

**Voluntary Sector Studies Network**



# **Our First Year-in-Review: Summary**

May 2015



**VOLUNTARY SECTOR STUDIES NETWORK**  
LUTHER COLLEGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

# VSSN Steering Group Members

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## SUMMARY

### Who are we?

The Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN) is an interdisciplinary, community-university collaborative, comprising students, the voluntary sector and faculty/staff administered out of the VSSN office at Luther College at the University of Regina. The VSSN program embraces three interrelated themes – learn, research, innovate. A twelve-member steering group was formed in September 2014 and continues to guide our work. Our ultimate goal is the sustainability of the voluntary/nonprofit sector for the benefit of our communities.

### What did we do?

We began our first year in September 2014. We created community-university engagement and research strategies that focused on Saskatchewan and Canada. The community-university engagement work included public conversations centred on the voluntary sector through discussion meetings (Koffee Klatches), focus groups and a forum on financing the sector. These events saw students, voluntary sector staff/volunteers and university faculty/staff in dialogue together about what they need from VSSN, how they can serve VSSN, challenges/opportunities facing the sector, areas of skill and deficiencies in knowledge that exist in the sector, core competencies and courses required for a new undergraduate certificate, and best delivery methods for these courses (e.g. online, block courses, weekend university, etc.). In addition, we conducted a student survey, a cross-Canada environmental scan and interviews with post-secondary education program administrators, an environmental scan of professional development opportunities already being offered to nonprofits in Saskatchewan through nonprofits and the private sector, and a focused literature review on skills/capacities needed in the sector. Finally, at the VSSN interactive booth, we helped students find voluntary sector jobs at the University of Regina Career Fair and the Neil Squire Society Job Fair held at the University.



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***“Great brainstorming time, great discussion, great connections and networking.”***

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*Participant at  
Dec. 15 Koffee Klatch*

## What were the results?

- There is definitely an appetite for conversation about and action on the voluntary sector. The eight public meetings had up to 60 people engaged in lively discussions. VSSN started a province-wide conversation about learning for/about the sector and will continue this work given this collective enthusiasm; our e-list of 190 individuals and organizations is the foundation of this new network.
- The Koffee Klatches and focus groups resulted in inventories and descriptions of core competencies and possible courses for undergraduate students as well as courses for voluntary sector staff and volunteers who are looking for advanced academic credentials. Thus, there is interest in a new certificate for undergraduate students as well as staff/volunteers in the sector.
- Research results indicate:
  - 70 post-secondary programs focused on the non-profit/voluntary sector exist across Canada but none are offered by Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions.
  - There is demand for learning opportunities – especially a new undergraduate certificate that introduces students to the sector. Learning opportunities are being initiated at other universities (e.g. in September 2013, Carleton University unveiled a new Master's Degree in Nonprofit Leadership and Philanthropy; Brescia University College in London, Ontario launched an undergraduate degree in Nonprofit Management in April 2015).
  - VSSN learned about special groups of people that it must incorporate into its research and learning opportunities: Aboriginal people, seniors, youth, rural communities and newcomers.
  - Saskatchewan has a network of professional development opportunities available to staff and volunteers in the sector, provided by nonprofits and the private sector, thus VSSN must work to build on that network and not replace it.



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*“VSSN has given me the chance to meet like-minded people with vast experiences and resources.”*

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*Participant at  
Dec. 15 Koffee Klatch*

- The literature review allowed us to make three major conclusions:
  - There is an increasing awareness by all levels of government, funders, donors and communities about the importance of the sector in society, governance and democracy, which has led to interest in educating and training voluntary sector CEOs, program managers and front-line workers as is currently done in both the public sector and private sector.
  - There are numerous analyses published that show future labour force shortages and skills mismatches, sustainability challenges, as well as a potential leadership "crisis" in the voluntary sector.
  - Post-secondary education programs that exist in Canada typically require ongoing advertising campaigns and a champion.
- Those voluntary organizations that attended VSSN public events spent time networking with others both on and off campus, thus VSSN is building community-university relationships.
- The only cautionary notes raised during the public conversations were: a) that VSSN should undertake a careful mapping exercise in order not to duplicate any courses that are currently being offered by Saskatchewan universities/colleges and b) re-think the label "voluntary sector".
- There is interest in sharing current information about the sector (e.g. a focus group with faith-based organizations was excited to receive information about how to engage volunteers given the current trend of time-strapped individuals and families).
- Students learned about the voluntary sector through three courses at Luther College (i.e. total of 20 students) as well as jobs in the sector through career fairs (i.e. 84 students at the University of Regina Career Fair and another 79 students at the Neil Squire Society Career Fair at the University of Regina).




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***“Keep doing what  
you’re doing –  
strides are being  
made.”***

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*Participant at  
Feb. 27 Koffee Klatch*





- The research and teaching circles organized by VSSN at Luther College showcased new methodologies and pedagogies being tested by faculty under the VSSN model (i.e. experiential learning, community-based research, student assignments presented at community meetings); thus faculty learning is occurring.
- Our VSSN website was designed and launched in October 2014 and features background research, the proceedings and photos of all our public conversations, student testimonials, and links to search engines for jobs in the nonprofit sector around the world that students can freely access ([www.luthercollege.edu/vssn](http://www.luthercollege.edu/vssn)).

In sum, we learned about a) the voluntary sector in Saskatchewan, b) the role that VSSN can play in growing nonprofit talent and capacity with/for/in the sector, c) key elements required for academic programming in the sector and finally, d) how to share and grow ideas with our public conversations including the launch of a new website where we share all our work. Our research will be used to develop curricula to enhance the knowledge and skill bases of those working and volunteering in the voluntary sector as well as for undergraduate students. We believe our VSSN work is a major impetus for human capital development and voluntary sector labour market development. VSSN promotes the sector as a viable career opportunity, provides learning specific to the sector, and enhances the professional status of those working in the sector. With these enhancements, individuals as well as whole communities benefit.

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*“I’m really impressed and excited by the work being done with this initiative.”*

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*Attendee of May 6, 2015  
RCE Recognition Event*

#### **Who was involved?**

A network of 190 individuals and organizations reflects who participated and who wants to stay connected to VSSN’s mission. We had students, voluntary sector staff/volunteers and faculty/staff at all our public gatherings (60 people attended the October launch, 35 people attended the Koffee Klatch held at United Way, 25 people participated in the Koffee Klatch at First Nations University, 28 people participated in the Heritage Saskatchewan focus group, six people were at the funders' focus group, six people were at the faith organizations meeting, etc.).

### Why did we do it?

Collectively, the steering group had much knowledge about the voluntary sector in Saskatchewan and had anecdotal evidence that there was not a certificate or undergraduate program focusing on the sector in Saskatchewan. Prior conversations with people in the sector emphasized the need for learning opportunities, identification and coordination of research and innovative collaborations between the sector and the university.

### Where did we do it?

Currently, the VSSN program is based at Luther College at the University of Regina and meetings took place in Regina, but we know our new program will serve the entire province using various technologies (e.g. skype meetings, webinars, online courses).

### How did we manage to do all this work?

Luther College provided seed money, \$89,298, for ten months. An additional \$96,705 of in-kind resources was leveraged (e.g. volunteer knowledge and skills, student involvement, free meeting space at First Nations University and United Way Regina). A full report will be available on our website, [www.luthercollege.edu/vssn](http://www.luthercollege.edu/vssn), at the end of May 2015.



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*“I like the diverse representation, wisdom, innovation and collaboration that groups bring to the table.”*

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Participant at  
Dec. 15 Koffee Klatch

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