

Community Engagement at VIU

A Framework for Discussion on Next Steps

Over the fall of 2021, VIU is reaching out to our internal and external communities to shape a **Community Engagement Plan** for the next five years (2022-27). In this short discussion document, we describe what we mean by community engagement, and describe some of the work already underway with external partners, share what we’ve heard so far about priorities for VIU-community engagement, and invite ideas to shape the plan.

# What is community engagement?

**At VIU, community engagement describes collaboration between the university and the larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.**

**Geographical space**

By mandate, VIU serves the defined geographical space of mid-Vancouver Island and adjacent mainland coast, but the impact of our community engagement reaches far beyond this mandate.

**Shared interests**

We also see ourselves to be in community with those who share a common purpose if not a common place. Those communities include organizations that, like VIU, are seeking to strengthen the education and skills of local people, support local businesses to thrive, safeguard the environment and address climate change, meet the challenges of poverty, combat racism and other forms of discrimination, and uphold the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People and implement the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

VIU is not alone in our commitment to community. Around the world, community engagement is increasingly central to the work of universities. Once a sidebar set of outreach activities, genuine engagement is becoming the mark of a modern institution. The Carnegie Foundation Classification for Community Engagement – the benchmark of an engaged university – describes the many ways universities do that work:

The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.*[[1]](#footnote-1)*

# Relationships based on reciprocity

Community engagement prioritizes relationships based on reciprocity or mutually beneficial outcomes. These relationships are formed, created and maintained for a multitude of reasons sometimes organically and sometimes due to strategic alignment of organizational priorities.

As an institution that serves Indigenous students and their communities, VIU seeks to better understand Indigenous ways of knowing and being and to apply that understanding in our campus and community relationships. As we seek to strengthen our work in community, the importance of reciprocal learning and service is key.

We believe that this relationship-rich, reciprocal approach to engagement makes a difference to VIU and to the communities in which we live, work, study, and play.

# How does VIU engage with community today?

At VIU, we have engaged with our communities in a variety of ways including:

## Teaching and learning with community

Core to VIU’s purpose, of course, is to provide excellent teaching and rich learning experiences. Much of that richness occurs in community.

* **Community-led and place-based learning.** VIU has been working with Indigenous communities to co-design and co-deliver learning programs that take place off-campus and in or near students’ home communities. Examples include the Indigenous Eco-Tourism Program and the First Nations Stewardship Technicians Training Program.
* **Work-integrated learning in the community.** Community businesses, school boards, health services, and organizations have long been host to VIU students who participate in co-ops, internships, practicums, and field schools. Examples include building houses with Habitat for Humanity, training in schools and hospitals, grant writing and community research.
* **Learning opportunities at VIU for the community.** In addition to the full range of for-credit training at VIU, the university also organizes learning opportunities for community members. Programs include Professional Development Training courses, general interest ElderCollege classes, Grandkids University, as well as invitations for community members to attend concerts, art shows, and learning events on our campuses and in the community. The Indigenous Lecture Series, the Engaged Citizen’s Speaker Series, the Community Forum on Social Justice, and the Arts and Humanities Colloquium are prime examples.
* **Community experts in the classroom.** Experts from across the region regularly join VIU classrooms as guest lecturers, presenters, performers and advisors.

## Researching with community

As in all universities, research and applied problem-solving is also key to our purpose. At VIU, much of that work is undertaken with our community.

* **Undertaking joint research projects with community members.** VIU researchers have long worked with community partners to identify research questions, carry out research, and mobilize communities around the findings. A few examples include the work of many of our Research Centers and Institutes. For example, Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute works with First Nations, local governments, not for profit groups, including K’omoks First Nation, Gold River, and the World Wildlife Fund on a range of projects addressing sustainability. The Applied Environmental Research Lab monitors air quality and supports communities to address the opioid crisis. The World Leisure Centre of Excellence collaborates with community partners to address childhood obesity in the Recreation Prescription Project. CBAIR (Community-Based Applied Interdisciplinary Research) matches community partners with interdisciplinary teams of students to conduct social research that meet a variety of issues related to food security, health and well being, equity and social justice.
* **Focusing on research topics of importance to community members.** In addition to joint research projects is the scholarly work undertaken by faculty who address topics that deeply affect our communities. For example, our faculty and Research and Innovation Chairs address a number of critical issues in society such as the health of our shellfish industry, sustainable tourism, aboriginal early childhood education, agricultural land use and wildfires, fresh water supply, resilience of health care workers, women’s health and community based arts.
* **Building innovations with community.** Our faculty are also involved in applied research and innovation to help advance industry growth and development. For example, our culinary arts department is working with the Centre for Seafood Innovation and the Vancouver Island Economic Alliance to create and test recipes to support enhanced food security.

## Exchanging knowledge

Beyond teaching, learning, and research, other forms of knowledge exchange are happening all the time.

* **Community members as Program Advisors.** Across VIU’s programs, community members serve on Advisory Groups, helping to ensure that VIU graduates are work-ready and that VIU’s services are meeting needs. The Community Advisory Committee for the VIU-run Centre for Community Outreach and Care is one of many great examples.
* **VIU expertise in service of the community.** VIU employees also work to support community efforts through lending their own expertise on boards, committees, or as speakers or performers at events. These opportunities allow VIU members to extend our reach and add vitality to community life.

## Encouraging student-led engagement with community

VIU’s students, as well as employees, are drivers of community service and partnership.

* **Service and activism in the community.** VIU students lead initiatives in and with communities in support of important social issues. In addition to student activism against racism, violence against Indigenous women and children, and other issues, students are working to make change in other ways. *Awareness of Climate Change through Education and Research*(ACER), for example, is a student-led and faculty-supported public outreach initiative, and through the Centre for Community Outreach and Care, students are leading projects that address poverty in our community.

## Sharing resources

VIU and community partners regularly share and leverage resources in creative ways.

* **Shared Funding.** VIU’s Regional Initiatives Fund has enabled faculty to work alongside a range of community partners to engage in applied research projects since 2017. Additionally, community partners regularly contribute to VIU’s fundraising campaigns in support of shared causes.
* **Shared Facilities.** VIU shares its premises with the school districts in Duncan and Powell River, and loans or rents out its facilities at low cost to community organizations looking for meeting spaces, theatre venues, residence spaces, or gallery events.
* **Shared Services.** VIU also makes available other resources, such as community access to the VIU Dental Clinic, Hairdressing Studio, Restaurant, and VIU Library.

## Contributing to the public good

And lastly, VIU lends its time, resources, and people to a range of community initiatives.

* **Collaboration on pressing societal issues.** VIU has worked with community organizations on issues of importance to the whole region. One example is the campaign to sign up local families to free government education grants through the Canada Learning Bond program. Those grants, which can be spent at any post-secondary institution, expand the potential powerful impact of education across our region. Similarly, VIU’s commitment to students who grew up in the foster care system – students who face high levels of poverty – is shown through our Tuition Waiver program.
* **Contribution to cultural vibrancy.** VIU also contributes to the cultural vibrancy of our region, seeking to make all of our host communities “university towns.” The offering of musical and theatrical performances, along with the extensive Milner Gardens accentuate the experiences for residents in our region.

# What have we heard so far about what’s working?

Over the course of 2020 and 2021, VIU sought feedback from students, employees, and the wider community about VIU’s direction for the next five years. In online workshops and surveys, we asked VIU’s stakeholders to identify our strengths and share ideas for the future in a range of areas, including strengthening community and building partnerships with Indigenous peoples. The [What We Heard](https://gov.viu.ca/sites/default/files/what-we-heard-report-14-december-update.docx) report summarized some of that input:

Community engagement is a point of pride at VIU, intensified today as the whole of our region plans its response to the pandemic and its profound impact on the workforce. Key strengths centre on student experiences in the community, VIU’s contribution to regional economies, as well as its roles as a regional knowledge hub, as a service provider and neighbour, and as a learning partner for community members. Visions for the future included ideas for extending community-based learning, building greater capacity to link programs, students and employers, and greater visibility for VIU in the communities it serves.*[[2]](#footnote-2)*

In addition, we collected hundreds of ideas about the direction we need to take, the approach and spirit of engagement we needed to maintain or strengthen, the priorities we should apply, the organization of our internal resources and people, as well as concrete ideas for initiatives to continue or launch in the future.

Our new plan builds on our track record in community engagement. Community engagement is front and centre in our new [Strategic Plan: *People, Place, Potential*](https://gov.viu.ca/strategic-planning). Two of the Plan’s six commitments focus squarely on community relationships:

* **Grow to be the region’s hub for research and expertise.** Our communities are active in solving the social, economic, and environmental challenges of our region and VIU wants to be the partner of choice in supporting that crucial work. We seek to become the community’s first point of call for research and expertise to address the issues that matter most to them.
* **Build stronger partnerships with Indigenous communities.** VIU is committed to building on its partnerships with the Indigenous communities of this region. We will do more to honour Indigenous students, employees, and communities; deepen our understanding of Indigenous knowledges; and work with Indigenous people to co-create programming that better serves the priorities of their communities.

VIU now wants to deepen our commitment to community engagement by creating an action plan. Building on our shared strengths, resources, and relationships, but acknowledging genuine constraints on time, money, and other resources, how can we best move forward**? In each of these areas (and more), where are there opportunities to build on our track record and create positive impacts through community engagement?**

* Teaching and learning
* Researching
* Exchanging knowledge
* Encouraging student-led engagement
* Sharing resources
* Contributing to the public good

# Call for input

We know based on past experiences that investing in reciprocal relationships results in mutually beneficial outcomes for VIU and our community partners.

Going forward, we’d like to learn from our internal community and external partners about how we can build on our track record in community engagement. Over the coming weeks and months, VIU will be reaching out in conversation with our internal and external communities to build a formal **Community Engagement Plan** for VIU.

## How can you provide input?

1. Host a discussion using the conversation kit within your Department to help us identify how VIU is currently engaging with community partners and where you see opportunities for deepened engagement.
2. Attend a lunch conversation with senior leaders to share what you are currently doing and where we could deepen commitment.
	* January 17, 2021 – Teaching and learning with Community
	* January 20, 2021 – Researching and exchanging knowledge with Community
	* January 24, 2021 – Encouraging student engagement with community
	* January 27, 2021 – Sharing resources and contributing to the public good with community
3. Provide input on Ethello (an on line engagement platform) in February to provide feedback on goals and potential actions.

Our hope is to recognize, strengthen, and broaden the partnerships that VIU has developed while collaborating to set shared priorities for our work together.

We hope you will join the conversation

1. [Community Engagement Classification](https://public-purpose.org/initiatives/carnegie-elective-classifications/community-engagement-classification-u-s/) (U.S.), Public Purpose Institute, no date. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. VIU, [*What We Heard Report*](https://viucanada.sharepoint.com/sites/viu_teams_CommunityEngagementAdvisoryGroup/Shared%20Documents/General/Workshop%206%20-%2016%20June%202021/Community%20engagement%20is%20a%20point%20of%20pride%20at%20VIU%2C%20intensified%20today%20as%20the%20whole%20of%20our%20region%20plans%20its%20response%20to%20the%20pandemic%20and%20its%20profound%20impact%20on%20the%20workforce.%20Key%20strengths%20centre%20on%20student%20experiences%20in%20the%20community%2C%20VIU%E2%80%99s%20contribution%20to%20regional%20economies%2C%20as%20well%20as%20its%20roles%20as%20a%20regional%20knowledge%20hub%2C%20as%20a%20service%20provider%20and%20neighbour%2C%20and%20as%20a%20learning%20partner%20for%20community%20members.%20Visions%20for%20the%20future%20included%20ideas%20for%20extending%20community-based%20learning%2C%20building%20greater%20capacity%20to%20link%20programs%2C%20students%20and%20employers%2C%20and%20greater%20visibility%20for%20VIU%20in%20the%20communities%20it%20serves.), 2020, chapter six. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)