



Entering the new millennium: Reflections on the research strategy at York University

BY STAN M. SHAPSON

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THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT: RENEWED SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH

As Canada entered the new millennium, the federal government enacted a strong policy of renewed support to university research. The Canada Research Chairs (CRCs) program was inaugurated to attract 2,000 top researchers to return to Canadian universities. This initiative complemented the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI), which was established to give researchers the necessary infrastructure to “think big and innovate.” Soon after, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) were created to broaden the mandate for medical research encompassing “the creation of new knowledge and its translation into improved health.”

THE INTERNAL CONTEXT: YORK’S PRE-2000 RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

York University faced the challenge of developing strategies to respond to the federal context for enhancing research. Until then, York provided a relatively basic set of services for researchers with the administrative responsibilities assumed under the large portfolio of the VP Academic. As well, York University had a unique mix of programs—heavily weighted to humanities and social sciences, without a medical school, and with a proportionately small science base. Given its programmatic mix, York was seriously disadvantaged in the pursuit of external research funding. Federal funding heavily favoured medicine and the natural sciences, with only about 12 cents in each dollar allocated for the humanities and social sciences. This hampered York’s ability to be among the leaders in the race for research income and impacted negatively on its reputation with policy-makers and the public at large (although York’s research was well recognized by the academic community). In addition, there was a strong push, led by the University of Toronto, to set a new policy of having the majority, if not all, of the research funding directed to a small subset of universities—those that had medical schools. The pressure was on to tier universities into research versus non-research (predominantly undergraduate teaching) universities. These challenges were all at York’s doorstep and called for action.

THE YORK UNIVERSITY RESPONSE

York President Lorna Marsden quickly acted on the changing research context by creating a new office to provide drive and direction to the research enterprise. She appointed me, as a social scientist and the former dean of education, as the inaugural Vice President Research and Innovation (VPRI). This was noteworthy because, at the time, the overwhelming majority of VPs Research in the country were from the natural sciences, medicine, or engineering. I suggested that the new office be named Research and Innovation (R&I), thus clearly linking these two functions: research—the creation of

new knowledge; and innovation—the impacts of research. The VPRI's office would be characterized not only by enhanced research services but also by public and private sector collaboration and community engagement.

BUILDING BLOCKS TO THE R&I STRATEGY

Internal Approach

The first steps in accomplishing the mandate were directed internally, building from the ground up, by providing support and creating visibility for York's diverse research activities. An advanced suite of research services was developed to assist individuals applying for and then managing their research grants. To build local support, an Associate Dean Research was appointed in each of York's faculties. The strategic research plan also encouraged interdisciplinary and collaborative research programs that cut across York's faculties. There were good examples of such academic collaboration scattered through the university, typically in the organized research centres (ORUs), such as the Robarts Centre (the home of *Canada Watch*). Extending this collaborative approach to complex societal themes such as the environment and health—where York had already built substantial strength—would help to close the gap between scientific, technological, and humanistic understanding.

Our team in the Office of Research and Innovation pressed the University for more research facilities and infrastructure. The Sherman Health Science Research Centre was built to provide specialized new space and equipment for vision research and neuroscience, including a research MRI. The Kaneff Tower enabled the housing of multiple humanities and social science ORUs, where large-scale research programs could flourish and graduate students could be exposed to enriched research training environments. The enhancement of the workspace for researchers and the targeting of strategic faculty appointments were solid pillars in enhancing York's research strength.

External Approach

Early on, I took the deliberate decision to engage externally in the growing York Regional Municipality. The plan was to develop a unique R&I network led by YorkU, beyond our involvement in downtown Toronto networks, which were dominated by MaRS (an urban innovation hub) and UHN (the University Health Network). The goal was to improve performance on the existing playing field for research while moving the ball to a new playing field where YorkU would be fully recognized for its leadership.

We understood that success would depend on building trust and having a visible presence in York Region. An early collaboration formed around the Innovation Synergy Centre in Markham. Extensive talks were held with officials in Markham and with entrepreneurs in industry, including the CEO of Sanofi Pasteur and the VP of IBM Canada. This led to unified pressure on the Ontario government to expand its network of biotech clusters to Markham with YorkU's leadership. The formation of York Biotech along with Innovation York resulted in a strong regional cluster focused on the convergence of IT and medical devices.

Innovative new outlets were created for YorkU's social science, humanities, and artistic research. Relationships were nurtured with regional agencies, community groups, and NGOs. These agencies demonstrated significant interest in YorkU's research on a range of topics such as transit, youth, policing, and immigration services. New links were forged, and collaborative research projects mounted.

At the time, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) began to formally request that researchers identify how their research could be more useful to groups outside academia. I was a director on the board of SSHRC, and served as interim president (2005–2006) during a transition in the agency's leadership. Based on the SSHRC work, YorkU launched the first Knowledge Mobilization Office in Canada, which collaborated with external partners to explore how social scientists might intensify

the impacts of their involvement in field research. In collaboration with the University of Victoria, Research Impact was launched and soon grew into a national network.

SOME ACHIEVEMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS

Alertness to opportunities resulted in a number of significant advances in research performance. Our research income increased about 300 percent in the decade 2000–2010. YorkU gained by being awarded new appointments and infrastructure from CRC and CFI. YorkU was a leader in the country in winning large-scale SSHRC partnership grants. New research facilities with state-of-the-art infrastructure were built.

The early selection of York Region/Markham was deliberate. We built collaborative relationships with top multi-nation enterprise R&D businesses. We opened an Innovation office in Markham and were a leading partner in the Regional Innovation Network. There was ongoing involvement by YorkU's researchers with NGOs, school boards, community groups, and York Region hospitals.

Over time, initiatives change and take on new features. Core activities persist as part of the DNA of R&I at YorkU—York Innovation, the Knowledge Mobilization Unit, and, based on the foundation of trust, goodwill, and contacts, a persisting culture of ongoing collaboration within York Region/Markham. ■