Reflections in Relation to *Community Scholars Program Developmental Evaluation Final Report: A Bridge to Access Research for Community Scholars* by Dr. Andrea Whiteley

THE COMMUNITY
SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Summary:

The Community Scholars Program librarians were happy to receive the report of a study conducted by Dr. Andrea Whiteley in 2020 under the supervision of Dr. Juan Pablo Alperin, and supported by Mitacs and the United Way of the Lower Mainland (UWLM). We are grateful to Community Scholars who contributed to the study by sharing their time, knowledge, and stories in the survey and interviews. We heard that Community Scholars value not only the access to scholarly publications afforded by the program, but also the opportunities for capacity building, knowledge exchange, and community. We also have gained insight into how to strengthen our communication, programming, and operations to enhance services, knowledge sharing, and effective relationships. Community Scholars librarians are grateful for the opportunity to learn alongside program participants and to apply this learning as we design approaches to increase the value of the program and its services to the Scholars. We will combine Dr. Whiteley's report with additional sources of data and analysis to articulate a theory of change and to inform strategic planning and program evaluation.

Full version:

Through the winter and spring of 2020, the Community Scholars Program welcomed post-doctoral researcher Dr. Andrea Whiteley to conduct a study of the experiences of program participants. This study was done at arm's length from the program operations, under the supervision of Dr. Juan Pablo Alperin at SFU Publishing's ScholCommLab. We are grateful to the Mitacs Program for supporting this opportunity, and to our community partner, the United Way of the Lower Mainland for partnership and advice. Additionally, we are grateful to the >100 Community Scholars who generously contributed their time, knowledge, and stories to this project through a survey and interviews. The knowledge of these program participants is what makes this program work.

We are excited about the stories that come through in this report. Community Scholars shared detailed stories about the contributions that the program has made to their achievement of funding goals, program development goals, and professional development goals, and operations. We heard that having access to research allows program participants to stay up-to-date in their fields, to support organizational practices, and to develop programs. Specifically, we heard that the CSP contributed to participants' ability to share their expertise

through presentations and publications, to prepare legal briefs, to secure grants, and to make evidence-informed decisions. The role of Community Scholars as knowledge producers, brokers, and mobilizers -- in addition to information users -- comes through strongly in the voices of program participants in this report.

The report includes a number of recommendations that would be difficult to achieve given our current resources, and also some specific areas where we agree that we have an immediate opportunity to develop and make improvements. Here are some of the themes we can address in both the short and long term.

- Impact:
  - We heard: that the impacts of the program, for individual participants, their organizations, and wider society, need to be more clearly communicated.
  - We will: deliberately collect and share stories of what changes for participants in the program, with an eye to strengthening a culture of community scholarship, and communicating the value of and need for accessible research to academics and other stakeholders.

- Communications:
  - We heard: that we can enhance our communications to be more welcoming and can generate better awareness of the program's values, operations and benefits, including increased visibility of existing services and resources.
  - We will: review our website for clarity and with an eye to welcoming new and prospective Community Scholars, alter our newsletter subject lines to be more engaging, check in with new Community Scholars individually after an initial period of use, and review our orientation materials to make sure that important information is purposefully shared. Additionally, we will refresh and enhance the design of the portal itself. We will work to ensure that Community Scholars know what kinds of support and capacity building activities are available through the program.

- Fostering Knowledge Exchange:
  - We heard: that the CSP is well-positioned to foster networks among Community Scholars and to serve as a conduit for knowledge exchange between multiple communities. This aspect of the program is highly valued but its potential has yet to be developed.
  - We will: re-establish an advisory group of program participants and other stakeholders.  We will also continue to connect our values to those of complementary organizations and movements, such as groups working on open access, epistemic justice, and community-campus engagement. We will build on the successes we have had with journal clubs and will explore new avenues for strengthening relationships through which to support communities of practice and knowledge exchange.

- Capacity-building;
  - We heard: that the CSP offers value in terms of both self-study (accessing journal articles) and group study (engaging with research and building knowledge in workshops) and that this latter aspect could be enhanced.
  - We will: draw on our collective expertise and that of our networks' to present opportunities for CSs to engage in communal professional development. We will build out the workshop offerings and investigate new ways to work closely to build research literacy and capacity with our participants.

The timeframe and scope of this project limited the degree to which analysis and meaning-making could be done collaboratively with Community Scholars stakeholders, and as such some of the findings and recommendations need further exploration by program participants and librarians. The study raises questions about what activities to prioritize, how the program is perceived by the participants and by external audiences, and how best to engage participants. We look forward to reviewing the survey data and interview notes to probe further into some of these questions.

We are approaching evaluation as an ongoing, iterative, and generative process for our program, and we see this report as part of our ongoing commitment to responsive engagement. If reading the report sparks questions or comments -- if you wish to confirm, emphasize, or interrogate anything that you read here -- we would love to hear from you. Please feel free to use our short feedback form (with the option to remain anonymous) or to email hdefores@sfu.ca.

This report joins a number of other data sources to support formative, reflective work of the Community Scholars Program, drawing on principles of developmental evaluation, and a plan for ongoing, continuing evaluation. Taking into account data from our intake surveys, event and workshop assessments, social media analysis, usage and reach data, impact stories, and more, we are working towards a Theory of Change that we will use for strategic and sustainability planning. With gratitude for the time and efforts of Dr. Whiteley, we are looking forward to the next steps in our development and sustaining and building on the value of the Community Scholars Program.