

Understanding the City-University Research Partnerships between UBC and the City of Vancouver

Executive Summary

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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

This report investigates research collaborations between the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the City of Vancouver (CoV) or other municipalities in Greater Vancouver on sustainability and liveability issues since 2010, when the CoV and UBC signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to work together in support of their sustainability endeavours. The study's objective is to better understand how to increase and improve such research collaborations.

Drawing on an electronic survey and interviews with faculty members and staff from UBC and CoV, this report finds **27 city-university partnerships** in Greater Vancouver between 2010 and mid-2019. A detailed list of these collaborative projects is included in the Annex of this report. The key characteristics of these projects are as follows:

- *Type of work*: The projects covered a **wide range of work**, including life-cycle assessment, risk assessment, mapping, public transit and community planning, energy and emissions assessment, climate change mitigation and adaptation planning, the development of funding proposals, curriculum development, and the development of communication materials for public engagement.
- *Funding*: While municipalities provided **no funding for a third** of these projects, they supported 18 collaborations at a median of around **\$15,000 per project**. Funding provided by municipalities for all projects combined amounts to more than **\$1.3m in total**.
- *Duration*: Most research collaborations were **relatively short** in duration, with just over half running for **less than a year** and one third at around 1 to 3 years in length.
- *Participation by UBC department*: The **Forestry** department collaborated half of the time (50%), followed by the **School of Community and Regional Planning** (19%), and others.
- *Participation by municipality*: **CoV** partnered most often (58%), followed by the District of North Vancouver, City of Surrey, Metro Vancouver Regional District (each around 10%), and others.
- *Initiation*: Most projects were initiated through **informal professional relationships**, by **both city and university personnel**.

Experiences with these research collaborations were **mostly positive**. **Benefits** of collaborating that project partners highlighted include:

- Mutual trust between collaborative partners as a result of having built and maintained long-term professional relationships over time
- Researchers' flexibility in adjusting to particular needs of municipal staff while staying within a project's budget
- High return on investment of collaborations, which offered good value for relatively little funding, at times allowing municipalities to leverage funding from other sources through a small contribution to a larger pool of funds

At the same time, there appears to be room for improvement. **Areas of improvement** include:

- Increase leadership commitment from both city and university
- Create longer-lasting impacts from the project outcomes
- Produce more practice-oriented deliverables
- Initiate more long-term collaborations
- Ensure sufficient financial and human resources
- Ensure appropriate communication
- Reduce administrative challenges at CoV

The report also identified several **barriers that prevented collaboration** in the past:

- Lack of awareness of potential partners for collaboration
- Tension between city and university partners in expected duration of collaborations
- Lack of financial and human resources
- Difficulty in generating ideas and matching municipal needs with UBC research capacity
- Lack of clarity around municipal public procurement processes

In order to address these barriers to collaboration and areas of improvement, this report offers the following **recommendations** to increase and improve research partnerships in the future:

- 1. Introduce formal processes to help identify overlapping research needs and interests between city and university**
 - Mirror the matchmaking process of the Greenest City Scholar program, i.e. city collects research needs from across its departments, and university similarly compiles project ideas from across campus and proposes possible matches
 - Ensure a steady flow of city-relevant research outcomes to municipalities to increase staff's awareness of research capacity at university
- 2. Increase efforts to facilitate connections between prospective collaborators**
 - Renew commitment to collaborate between city and university, focusing on more specific, targeted subject matter than the relatively broad 2010 MoU
 - Organize regular "mixer" events to bring together university faculty and city staff
 - Invite university faculty as guest speakers to city-internal lunch-and-learn talks, and likewise invite city staff to similar events at university
- 3. Involve dedicated full-time project managers**
 - Project managers help ensure that research partnerships are kept alive and move forward, and they facilitate better communication between collaborators
- 4. Increase available funding for research collaborations**
 - University and city could foresee specific funds for research collaborations, possibly allocated through competitive processes

5. **Include elements of co-creation**
 - Shape research collaborations jointly as early on as possible in the process of collaborating to ensure buy-in from all project partners
6. **Develop clear administrative pathways to research partnerships and showcase successful project outcomes**
 - Develop clear administrative processes and templates (i.e., procurement, legal agreements) for setting up city-university collaborations
 - Showcase successful experiences of collaboration and relevant outcomes
7. **Produce deliverables that are both policy-relevant and publishable**
 - Ensure final deliverables are policy-relevant to maximize usefulness for city
 - Identify an appropriate research question at the outset of a project to facilitate academic publishing efforts
8. **Collect information about research collaborations systematically**
 - Set up administrative processes within both city and university to report relevant partnerships and establish a joint database of collaborations
 - This would facilitate future research and evaluation efforts to increase and continuously improve research collaboration

These recommendations should be understood as a **starting point for further discussion** and reflection about how to increase and improve research collaborations in the future.

The report's findings may inform the development and implementation of future collaborative research projects not only between UBC and CoV, but also for other city-university partnerships in the Pacific Northwest and beyond.