

A CRITICAL MAPPING OF COMMUNITY ENGAGED LEARNING IN CANADIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Community engaged learning (CEL) is an increasingly important collaborative form of experiential learning (EL) within Canadian higher education. This article critically examines the landscape of CEL within publicly funded universities across Canada. As EL gains traction across the country, CEL emerges as a unique response to varied social exigencies amidst the corporatization of academia. Ethically coordinated CEL can address societal challenges and nurture conscientious citizens, but navigating the complexities of CEL programming demands substantial resources and a commitment to reflective practices. Through a comprehensive scan of university websites and strategic plans, our research reveals myriad approaches to CEL terminology, institutional commitments, and community engagement. The study identifies key pathways for future research and calls for the establishment of a national network to facilitate collaboration and advance the collective understanding and impact of CEL in Canada.

Keywords: community engaged learning, experiential learning, Canada, university priorities

Résumé

L'apprentissage engagé dans la communauté (AEC) est une forme de collaboration d'apprentissage expérientiel (AE) de plus en plus importante dans l'enseignement supérieur canadien. Cet article examine de manière critique le paysage de l'AEC dans les universités publiques au Canada. Alors que l'AE progresse, l'AEC apparaît comme une réponse distinctive à diverses exigences sociales dans un contexte de corporatisation du milieu universitaire. Coordonné de manière éthique, l'AEC peut relever des défis sociétaux et soutenir des citoyens consciencieux, mais sa mise en œuvre exige des ressources substantielles et un engagement envers des pratiques réflexives. À partir d'une analyse des sites Web et des plans stratégiques des universités, notre recherche met en lumière différentes approches de la terminologie, des engagements institutionnels et de l'engagement communautaire. L'étude identifie des pistes clés pour la recherche future et appelle à la création d'un réseau national afin de renforcer la collaboration et l'impact de l'AEC au Canada.

Mots clés : apprentissage communautaire engagé, apprentissage expérientiel, Canada, priorités universitaires

INTRODUCTION

Community engaged learning (CEL) is a unique and increasingly important form of experiential learning (EL) within Canadian higher education. The term CEL, also referred to in other locales and institutions as service learning or community service learning, is used to describe a praxis-oriented process that sees students engaging in projects that are developed collaboratively with community partners for mutually beneficial outcomes (Western University, 2019). With the rise of EL across Canadian higher education, this article offers a critical overview of CEL within the country's network of publicly funded universities. Drawing on primary research and grounded in relevant scholarly literature, it contributes to intensifying discussions about CEL, which is at a critical juncture in the country.

Over the last several years, EL has been growing in both size and scope throughout Canadian universities and colleges for a gamut of reasons, including the push by some provincial and territorial governments to ostensibly prepare students for the labour force post-graduation (LaCroix, 2024; Levac, 2020; McGowan, 2021). To clarify terminology, we view EL as a broad pedagogical “approach that educators use to intentionally connect learners with practical experiences that include authentic and focused reflection” (Western University, 2019). Under this umbrella fall myriad types of EL activities, from case-based learning to short- and long-term internships, from co-ops to CEL experiences.¹ As a distinctive form of EL geared toward fostering the public good, CEL prioritizes reciprocal, trust-based relationships with community partners (Smeltzer & Sperduti, 2023).

CEL is therefore particularly relevant for university administrations keen to demonstrate their institution's commitment to local and regional communities, to highlight the academy's

social relevance, and to justify public spending. Universities seeking to gain an edge in competing for students also actively promote various EL opportunities, including CEL, to appeal to incoming cohorts seeking “real-life” experiences and pathways to hone skillsets for their lives and livelihoods post-graduation (Aujla & Hamm, 2018; Kostell et al., 2021; Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020).

As universities become more corporatized and entrenched in a metrics-oriented environment, these hands-on experiences have become a key benchmark of institutional success in many regions of the country, especially in locales weathering problematic performance-based funding models (Lawrence & Rezai-Rashti, 2022; Majhanovich, 2024; Smeltzer et al., 2022; Spooner, 2020). Notwithstanding serious concerns about the deepening neo-liberalization of higher education, we contend that CEL can play a critical role in helping to address wide-ranging societal exigencies. Indeed, as students work alongside non-profit and community-based organizations to advance the public good through reciprocal relationships, CEL can help foster critical, conscientious, and caring citizens (Goemans et al., 2018; Karasik, 2020). To achieve such wide-ranging outcomes, CEL endeavours must be underpinned by in-depth and authentic reflection as students grapple with a range of emotions, explore positionalities, and foster their personal agency (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Morris, 2020). However, as Power (2010) highlights, critical reflection is not always intentional, continuous, or rigorous during a student's CEL journey. Rather, authentic reflection requires structured guidance, institutional support, and a commitment of resources to be productive for students (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Helyer, 2015). The work needed to coordinate and facilitate this kind of critical reflection is compounded by the need to intertwine students' community-based experiences with relevant curriculum (Smeltzer et al., 2022). Community engaged learning programming is therefore remarkably labour-intensive in nature and institutions have an obligation to provide requisite human and financial resources.

1 At our institution, work-integrated learning (WIL) refers to EL programming that integrates academic learning with practical, employment-related work settings (Western University, 2019). For a robust discussion of WIL, see Björck & Willermark (2024).

Though we, the co-authors, may informally know that this type of community-oriented EL has become progressively more important throughout Canadian higher education, to date there has been no mapping of CEL across the country's university network. This research aimed to fill that gap. In the discussion that follows, we describe our study's methodology, highlight key findings emerging from the data, and offer targeted recommendations of future research trajectories for this growing area of scholarship and practice.

METHODOLOGY

Between April 2023 and mid-October 2024, our six-person interdisciplinary research team conducted an in-depth scan of the Canadian CEL landscape, focusing on undergraduate curricular programming offered at publicly funded universities in all 10 provinces and three territories. We describe this mapping process as critical in reference to the urgency of the research, as well as systematic in its multi-step approach to presenting a snapshot of CEL at a centralized level in public universities. Research that maps an aspect of the curricular landscape in this manner is important for understanding how educational frameworks evolve and address the needs of diverse student populations (e.g., Baker et al., 2022). For example, Brunette-Debassige et al. (2022) conducted a mapping study to gain insight into how universities across Canada work to Indigenize the academy. The authors charted five approaches universities have adopted to foster "curricular transformation" (p. 5), offering a lens to examine how major and minor changes appear to be taking place within institutions, from hiring Indigenous faculty to establishing offices of Indigenous initiatives, from providing professional development for instructors to establishing relationships with Indigenous organizations and communities. In a similar manner, we mapped what CEL looks like across the Canadian university landscape, an undertaking that is valuable in and of itself (Smeltzer et al., 2021) as no comparable large-scale study has been undertaken (at the time of writing). Given the sheer size and variations in this CEL topog-

raphy across the country, our study was therefore not designed to focus attention on specific examples of programming and policies. However, through the research process our team identified recurring themes that merit additional analysis, which are described in the concluding section of this article.

In this Methodology section, we recount our team's collaborative, iterative approach to the five-part research process. To enhance reliability, a minimum of two members of the team were assigned to independently research every university. Our inclusion criteria for institutions encompassed all main or "parent" campuses of English-language, French-language, and bilingual public universities listed by Universities Canada (2023). Our decision to exclude affiliated university colleges and satellite campuses from the research was based solely on the sheer number of entities, which would necessitate a significantly larger study. Our exclusion criteria also removed private institutions from the research project. Given the public-good orientation of CEL and the role it strives to play in promoting the "third mission" of the academy (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020), our perspective is that CEL does not align with the more corporate sector interests of for-profit educational establishments.

Guided by these criteria, our study included a total of 80 universities. Our team's first step in the research process was to ascertain whether a university has a current mission statement or analogous overarching statement (e.g., vision, mandate, strategy) about EL or work-integrated learning (WIL) and, if so, whether it includes references to community-oriented forms of EL.²

Second, we examined overarching institutional strategic plans to determine if the university includes public commitments to supporting EL writ large, and CEL (or analogous term) specifically. Our inclusion criteria included strategic plans that, at the time of our research, were publicly available and extended into or beyond the

2 Although we contend that CEL fits best under the umbrella of EL, for some institutions it falls under the broader category of WIL.

year 2024. These two sets of public-facing communications—EL (or WIL) mission statements and institutional strategic plans—were the starting point for our study as they offer important insight into a university’s priorities, including their perspectives on, and possible commitments to, CEL programming.

Third, to determine if a university offers CEL, we engaged in an in-depth examination of its public-facing website. Although the term “community engaged learning” appears to be gaining traction across the country, many English-language institutions use other terminology to describe this praxis-oriented pedagogy. Given the panoply of potential terms, we cast a wide net of terms to capture CEL activities, including “community engaged learning,” “community engagement,” “community service learning,” and “service learning.”³ For French-language institutions, our team looked for terms that relate to discussions of EL such as “apprentissage expérientiel,” “stage,” and “communauté/communautaire.” In the Key Findings section that follows, we provide a detailed statistical breakdown of terms for English-language universities and a synopsis for French and bilingual institutions. However, for ease of reporting, we use “CEL” throughout this article as a catch-all for the varied terms employed across the country.

Fourth, if our search process produced evidence of CEL at a university, we examined its website to determine whether some of the coordination and facilitation of CEL takes place in a centralized office. We thus excluded from our study CEL activities occurring in discrete units across a campus (e.g., within departments, faculties, programs). Although CEL is oft-times heavily decentralized within institutions for a range of disciplinary-specific and other reasons, mapping this latticework across multiple campuses would constitute a colossal research undertaking. If we found an institutional-level

CEL office or clear evidence of centralized personnel dedicated to CEL activities, we ascertained where/what unit within the university this work takes place.

Fifth, to validate the research data procured from the above four steps, a member of our team sent a confirmation inquiry to institutional representatives via publicly available contact information listed on university websites. These representatives included specific individuals if available, as well as general email addresses of positions associated with either EL programming writ large or CEL more specifically. We received 39 email responses from 80 queries sent. Of these responses, 12 institutions requested follow-up correspondence via phone, Zoom, or Microsoft Teams (in French or English) to provide clarification of their university’s information instead of providing details through email.⁴

KEY FINDINGS

Study Results: Overview

We begin with some pertinent statistics emerging from our primary research. First, we examined a total of 80 Canadian universities: 61 English-language, 16 French-language, and three bilingual institutions. Based on an in-depth analysis of material available on public-facing websites for these universities, we found evidence of CEL at 58 English universities (95%), four French (25%), and all three bilingual universities (100%). For institutions where we could not find CEL programming, as noted in the Methodology section, we followed up with an email directed to an institutional-level EL person or position for confirmation. We received a response to this request from all but one English-language and three French-language universities.

Of the English-language universities with demonstrated CEL programming (i.e., 58 of

3 Although we have not included hyphens in this list of terms, many institutions insert them between “service” and “learning,” or between “community” and the corresponding subsequent word (e.g., “-engaged,” “-based,” “-centred,” “-oriented”).

4 We could not initiate fulsome discussions in these correspondences without ethics clearance. However, at our institution, there is no reasonable expectation of privacy in requesting or confirming publicly accessible information of this nature and therefore does not require ethics review.

61 universities), 26 (~45%) have a centralized CEL unit or clear evidence of dedicated CEL personnel (at least one position) in an institution-wide capacity. Likewise, three of four (75%) French-language and two of three (~67%) bilingual universities with CEL have similar evidence of centralized CEL staff. An important caveat, though, is that the existence of institutional-level CEL personnel does not reflect the extent or scope of a unit's programming, nor its human and financial resources. Based on our examination, some of these units are comprised of ample personnel whereas others have a very limited number of staff members.

Prior to conducting this research, we anticipated that centralized CEL units and personnel would be housed predominantly within a larger EL (or WIL) office. This is indeed the case for 31 of the 58 (~54%) English-language universities with centralized CEL programming. However, institutional-level CEL is also housed in other on-campus units. For English-language universities, these include student services and student experience offices (nine of 58, ~16%), teaching and learning centres (four of 58, ~7%), and community engagement offices (two of 58, ~3%), with an additional 10 of 58 (~17%) located in other campus units. Of note, we found that a significant number of universities integrate at least part of their CEL programming into a community engagement office, often with non-academic staff members working across both a centralized EL unit and this type of office geared toward building relationships between campus and community.

Second, with respect to terminology, we found an array of titles to describe CEL activities. For the 58 English-language universities offering CEL, 12 (~21%) employ the term "community engaged learning," another 12 (~21%) use "service learning," nine (~16%) have adopted the title "community service learning," and four (~7%) use the term "community engagement." A hefty 21 (~36%) English institutions use a variety of other terms, including "experiential service learning," "community based learning," "community centred education," and "community oriented work."

Of the four French-language institutions with evidence of CEL offerings, three refer to "apprentissage par le service" and one uses the term "apprentissage expérientiel." All four modify this phrase with some reference to community: "communautaire" (two), "à la communauté" (one), and "en milieu communautaire" (one). As well, one of the bilingual universities refers to CEL as "programme d'apprentissage par l'engagement communautaire." Given that no widely accepted CEL-oriented terminology exists across French-language institutions, future in-depth primary research, especially in the province of Quebec, would provide important insight into potentially different approaches to community-oriented forms of EL.

Third, as noted in the Methodology section, overarching strategic plans signal the significance and role EL plays in an institution's vision for its future. This is distinct from focused references to CEL, which we outline in the next section. Institutional plans that fit our criteria of being both publicly available and current include 52 English-language, 13 French-language, and three bilingual universities. Of these, 50 of 52 English-language (~96%), four of 13 French-language (~31%), and two of three bilingual (~67%) universities reference the importance of EL to their institution's strategic future. To ascertain these statistics, a minimum of two research team members independently coded each plan as "very committed" or "somewhat committed" to EL endeavours. In our post-coding discussions, members of the research team expressed surprise that many of these plans include an explicit pledge that every student at the corresponding institution, regardless of discipline or field of study, would be offered an opportunity to participate in a minimum of one EL experience during their degree program. There will, of course, be variability in type, intensity, and quality of these experiences. However, and notwithstanding that such promises may be rhetorical to appease governments and to appeal to students and donors, a public commitment to offering EL opportunities, which was especially apparent in English-language institutions, signals its importance to university administrations.

Relatedly, these strategic plans overwhelmingly vaunt the benefits of EL in terms of helping students to secure employment, especially in the private sector. Indeed, the language makes a strong connection between hands-on learning and “industry needs.” Although we are certainly not opposed to students honing skillsets or gaining experience to advance their careers, these are not the only benefits afforded to them from participating in EL. Stated markers of success in meeting strategic plan objectives vis-à-vis EL are also predominantly quantifiable. Key benchmarks include post-graduation employment rates, number of students who have completed placements, number of external partners, number of contact hours, and number of EL-specific courses available. Although qualitative indicators of enriching EL experiences may be more difficult to articulate, especially in succinct, public-facing documents, these plans often rely on vague adjectives like “quality,” “valuable,” and “engaging” to describe experiences without elucidation of how placements affect students’ personal, academic, and professional lives in a multitude of ways. Foregrounding these affective outcomes is (arguably) especially relevant to CEL, a unique form of community-oriented EL geared toward fostering the public good.

At a more focused level, our team took two approaches to determine whether strategic plans signal the importance specifically of CEL to an institution. First, we examined if the plan refers to CEL or a comparable term. To this end, 37 of 52 (~61%) English-language, two of 13 (~15%) French-language, and two (~67%) bilingual universities clearly mention CEL (or an analogous term) in their plans. For those that reference CEL, apart from one university, the language is wholly positive and draws heavily on the rhetoric of success and personal transformation. Examples of such language include “development of these professional skill sets” will help students “solve problems,” “mettre connaissances en pratique,” “prepare for a rewarding future,” benefit from an “expérience enrichissante,” and develop “en lien plus solide entre formation et l’expérience en milieu de travail.” We recognize why institutions instrumen-

talize positive language about CEL to attract students, as well as to appeal to donors and alumni. However, the almost exclusively positive messaging can be problematic inasmuch as “the continuous sharing of positive stories and problems with pleasant endings” limits the range of students’ experiences, including those that facilitate growth through challenges that may be uncomfortable or disconcerting (Schutter, 2018, p. 9; Sperduti & Smeltzer, 2022). Further, learning outcomes are often subtle and incremental, which do not necessarily fit a university’s “kind face” public relations strategy that extols opportunities for near-immediate personal transformation (Raddon & Harrison, 2015).

In the literature, CEL also tends to be framed in a positive light with critical interventions focused predominantly on prescriptive suggestions for improved student learning outcomes, more accurate assessments, and greater inclusivity (e.g., Aláez et al., 2022; Salam et al., 2019; Yamamoto et al., 2023). These are important contributions to wider conversations about CEL policies and programming yet tend to be premised on narratives of assumed success. Other scholarship focuses attention on potentially problematic aspects of CEL, highlighting ethical concerns regarding the ways in which it can reinforce neo-liberal narratives and hegemony (e.g., encouraging students to view themselves as precarious labour and to self-brand as exploitable; Butin, 2006; Grain & Lund, 2016; Raddon & Harrison, 2015). These are valid critiques that deserve sustained attention. However, space should be made for conversations about how to acknowledge the ethical complexities of CEL and harness this insight for productive outcomes. In the one Canadian university that offered a more nuanced discussion of CEL on a public-facing website, the language focused more on the process and the *journey* of community engagement, rather than on specific outcomes. We welcome this kind of language, which highlights how CEL can afford students opportunities to engage in the messy work of trying to make a difference in the world as they cultivate their social consciousness.

The second CEL-oriented component of strategic plans we examined was whether and to what extent universities make public commitments to community engagement writ large and/or to fostering campus–community relationships. Our research found that of the 52 English-language universities with strategic plans that reference CEL, 43 (~83%) are “very committed” and nine (~17%) “somewhat committed” to advancing these relationships. Likewise, of the 13 French-language universities, eight (~62%) are “very committed” and five (~39%) “somewhat committed”; two (~67%) bilingual universities are “very committed” and one (~33%) “somewhat committed” to such partnerships. These statistics reveal that most plans highlight the central importance of campus–community relationships and that universities brand their institutions as being community-focused.

However, this language is almost entirely separate from references to EL broadly or CEL more specifically. Only four of the strategic plans (three English and one French) explicitly link EL to community commitments. These findings are important because faculty and staff wanting to underscore the significance of CEL or to seek additional resources must often make the connections themselves to demonstrate to various levels of administration the valuable relationship that can be forged between this praxis-oriented pedagogy and community partnerships. This undertaking can be especially difficult for those in precariously employed positions. Contingent faculty and staff often face challenges related to job and financial security, heightened stress, and limited institutional resources, all of which can also impact individuals’ capacity to engage in labour-intensive community projects and pedagogy (Cahuas & Levkoe, 2017; Compare et al., 2024; Cummins et al., 2023, pp. 90–92; Fang, 2016; Hearn & Burns, 2021).

Fourth, as our team mapped CEL across the country, we looked for patterns in terms of university size and the presence of CEL at institutions. Drawing on our original list of universities, we separated main campus institutions into three categories according to undergrad-

uate full-time enrolment: small (under 5,000 students), medium (5,000–15,000), and large (over 15,000). A minimum of two team members then independently coded and compared results in two areas: (1) whether institutions in each of the three size categories have dedicated CEL staff at a centralized level, and (2) whether an institution’s strategic plan makes clear reference to supporting campus–community relationships.

On the one hand, we might expect to see larger institutions (with potentially greater financial and human resources) dedicate administrative support for centralized CEL. On the other hand, we might expect smaller institutions to have closer ties to the municipality or region in which they operate and therefore place greater emphasis on CEL initiatives. The data emerging from this critical mapping challenge the second assumption: 15 of 22 (~68%) large universities have staff dedicated to coordinating CEL initiatives through a centralized office of some sort, which is relatively substantial, whereas only nine of 28 (~32%) of small institutions have the same. Medium institutions have similar statistics to that of their smaller institutional counterparts, with at least one dedicated CEL staff member working out of a centralized office at eight of 23 (~35%) universities. An important proviso with these statistics, as noted above, is that our team could not consistently determine the extent of human or financial resources devoted to supporting CEL through centralized institutional offices, as the number of positions earmarked exclusively to coordinating CEL can vary and information about funding allocations for CEL support is not publicly available.

In terms of explicit commitments to campus–community relationships, 15 of 22 (~68%) large universities, 13 of 23 (~57%) medium universities, and 15 of 28 (~54%) small universities include prominent references in their strategic plans. These statistics seem relatively robust. However, most institutions employ the word “community” to refer to several different constituencies within the same plan, from the “university community” to the “academic community,” from the “local community” within which

the campus is located to sweeping references to “the global community” and groups identified through a common identifier (e.g., Acadian community, francophone community). Thus, although all the university plans referenced here include passages about the importance of building and maintaining relationships with communities external to campus, which is critically important to CEL, the language is diluted by other uses of the word “community.”

Challenges and Limitations

Although CEL activities are, of course, context-specific, their coordination and facilitation tend to be undertaken largely within institutional vacuums, often with relatively little knowledge of what counterparts are doing in other regions of the country and often even within their own university. From previous ethics-approved semi-structured interviews (2019 in person, 2021 and 2022 via Zoom) with 19 faculty and staff from six universities in Ontario,⁵ individuals relayed that as CEL grows throughout the Canadian university ecosystem, scholars and practitioners need to share resources; learn more about the practices, policies, and approaches of colleagues working in different locales; and engage in frank discussions about common challenges.⁶ This need for open and robust conversations was underscored by comments made by 39 faculty and staff in response to our

team’s requests for data confirmation for the study described in this article. Although many respondents expressed excitement about this research, their institution was actively updating its EL information, restructuring or renaming its EL/CEL unit, or experiencing employee turnover and thus could not provide fulsome or up-to-date information about their institutional CEL landscape.

A key strength of this research is also another limitation—we offer a bird’s eye view of the Canadian CEL landscape, but this meta-level analysis sacrifices some specifics that would allow for more targeted insight into differences within and between regions. Additionally, as institutional leadership and regional governments change, shifts in priorities can impact how and to what extent CEL is supported. A longitudinal study, including semi-structured interviews to capture individuals’ first-hand experiences, would provide particularly valuable information about how CEL transforms as it expands throughout the country.

Although not the focus of this research, our team frequently noted inconsistency regarding terminology *within* universities. Given the situational nature of CEL, different academic and non-academic units brand their programming for varying reasons. Yet, the lack of uniformity not only between, but also within, universities poses challenges for conducting comparative research, for faculty and staff looking to connect with colleagues and to share resources, for community partners collaborating with institutions, and for students trying to determine what paths best fit their personal, academic, and professional aspirations. Closer to our own home, the partners we work with in our city’s communities often express some frustration with the variability in EL terminology at our university. Even with a robust central website and dedicated staff, these partners comment on the challenge of trying to figure out what types of placements are being offered by the institution, by whom, and with what expectations and types of support. Community engaged learning’s oft-decentralized nature is exacerbated by the fact that many curricular and non-curricular offerings are short-lived, ephemeral opportunities (Loh et al., 2021).

5 Ethics review process completed through the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board at Western University (Project ID 121145, Project ID 118548, and Project ID 113475).

6 Examples of important Canadian venues that offer space for conversations about ethical community engagement include Community Campus Engage Canada (<https://ccecCanada.ca/>). Here we draw attention to an important distinction between CEL and community engagement. While the former relates to teaching, learning, and pedagogy, community engagement can entail a “broader context” of research, public scholarship, and political interventions beyond curricular considerations (Nguyen & Condry, 2023, pp. 4–5).

RECOMMENDED RESEARCH PATHWAYS

First, as the discussion directly above highlights, Canada lacks coherency in terminology, language, and definitions for community-based forms of EL (Asafo-Adjei, 2020, p. 77; Lund & Bragg, 2020; Universities Canada, 2021, p. 6). Though we are not recommending a shared CEL nomenclature across the country, this growing field of scholarship and practice would benefit from a common set of CEL *principles*. In 2019, a Canadian Pilot Cohort of 16 universities began the process of considering how to modify the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement and adapt it to the Canadian context (University of British Columbia Community Engagement, 2022). In July 2024, the Carnegie Foundation and the American Council on Education circulated an announcement that they had officially entered a partnership with Canada to develop a Canadian version of the classification. While not focused exclusively on pedagogy and notwithstanding concerns we express about drawing on an American classification system, the “values and principles” developed by the Canadian cohort of universities capture well the ethical underpinnings of community-based pedagogical endeavours: reciprocity, reconciliation, fun, courage, accountability, collaboration, and equity, diversity, and inclusion (Simon Fraser University, 2021).

Second, and related to our first recommendation, we contend that Canada needs a country-wide network of CEL faculty, non-academic staff, and community partners, especially given that the Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning (CACSL) is now defunct. Although the Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada) organization is the primary (and impressive) voice for EL in Canada, CEL currently plays a relatively small role in this network and is housed under its overarching definition of WIL (CEWIL Canada, 2021; Peters & Pizarro Milian, 2024, pp. 6–7). We thus argue the critical importance of creating a sustainable CEL-specific, bilingual national network composed of individuals who develop, coordinate, facilitate, and critique CEL

activities, as well as community partners who host and co-educate students.⁷ Future research would therefore include contacting individuals from a range of universities and their external partners to discuss in greater depth their vision for a national CEL association.

Third, our bilingual team members found clear indications of CEL at several French-language universities. However, as researchers based in an English-language institution, we recognize that differences in approaches to community-oriented forms of EL extend beyond linguistics. This necessitates a more fulsome understanding of how CEL is conceptualized and facilitated in French-language universities, especially in the province of Quebec, through a series of semi-structured interviews with faculty and non-academic staff.

Fourth, although the research presented here includes 80 universities, it does not reflect a full picture of the Canadian environment. In the case of our university, for example, affiliated colleges operate their own EL programming separate from the main campus. To offer a more complete account, affiliated colleges and satellite campuses should be included in future research, but this would necessitate a *significant* outlay of time and resources. A series of case studies from various regions of the country is a more feasible undertaking and would provide valuable insight into a substantial set of student demographics.

Fifth, proactively addressing students’ wellness as they engage in local or domestic forms of CEL has become increasingly important. Indeed, engaging in CEL can both positively and negatively impact students’ well-being in different ways and at various points before, during, and after their community-based experiences (Smeltzer & Sperduti, 2023). In challenging the tenuous language of wellness and well-being that is inextricable from larger commercial and pharmaceutical drives, recent scholarship

7 To this end, in spring 2025, one of the co-authors (Smeltzer) co-established an official CEL Community of Practice within CEWIL to advance this process.

has identified the need “to de-emphasize the individual as a unit of analysis by reorienting toward the connective tissue implied by a revitalized definition of *social wellness*” (Charise et al., 2024, p. 450). By focusing on this “connective tissue” of social wellness, well-being is re-defined as something that emerges from community bonds and social networks, rather than focusing solely on individual health (Jordan, 2023). This conceptualization also asks how, in terms of CEL, fostering community can break free from neo-liberal pressures on wellness as a tool for productivity by creating a relational and meaningful university experience for students (Badr, 2022). However, broader sets of moral, ethical, and cultural issues can destabilize students’ wellness during their CEL experiences (e.g., managing the emotional impacts of un/familiar systemic injustice, feeling helpless to address “wicked” problems, balancing CEL responsibilities with other personal, academic, and employment obligations). We therefore recommend additional research be dedicated to mapping wise practices, policies, and approaches that support students’ holistic wellness throughout their CEL journeys with special attention to intersectional and specific demographic impacts (Smeltzer & McCracken, 2025; Stowe et al., 2022).

As a particularly salient case in point, Gatto et al. (2021) highlight the urgent need to address accessibility and inclusivity specifically regarding EL, WIL, and CEL opportunities for students with disabilities, which has received scant attention from many Canadian universities (p. 125). In accordance with federal, provincial, and territorial human rights legislation, universities have a commitment to create and maintain equitable learning environments for all individuals (e.g., the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms). We therefore argue that additional research needs to also address CEL accessibility for Indigenous, first-generation, international, and neurodivergent students (e.g., Buckner et al., 2020; Guanlao et al., 2025; Guo & Guo, 2017; Livingstone, 2022; Stowe et al., 2022). This research is especially critical to help ensure that universities commit the human and financial resources, as well as the immaterial resources

(e.g., public-facing political commitments), required to support a wide range of students being able to fully participate in CEL experiences. A key concern here is that much of the additional labour required to provide this support often constitutes hidden care work and emotional labour that has distinctly gendered and racialized implications (Altan-Olcay & Bergeron, 2022; Gaudet et al., 2022; Lawless, 2018).

The above five pathways cover a significant amount of ground but still do not fully capture the scope of research required not only to understand the state of CEL in the country, but also to positively impact its future trajectory. A country-wide, bilingual CEL-specific network or association would play a critical role in this process. By providing faculty, staff, students, and community partners with a venue to share, engage, and collaborate with one another, we can collectively forge a path that is uniquely Canadian.

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