

Building bridges: Canadian Studies across borders

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If all goes according to plan, by the fall of 2025 the Windsor–Detroit borderlands will be linked by a new international crossing: the Gordie Howe International Bridge. The 2.5 km long bridge will be built at an estimated cost of \$6.4 billion and will feature a multi-use path specially designed for pedestrians and cyclists.¹ With more than \$325 million in trade crossing the Windsor–Detroit border every day (nearly a third of all Canada–US trade),² the economic imperative to move goods and people as efficiently as possible is obvious. Even in a trade war between Canada and the United States, time is still money when it comes to the movement of goods and people, and the new bridge’s practical benefits for improving and strengthening capacities in Canadian–American supply chains remain clear.

Beyond such benefits, the Gordie Howe bridge also can be seen as a catalyst in Canadian–American relations, a platform for cross-border innovation. Its symbolic value for continental neighbours was certainly recognized by many who attended the 2024 CN Forum, “Beyond the Gordie Howe Bridge: Reimagining Trade and Commerce for a New Age,” hosted by Dr. Rebecca Malouin and the Canadian Studies Center at Michigan State University (MSU). Canadian and American officials and diplomats, academics, and representatives of business and non-governmental organizations came together at MSU to consider the bridge’s wider significance.³ In his keynote address, Michigan Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist II spoke glowingly of the Detroit–Windsor relationship, recognizing the potential of this borderland region as a logistics and technology hub. Beyond the obvious economic and trade benefits, the subject of cross-border collaborations in education was also raised at the forum. In what ways might the Gordie Howe bridge point to the potential for increased learning and cultural connections between Canadian and American institutions, at all levels of education?

BUILDING NORTH AMERICAN PARTNERSHIPS

For two decades, the North American Studies Program at Wilfrid Laurier University has worked to establish relationships with universities in the United States and Mexico. In the United States, Laurier has partnered on projects with the University of Vermont, Bowling Green University, Syracuse University, Georgia Southern University, and MSU. Many of these connections were originally forged with government funding. In the early 2000s, North American Mobility in Higher Education funding provided sizable grants (typically \$150,000, with matching funds from the US and Mexican governments) to establish consortia of university partners, covering student and faculty exchange costs over several years. The Laurier partnership with Georgia Southern, established in 2005 on one such grant, continues today.

More recently, a Federal Assistance Award from the US State Department was used to create the MSU–Laurier partnership. Building on short visits by staff, students, and faculty (full-time and con-

tract) to the university campuses last academic year, in the fall of 2024 Laurier and MSU signed a memorandum of understanding to foster further academic partnerships.⁴ The Laurier Centre for the Study of Canada and the Canadian Studies Program at MSU have taken the lead, at our respective universities, to promote and encourage opportunities for Canadian–American collaboration on our campuses, including the exchange of students and future scholars.

LESSONS LEARNED

From these various partnerships over the years, several useful lessons have been learned.

First, seed funding, sometimes generous but relatively small amounts too, can yield impressive results. Accessing existing government, non-government, or institutional funding to spark cross-border relationships can produce long-term cooperation and benefits. Networking within and beyond universities to identify such funding opportunities, as we did through the US Consulate in Toronto to foster the Laurier–MSU connection, is a good first step.

Second, successful cross-border partnerships between institutes of higher learning require academic champions. This is where Canadian Studies centres are perfectly situated to take a leading role within our universities to engage with new partners in North America and beyond. As centres of expertise about Canada, who else is better suited within universities to offer knowledge mobilization of Canadian research abroad and to support the study of Canada internationally?

Third, the development of new partnerships works best when the administrative and academic silos in universities are breached. At Laurier, when North American Studies and the Laurier Centre for the Study of Canada worked closely with staff from Laurier International, Student Affairs, Indigenous Initiatives, and senior administration, it was much easier to get projects and partnerships off the ground. This proved especially true when working with American universities where there was a comparable campus culture of cooperation. Conversely, partnerships with others where such a collaborative intra-university culture did not exist typically faltered. The lesson: Be thoughtful and deliberate when identifying potential partner institutions.

UNDERSTANDING CANADA IN THE NEAR FUTURE

The Conservative government's 2012 decision to cancel the Understanding Canada program was a tremendous and seriously short-sighted blow to Canadian cultural diplomacy. A relatively small amount of money helped to ensure that there were vibrant communities of scholars engaged in the study of Canada across North America and around the globe. The program literally informed the world about Canada. Now, particularly with respect to our relationship with the United States, if Americans fail to understand the significance of Canada to their own economy or the social and political convergences and divergences that shape relations with their northern neighbour, this is largely Canada's fault. Successive federal governments have abandoned their responsibility to explain Canada through cultural diplomacy. Confronted by an erratic Trump administration intent on undermining Canadian sovereignty through tariffs, economic coercion, and misinformation, the need to educate American legislators and the wider public about Canada and its significance as a continental partner could not be more obvious. American ignorance and indifference have angered Canadians and led to a remarkable degree of national unity, but we are partly to blame for this state of affairs.

Put another way, the proverbial chickens have come home to roost. Ideally, Ottawa would recognize the errors of its ways and restore or even enhance Understanding Canada. Yet, we're reminded of scholar Greg Anderson's suggestion to observe the "many connections and processes taking place across borders every day" and to appreciate the roles played in the incremental integration of North America by "bureaucratic, sub-state, and non-state levels" (2012, p. 450).

As non-state actors, it may well fall to the centres of Canadian Studies across this country to take the lead in developing concrete action plans, with our partner centres and Canadianists in other countries, especially in the United States, to create new relationships and understanding from the

ground up. With the greatest respect for Gordie Howe, an entirely different sort of bridge building is what is now needed most. ■

NOTES

1. <https://www.gordiehoweinternationalbridge.com/en/by-the-numbers>
2. <https://www.citywindsor.ca/business/economic-development/location-and-logistics>
3. https://canadianstudies.isp.msu.edu/news_article/23642
4. <https://studyofcanada.ca/laurier-students-visit-michigan-state-university/>

REFERENCE

Anderson, G. (2012). NAFTA on the brain: Why creeping integration has always worked better. *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 42(4), 450–459.