



DESIGNING THE SCHOOL FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Alastair Summerlee, President

University of Guelph

Interviewed March 2012 | *This interview has been condensed.*

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT VISION FOR THE SCHOOL FOR CIVIL SOCIETY?

The really fundamental thing is learning how to be of service to society. And that for me is learning how to do it, how to be able to provide that support and frameworks that allow us to interact and integrate, and then how do we teach people those values. For me the school for civil society is very much taking what I think is an astonishing array of areas in which we do work in the community and with people and being really explicit about this as something the University of Guelph does so that we draw those people together. And then we can engage what we know is a huge number of students who choose to come to Guelph because of that engagement piece. In the survey done before they come, 70 percent of students say one of the principal reasons for choosing Guelph is to be involved in society in some way, and when they leave, 72 percent of them say they did it. We already have a reputation that the students are choosing Guelph to come here to do this and we appear to be delivering in ways that they want that to happen, but it's not coordinated. So I'd love us to be in the position where 70 percent of them come in saying they want to do it and a hundred percent of them go out saying they did it. The school for civil society is the vehicle for me for that to happen.

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University of Guelph

Guelph, Ontario, Canada N1G 2W1

www.schoolforcivilsociety.ca

519.824.4120 x 56096



[sfcivilsociety](https://twitter.com/sfcivilsociety)

civilsociety@uoguelph.ca

I think one of the successes of a school would be that we do find ways to get students and faculty and staff abroad. Actually having a budget and adhering to the principle that you need to get people out of here to learn. But they don't have to go to the sands of the Kalahari because - they could do it as well in downtown Guelph, but they need to be out doing stuff – community engagement for faculty and staff, as well as for undergraduates.

WHAT ARE SOME TRENDS OVER THE OVER THE NEXT DECADE OR SO AFFECTING THIS EFFORT?



I think there is a pretty clear understanding in the Ontario system that we are already differentiated because we're not a university that is a teaching university. We're not a university that's a research university. We're actually a university that's tripartite -- and people articulate that – we can build on that.

But then there are truly external issues. There is a huge shift, from my perspective, in students wanting to make a difference. The mindset of the students today, however much it gets castigated by people saying, “they don't do this” or “they don't do that”, is totally different in that they care and are involved in issues about the world. And that may be the world in a very constrained way, but they have a real sense of wanting to make a difference.

Canada has shown in international development that size-wise, we're punching way above our weight, and we are at risk of losing that. The federal government says we need to be doing less in terms of international development or it needs to be more focused – or we should be giving resources to governments. Yet in one concrete example, all of the people that I know in Kenya articulate that when everything broke, it was civil society that they could say was solely due to the investments made by Canada, that caused the middle ground to rise up and say we're not going to put up with this disruption anymore. Internal problems were solved because of their real strength in civil society. That's something we could lose if we don't understand both the history of what we've done and the potential of what we could and should be doing.

Also in building this, how do we stop the school for civil society from becoming the only place where you engage? We've got to have the ability for people who are not associated with the school for civil society to continue to build a number of innovations - to not lose the impetus in other places.

WHAT DOES THE SCHOOL LOOK LIKE A FEW DECADES OUT?



I would love to sit and say that finally, after 30 years of trying, we destroyed undergraduate education and that we created a new way of educating students

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that has turned out to be successful. And that we managed to turn round the paradigm of feeding people information by putting students in the position of giving them unbelievable interdisciplinary challenges that they were able to rise to -- so I am now dreaming of 20 years in the future, that the students actually reconstruct in their own minds disciplinary boundaries from interdisciplinary work. One of the challenges that I experience in trying to get people into thinking from an interdisciplinary perspective is how can you give them a problem on something like global markets today when they haven't got Microeconomics 101 – and that they need discipline training in order to be interdisciplinary. And I think that it's actually the reverse. You need interdisciplinary problems and thinking to drive students to say I need to know the microeconomics involved in this interdisciplinary problem – and no one else has the responsibility of learning that - I have a responsibility to go and do it, rather than faculty have to tell me all that I need to know to pass the exam in microeconomics and when I'm done that then you'll allow me to engage in some interdisciplinary thinking. If I could have one thing that I could honestly say we've done, it was to make that paradigm shift.

STUDENTS SOMETIMES COME IN FROM A SPECIFIC DISCIPLINE IN THEIR UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE, THEN THEY GO INTO AN INTERDISCIPLINARY GRADUATE PROGRAM AND THEY SOMETIMES HAVE A BIT OF A CRISIS...



Yes – absolutely! But sad because mostly we do that at the graduate level - you've just wasted five years. You would have been much better to have had that crisis in year one, semester one, and be facilitated through it so that you were in a position to be able to grow and use all of the resources that are available. It's really important to be able to facilitate people through it and help them understand that this is the learning point - a support network to work through it, and the better they become at the end.

Extended from that would be that we no longer have students wasting their time in classrooms being talked at except to excite them. And then we would have students coming in who start with no confidence that are 20 years from now running any aspect of society and feeling totally empowered to engage on anything, with anything – those would be markers of success.

A great surprise around building this is the reaction of one government official – finance background – tough as nails. When I said we're talking about a school for civil society, she actually had tears in her eyes - she said that's exactly the kind of thing I would have expected Guelph to do, how wonderful. I've had people who just think this is the right thing, the right time.

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