

Turning research into action

By Dr David Phipps

“We must translate our research findings in the human sciences into public policy and social programs...Knowledge transfer in the human sciences — the transfer of findings into policy and programs — is as important as technology transfer in the engineering and natural sciences.” (Dr Martha Piper, 2002 Killam Lecture)

In response to the Government of Canada's Federal S&T Strategy, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) announced three strategic directions in its document *Framing Our Direction*. SSHRC will enhance the quality of research and training programs, enable connections between researchers and the larger community and increase the impact of research. Knowledge Mobilization (KM) is one tool that will allow SSHRC to fulfill its connection and impact mandates.

Similar to knowledge translation (Canadian Institutes of Health Research) and knowledge exchange (Canadian Health Services Research Foundation), KM is a suite of activities that enhances the two-way connection between researchers and research users so that research and evidence can inform decisions about public policy and professional practice. KM encompasses methods of knowledge translation and exchange, but extends them to include the co-production of knowledge between researchers and research users — mainly community and government organizations seeking to use research to inform policy and/or practice.

KM turns research into action through a process analogous to technology transfer. York University, like most academic research institutions, has invested in technology transfer services that support economic innovation, industry collaboration and commercialization. Housed within the Office of Research Services, York's technology transfer office patents research with commercial potential, licenses technologies to industry and assists faculty seeking to start up companies. York leads the Medical Technologies Commercialization Collaborative, funded by an Intellectual Property Mobilization (IPM) grant, with Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Bloorview Kids Rehab and St. Michael's Hospital. York University is also a partner in local economic innovation initiatives such as YORK biotech (an Ontario Research Innovation Network) and the Inno-

vation Synergy Centre in Markham ON.

Yet York wishes to maximize the impact of all research not just research with commercial potential or industrial application. As envisioned in York's strategic research plan, "we will also determine how community groups, non-governmental organizations and non-profit corporations might benefit from — and contribute to — York's research initiatives." York is therefore leading social innovation: the creation or application of research and knowledge to develop sustainable solutions to social and cultural challenges. Social innovation results in more efficient and effective human services, more responsive public policies and a greater cultural understanding. Knowledge mobilization (the how) enables social innovation (the what).

York and its KM partner, the University of Victoria, received the first tri-council IPM grant for social sciences and humanities to develop an institutional capacity to support KM. This grant allowed York and UVic to establish ResearchImpact, Canada's emerging national knowledge mobilization network (www.researchimpact.ca). York has subsequently received a Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS) grant from SSHRC, along with institutional funding and funding from the York Region District School Board and the Regional Municipality of York via the Human Services Planning Coalition to locally deliver KM services.

York's KM Unit is home to two knowledge brokers (Manager of Knowledge Mobilization and Knowledge Mobilization Officer). Similar to managers of technology transfer, the knowledge brokers support research-based partnerships that respond to research user needs while leveraging the expertise of researchers and graduate students.

Over the last two years, the KM Unit has fostered over 95 partnerships, ranging from informal speaker series and graduate student internships to formal, funded research col-

laborations, with municipal, provincial and community organizations. These research relationships have attracted over \$210,000. In some cases, these partnerships have resulted in the co-creation of new evidence that has enabled the research partner to make a decision informed by previously unavailable evidence. York's KM Unit also supports faculty applying to large-scale social sciences and humanities grant competitions. Of the 13 grant applications supported by the KM Unit, 11 have successfully secured more than \$11 million in funding for York University and its research partners.

The KM Unit has made over 150 presentations to different audiences and has engaged over 140 graduate students with research users through internships, research assistantships or community presentations. In some cases, students have been hired by their partner organization, joined the board of directors or secured additional funding for their partner. KM allows graduate students to gain real world experience while helping partner organizations to learn how academic research can inform policy and/or practice decisions.

While the KM Unit at York has enjoyed exciting progress over the last two years, the process is not new to academics. KM has its roots in participatory-action research, community-university engagement and through the many researchers who have undertaken work in collaboration with non-academic partners. What is new is the institutional capacity for KM developed at York and UVic, analogous to technology transfer, which enhances research's connections and impact. To sustain these activities, research funding organizations need to invest in KM through institutional programs such as KPM and Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS). Foundations need to look to social innovation as a target area for support and institutions need to invest in institutional KM practices as they currently do for technology transfer.

Only in partnership will academic research maximize its social, cultural, environmental and economic impact of research on Canadians. York's KM Unit is one example of how working in partnership has tangible and sustained impacts on researchers, graduate students, the university and the wider community.

Dr David Phipps is director of York University's Office of Research Services.