While many of the participants noted that they enjoyed having the autonomy to develop and design their own sub-projects, some project leads indicated that this level of independence could lead to ambiguity regarding their roles and responsibilities, both as members of the research team and as members of the alliance.
Impact for Academia and the Social Economy Sector

A major stakeholder, SSHRC, invested $1.75 million over five years in the Alliance, with a one-year extension granted. The dissemination component is still underway, but there are some clear indications of the Alliance’s output at this point – for example: one authored book, and three edited collections have been published by participants in the Alliance (three of the books by a university press). Two other edited collections are under review by a university press. Members of the Alliance have published or had accepted for publication over 50 refereed research papers and book chapters and have presented 165 papers to refereed conferences based upon their Alliance research. Other dissemination products include workshops, reports, public talks, and articles in public media. These numbers will continue to grow over the next few years and are archived on the Social Economy Centre website.

For all of the sub-projects, the research clearly reflected the needs and interests of the community partners or the sector as a whole. The research often had a practical element or application for the organizations involved. For example, some projects developed specific measurement tools for their community organizations. Another example is a census of all co-operatives and credit unions in Ontario and an analysis of student co-operatives in Québec undertaken by OnCo-op; a mapping of the social economy in Ontario undertaken by Imagine Canada and OnCo-op; the revision of a social accounting tool used by the Toronto Enterprise Fund. Given the collaborative expectations of the research, each of the 36 projects either have produced or are producing short fact sheets and backgrounders that are specifically designed for the community partner organizations. These fact sheets translate the research into simple language and are posted on the Social Economy Centre website.²

The research also met the needs and interests of the academic partners, who were concerned with advancing knowledge and publishing. The idea of a professional research association based upon the social economy and a Canadian journal for this field also originated and received its initial impetus from participants in the Alliance, and have been realized in the Association of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research (ANSER), now in its fourth year, and the Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research, about to publish its first issue. The Alliance executive also initiated the process that led to the formation of the Ontario Social Economy Roundtable or OSER, a network of community partner organizations that was founded in 2008 with the intention of bringing together the major players in Ontario’s social economy. The creation of OSER reflected an important outcome of this CURA in that it brought together key organizations for non-profits and co-operatives, organizations that normally function separately.
The Alliance also funded the development of education materials on the social economy for business schools and invested in updating materials on co-operatives as part of a broader education initiative by OnCo-op – the Rochdale Education Project; the intent being to increase the presence of curriculum about co-operatives in secondary schools.

The Social Economy Centre (SEC) established a monthly workshop series for community organizations that can lead to a certificate, and has proven so popular that a second certificate in human resource management has been developed. Some of the sub-projects held educational workshops including one from the University of Ottawa on food security. The SEC also runs a monthly speakers’ series, predominantly by members of community organizations, that is webcast and archived. The speakers’ series disseminates innovative practices. The innovative online social accounting system, Volunteers Count, was developed through the Alliance by Laurie Mook with support from the Education Commons at OISE, and this practical tool is being used by community organizations to keep track of volunteer contributions and to include them in social accounting reports.

These latter outputs are contributions to the broader community, not simply the participants in the Alliance. The same was true of the five annual conferences that drew from a broader community.

Impact for Students

One of the objectives stated in the CURA proposal submitted for funding was to “build a future generation of researchers, create a presence for the social economy in higher education institutions and focus heavily on knowledge dissemination. Training of students is a key feature of this Alliance, and for each project graduate students will form part of the team.” Some students exceeded these expectations, becoming project leads and conducting their own research.

While there was variation in the funding for sub-projects, the norm was $30,000 per year over two years. (Some projects spread the funding over more than two years.) Of this amount, it was expected that at least two-thirds of the allocation was for graduate student training.

By the time that the survey of graduate assistants was undertaken, most had graduated from their university. The 20 students who responded were still engaged in the research when the survey was undertaken and tended to be actively involved in the Alliance. Some of the key findings from their responses were:

• 91 percent expressed satisfaction with their experience;
• 91 percent increased confidence in their research capabilities;
• 56 percent accessed data for their thesis;
• 73 percent felt their experience increased the likelihood for completing their thesis work;
• 73 percent increased quality of their thesis work;
• 91 percent increased their ability to conduct independent research;
• 91 percent increased confidence in their research capacities;
• 82 percent increased capacity to work in teams;
• 82 percent increased enhanced project management skills;
• 82 percent increased communication skills;
• 55 percent developed contacts with potential employers:
• 91 percent developed useful references for their resume;
• 82 percent increased knowledge of what an academic career entails.

Although more follow-up is needed on the graduate student experience, the preliminary indications are that the Alliance lived up to, and may have surpassed, its commitments to the funding agency.

Additional Reflections and Recommendations

The Social Economy Suite funding falls within what SSHRC now labels as partnership research, and in particular, partnership between universities and “community sector partners.” The SSHRC website currently describes this relationship as: “designed to foster innovative research, training and the co-creation of new knowledge on critical issues of intellectual, social, economic and cultural significance through a process of ongoing collaboration and mutual learning.” (SSHRC, 2010b)

The evaluation of the Southern Ontario Research Alliance suggests that the majority of sub-projects could be classified as community-university partnerships involved in the “co-creation of new knowledge.” Other research groups were guided generally by co-constructed research, but operated more as a consultancy. Still others operated in more the traditional research style; however, they still produced knowledge of use to the social economy and to academia. Overall, the Alliance succeeded in producing a comprehensive body of research and disseminating it in differing ways that could be of use to both university and non-university stakeholders. It also surpassed its mandate to train students and create a new generation of social economy researchers. In terms of sustainability, the creation of a new association, the Association for Nonprofit and Social Economy Research, provides a structure to create and sustain relationships between researchers, community groups, students and policy makers, as well as advance knowledge in this area. The website also provides an important archive and resources for community and academia alike.
One of the challenges in the co-production of research is that norms for university scholarship are not necessarily compatible with the needs of a partner organization. Finding a balance that meets the needs of all stakeholders is challenging. It is tempting to suggest that supporting community partner-led projects is the solution because it allows partner organizations to pursue research directly related to the needs and interests of their organizations, with the added advantage of bringing the practitioner’s perspective to the forefront of the research. However, issues of resource constraints, both finances and time; the capacity to do research; and the relevance of research to the day-to-day operations of social economy organizations, needs to be addressed.

**Moving Forward**

The lessons learned from the Alliance have helped fashion the newest CURA operating out of the Social Economy Centre, “Social Business and Marginalized Social Groups.” In this case, a small grant received as a result of a successful letter of intent allowed more collaboration in the formation of the research proposal to SSHRC.

In terms of capacity to do community-university partnership research, prior to the release of funds to the individual projects, all of the research teams (comprised of the community partners, academic partners, and graduate students) were invited to an all-day workshop to discuss the overall objectives of the CURA and to prepare for the case studies. Bearing in mind the lessons of the Alliance, an effort was made to clarify the expectations of all participants in the project.

The case studies are all university-led; however, the governance group consisting of both community and university representatives have mutually designed the overall research program. Moreover, release time is budgeted for the community partners to the CURA to participate. Every effort is being made to keep the partner organizations engaged, but it will take time to know whether this continues.
Endnotes

1. Two research projects (“To explore the value that urban communities add to public dollars” and “To examine the effectiveness of specific behaviours, primarily web-based, for facilitating the development of social networks”) were withdrawn in their early stages from the Alliance. The projects highlighted in bold were later additions to the Alliance.


3. See: http://www.volunteerscount.net
Community-University Research Partnerships

References


