

## Summer 2022 Sustainability Scholars Program Internship Opportunity

The UBC Sustainability Initiative (USI) is pleased to offer current UBC graduate students the opportunity to work on funded sustainability internship projects. Successful candidates work under the mentorship of a partner organization, and are immersed in real world learning where they can apply their research skills and contribute to advancing sustainability across the region.

- Visit the [Sustainability Scholars Program website](#) to learn [how the program works](#) and to [apply](#).
- Be sure to review the [application guide](#) to confirm your eligibility before applying.

**Applications close at midnight on Sunday January 30, 2022.**

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### **Research project title: Research to understand the benefits of granting practices that support grassroots organizing (vs non-profit community organizations)**

#### **Project Background & Overview:**

“The purpose of this capacity-building work is to ensure that we each do our part to disrupt the non-profit industrial complex we operate under, to challenge complacency in the sector, and to implement efforts that are actually responsive to the needs and interests of communities our respective organizations claim to serve (rather than maintaining the status quo of hoarding resources, co-opting movements, and gatekeeping to prevent directly-impacted communities from decision-making)...actively pushing for critical thinking, fruitful disruptions of the status quo, and collaborations centred on systemic change in order to support directly-impacted communities on their own terms.”  
Excerpt from a 2021 grant application

The City of Vancouver has a stated commitment to advancing reconciliation, equity, and anti-racism for all people in Vancouver. Its Social Policy division exists to make policy, infrastructure and funding decisions that address systemic inequities in the social determinants of health and work toward a healthy, equitable and safe city for all people in Vancouver. We focus this work and measure progress through the goals and outcomes of the Healthy City Strategy.

For more than four decades, the City’s Social Policy grants programs has awarded annual grants to hundreds of non-profit social service groups and neighbourhood organizations. While the grants support key services and supports for residents facing challenges to full participation in social, cultural and/or economic life, over the past three years there has been increasing pressure to question the core assumptions and processes used to determine the awarding of grants.

Research indicates that funding to the non-profit sector often supports established, formalized NGOs, whereas those organizing at the community level lack access to these resources. Yet, those organizing at the grassroots level are often people in equity-denied groups that may experience the most gaps in funding and supports, and the most challenges in accessing them. We are increasingly relying on these groups for information on the needs of Vancouver residents that face the greatest barriers to achieving health and well-being, but many of these groups are not yet represented in our granting programs.

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The dilemma the grants program may be facing here is the tension McKnight<sup>1</sup> describes between organized non-profits and what and others refer to as ‘associations’:

... not-for-profit service institutions have great difficulty developing programs that recognize the unique characteristics and needs of each person. Indeed, their strength is in their ability to mass produce because they are modeled after commercial systems of mass production. They can create minimum or uniform standards. But unique individuals are not their natural constituents.

[whereas]

Associations are groups of people with names and unique characteristics known to their members. Individualization is necessary for their successful functioning. They must recognize the unique talents of each member and respond to their unique needs, often with the talents of other members. Because associations are so practiced in individualization, they can provide critical personalized responses to members and non-members.

The social policy grants team is challenged to look at the way in which current granting practices may present barriers to supporting ‘associations’ or, for our purposes, what we are going to refer to as ‘grassroots community organizing.’ Our key challenges are: first, to define these groups; and, even more importantly, to understand what unmet need or community benefit the City could meet by extending funding and/or other supports to this form of community organizing.

An oft-repeated message—as articulated in the opening quote in this document—is that existing non-profit organizations are out of touch with the people and communities they purport to serve and that, through their formalization and growth, they have in fact themselves become additional barriers to equity-denied communities achieving their goals. And yet, as a municipal funder ultimately answerable to sometimes contradictory concepts of equity, efficiency, accountability and return on investment, the City turns to organized groups – non-profits – who it believes offer some surety of quality and oversight in delivering services to others at a scale that can benefit many people.

On the other hand, City practice when dealing with grassroots community organizing is variable and may take one or more of the following or other forms:

- a) refuse funding based on eligibility criteria regarding legal incorporation, governance and other measures;
- b) provide modest, one-off funding to such groups, tied to often unrealistic expectations that in so doing we are ‘addressing gaps’ in supports;
- c) engage individual members of such groups in consultations or advisory roles – paid or not – to ensure connection to the ‘grassroots.’
- d) provide such groups with limited ‘capacity building’ support (financial or otherwise), in the belief that the obvious and penultimate goal of all such groups is to formalize and institutionalize their structures to achieve longer term outcomes.

We think there may be a better way to understand and approach this issue, if we understand associations in the way posited by McKnight, as “filling the vast space where institutional solutions

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<sup>1</sup> The Four-Legged Stool, John L. McKnight, Kettering Foundation (2013)  
[https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/The\\_Four-Legged\\_Stool.pdf](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/The_Four-Legged_Stool.pdf)

cannot reach or fail... the knowledge base... is personal experience and common sense. This knowledge usually leads to distinctive problem definitions and solutions. And it is these solutions that provide a valuable counterbalance or alternative to the narrow world of technical answers.” As counterbalances to, in this instance, the established norms of the formalized non-profit sector, how and what should the City’s role be in supporting these groups?

Here are some of the questions we need to address to help us understand the City’s potential role:

1. What are the unique and critical characteristics and benefits that may be compromised if the City does not directly support grassroots community organizing?
2. What is lost when assumptions are made about the inevitable link between ‘value’ and ‘formalization/organization’ of grassroots community organizing into formal non-profit structures and governance models?
3. Can the City better achieve its Healthy City Goals - and in particular those directed at addressing the needs of equity-denied groups - by directing more of its support directly to grassroots community organizing, via grants or other mechanisms? Or, can the City’s non-profit partners be supported to in turn provide the space and support that grassroots groups may require at different times and in different forms?
4. From the City’s perspective as a municipal funder, how do we understand the type of grant investments that will foster broader community well-being? Are grants even the right tool for providing support?

These questions and others have become even more pressing as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed the large and growing inequities in Vancouver, and the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had and continues to have on equity-denied groups.

## **Project description**

The project will explore, from the City’s perspective as a municipal funder, how grant investments can better foster broader community well-being. Responding to criticisms that current grant practices<sup>2</sup> benefit established non-profit organizations at the expense of the more ‘grassroots’ organizing that is crucial to helping equity-denied groups challenge the barriers they face, this project will be comprised of two distinct but related components:

- a) a research/literature review to help better define what is meant by ‘the grassroots’ and develop a preliminary assessment of the degree to which the City’s social policy grants currently support such work; and,
- b) interviews with community members to help identify how – and whether – shifting grant investments from the ‘formal’ non-profit sector to the grassroots can be achieved.

## **Project scope**

Key questions:

- 1) How do we define grassroots community organizing?
- 2) Using that definition, review grant reports from 2017 to today, the Social Policy Non-Profit inventory and other sources to assess the degree to which social policy grants are currently supporting grassroots community organizing, both directly and indirectly.
- 3) How can the social policy grants team more systematically identify and connect with grassroots community organizing in the city?

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<sup>2</sup> While this study will focus on the Core Support Grants <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/core-support-grants.aspx> administered by the Social Policy & Projects grants team, the findings are expected to be broadly applicable to other City grant programs, e.g., Greenest City Grants.

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- 4) What are the barriers in current granting practice that may limit the grants programs ability to recognize and respond to the needs of grassroots community organizations?
- 5) Are there alternatives to traditional grants that may be more appropriate for a municipal funder to offer to grassroots community organizations?

## Deliverables

- 1) Literature Review: both academic and from the non-profit and funders sectors to identify:
    - a. identifying/developing a shared working definition of a grassroots community group.
    - b. current research/understanding of the tension between grassroots and mainstream funding
    - c. developing a preliminary inventory of associations in Vancouver - who they are, what drives them, what are some of their needs on their way to pursue their causes – supports needed to achieve their cause
    - d. the case for increasing - or not! – social policy grant funding grassroots community organizing
    - e. strategies employed by funders that have actioned funding and/or other forms of supports to grassroots community organizing
  - 2) Key informant interviews: based on the findings of the lit review:
    - a. a) interviews with at members of at least 10 local identified grassroots community organizing groups regarding their experiences in securing financial and/or other support from funders and from established non-profits. Potential interviewees will be identified by Social Policy staff (Grants team, Data team, Anti-Racism & Cultural Redress team, Gender Equity team, Sex Worker Safety team, and others) as well as by the student researcher and the contacts they may make via the literature review and other activities.
    - b. b) interviews with at least 5 local and regional/provincial funders regarding their efforts in supporting associations.
- A final report (or executive summary) for the online public-facing Scholars Project Library, containing a summary of the work completed, to include a snapshot of grassroots community groups in Vancouver, with recommendations for possible next steps.

## Time Commitment

- This project will take 250 hours to complete.
- This project must be completed between May 2, 2022 and August 12, 2022
- The scholar is to complete hours between 9 am and 5 pm, Monday to Friday, approximately 17 to 20 hours per week.

## Required/preferred Skills and Background

- Excellent research and writing skills
- Experience conducting stakeholder engagement events, including facilitation skills, is an asset
- Community engagement experience
- Familiarity conducting focus group research
- Strong analytical skills
- Ability to work independently
- Background working or volunteering with the non-profit sector and/or with grassroots community organizations/initiatives, an asset.

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Applications close **midnight Sunday January 30, 2022**

Apply here: [Click here to apply](#)

Contact Karen Taylor at [sustainability.scholars@ubc.ca](mailto:sustainability.scholars@ubc.ca) if you have questions

## Useful Resources

We are holding a special **resume preparation workshop for prospective Scholars** on January 19. [Click here for details and to register.](#)

Below are some links to useful resources to help you with your resume and cover letter (there are many more online). Some of these resources also provide information on preparing for your interview.

<https://students.ubc.ca/career/career-resources/resumes-cover-letters-curricula-vitae>

<https://www.grad.ubc.ca/current-students/graduate-pathways-success>

<https://www.grad.ubc.ca/cover-letter-cv-resume-templates-ubc-career-services>