The Development of an Online Platform to Cultivate Collaboration and Connect Post-Secondary Student Leaders Across Canada

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Abstract

In 2020, 10 visionary undergraduate students across Canada were brought together through the 3M National Student Fellowship and tasked with developing a project that furthers STLHE's mission of enhancing teaching and learning in higher education. To address a need for increased national collaboration among student groups and to unify student leaders in their efforts to transform higher education, we developed an online bilingual resource hub and forum—CANnect: Cross Campus Collaborations—that enables Canadian post-secondary students to learn about and engage in various areas of advocacy and activism across campuses. We worked with STLHE staff to build the online platform and drew from our own networks of student advocacy groups across Canada to populate the website. To ensure the platform's sustainability and safety, we hired a bilingual moderator to manage the forum content and update resources. In December 2021, 19 months after we began working on the project, CANnect officially launched. Currently, our biggest challenges involve increasing platform usership and engagement, and ensuring the platform's long-term sustainability. Nevertheless, we see great potential in this project and remain determined to enhance teaching and learning in higher education by creating an accessible and inclusive space to connect student leaders across Canada.

En 2020, 10 étudiants visionnaires de premier cycle à travers le Canada ont été réunis dans le cadre de le prix national d'excellence 3M pour étudiants (3M National Student Fellowship) et chargés de développer un projet qui fait avancer la mission de la SAPES: d'améliorer l'enseignement et l'apprentissage dans l'enseignement supérieur. Afin de répondre au besoin d'une collaboration nationale accrue entre les groupes d'étudiants et d'unifier les leaders étudiants dans leurs efforts pour transformer l'enseignement supérieur, nous avons développé un carrefour et un forum de ressources bilingues en ligne - CANnect: Cross Campus Collaborations. Cette collaboration permet aux étudiants canadiens de niveau postsecondaire de se renseigner et de s'engager dans les divers domaines de plaidoyer et d'activisme sur les campus. Nous avons travaillé avec le personnel de la SAPES pour construire le plateforme en ligne et puisé dans nos propres réseaux de groupes de défense des étudiants à travers le Canada pour alimenter le site web. Pour assurer la pérennité et la sécurité de la plateforme, nous avons embauché un modérateur bilingue pour gérer le contenu du forum et mettre à jour les ressources. En décembre 2021, 19 mois

après avoir commencé à travailler sur le projet, CANnect a été officiellement lancé. Actuellement, nos plus grands défis consistent à accroître l'utilisation et l'engagement de la plateforme, et d'assurer la durabilité à long terme de la plateforme. Néanmoins, nous voyons un grand potentiel de ce projet et restons déterminés à améliorer l'enseignement et l'apprentissage dans l'enseignement supérieur en créant un espace accessible et inclusif pour connecter les leaders étudiants à travers le Canada.

The 3M National Student Fellowship (Fellowship), which is awarded annually by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) in partnership with 3M Canada, recognizes up to 10 full-time undergraduate or diploma students at Canadian post-secondary institutions who demonstrate exceptional leadership and innovation in their lives, campus communities, and beyond. Since 2012, the Fellowship has honoured students who embrace and actively contribute to advancing STLHE's mission to enhance teaching and learning in higher education. Historically, student's receiving the Fellowship were recognized by STLHE and its partners in the media, awarded a personal financial stipend, granted STLHE membership, and brought together for various gatherings, conferences, and retreats throughout the duration of their Fellowship.

As to be expected when 10 highly motivated, engaged, and passionate students are given a platform and united, 3M National Student Fellows (3MNSFs) often rally to launch projects, spark conversations, inspire action, and drive change at a larger scale across Canada over the course of their Fellowship. To further amplify 3MNSF's voices and increase their ability to advance teaching and learning in higher education, STLHE and 3M Canada revised the Fellowship provisions in 2019 such that forthcoming cohorts would also receive $25,000 of funding to develop and complete a project that, in some way, supports teaching and learning in higher education. The 2020 cohort of 3MNSFs, composed of students from the University of Victoria, University of Manitoba, University of Toronto, Western University, Bishop's University, Dalhousie University, and St. Francis Xavier University, was the first cohort to benefit from this funding.

In this article we, three of the 10 2020 3MNSFs, provide an overview of the thinking, resources, and expertise that went into the development of our project, CANnect: Cross Campus Collaborations (CANnect), an online bilingual resource hub and forum for student activists, as well as reflect on our experiences, challenges, and successes as 3MNSFs.

Methods: A Timeline

Our cohort of 3MNSFs came together in May 2020, only a few short months into the COVID-19 pandemic, which rapidly shifted our social structures and ways of connecting. Although businesses, universities, and students quickly adapted to the new norm of virtual collaboration, the initial months were challenging as we worked to figure out how to best communicate with one another. We chose to conduct our biweekly meetings via Zoom teleconferencing. Figure 1 provides an overview of the project timeline.

Figure 1

Project Timeline
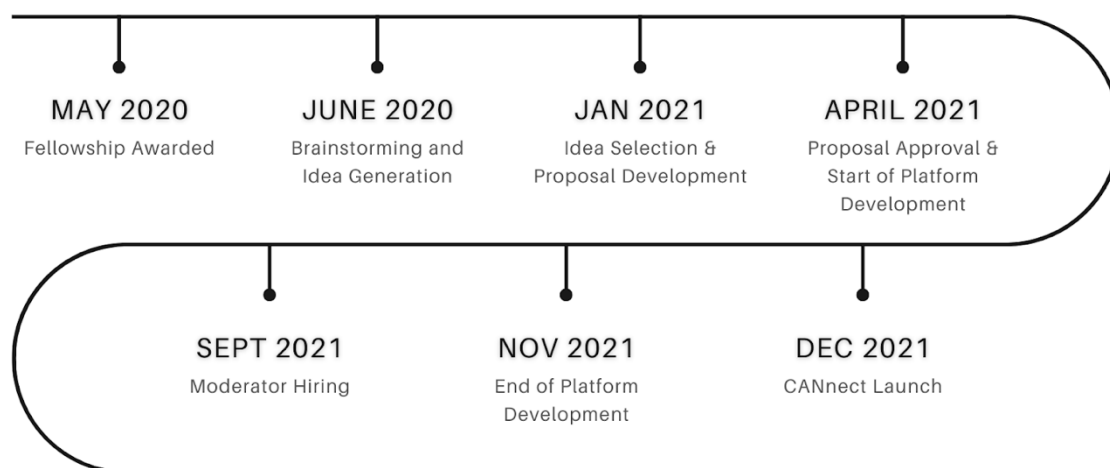
Note. For a plain text version of Figure 1, please see Appendix A.

The Gap: Identifying the Problem

During our initial bi-weekly virtual meetings, many of us were struck by the power of being connected through the Fellowship and that, without it, we would have likely remained unaware of the incredible work being done by like-minded students across the country. These realizations also challenged us to acknowledge that we represented only 10 of the over 2 million students enrolled at post-secondary institutions across Canada, many of whom are also leaders of change on their campuses and beyond (Centre for Education Statistics, 2021). Worldwide, student activists are recognized as potent drivers of political change and instrumental to shaping higher education policy (Altbach & Klemencic, 2014). Across Canada, students are tackling climate change (Helferty & Clarke, 2009), developing initiatives to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (Ford et al., 2021), launching movements to address sexual assault on university and college campuses (Salvino et al., 2018), and designing programs to support student wellbeing amidst the COVID-19 related shift to virtual learning (Phung et al., 2021).

Student leadership is essential to improving educational curricula, creating campus communities, and inspiring action at regional, provincial, national, and even global levels. Given the empowerment, inspiration, and motivation our cohort experienced by being connected, we wondered what possibilities would arise from uniting hundreds, even thousands, of student leaders across Canada, and considered how we might be able to extend the platform and privileges awarded to us as 3MNSFs to others.

Another matter at the forefront of many of our initial discussions was equity, diversity, and inclusion. We were starkly aware that awards such as the Fellowship are highly prestigious and competitive, inaccessible to many, and, though often unintentionally, tend to be awarded to individuals with a certain degree of privilege. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, minority ethnic groups, and marginalized communities, as well as those with disabilities or who otherwise experience barriers to education (e.g., caregiver responsibilities), are often unable to pursue activities or participate in experiences sought after by merit-based scholarships, awards, and programs (Sandel, 2020). This disparity creates a feedback loop that further discourages marginalized and diverse students from applying to such scholarships, awards, and programs because they do not see themselves or their experiences represented in past recipients. Beyond the social and moral implications of these inequities, the resulting lack of student diversity, among other things, limits perspective taking and knowledge acquisition (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), and hinders creativity (Leung et al., 2008), critical thinking, and social agency (Nelson Laird, 2005), as well as academic engagement (Gurin et al., 2004). As such, we were particularly interested in working on a project that would provide a more inclusive and accessible space for a diverse group of post-secondary students to connect and collaborate.

The Bridge: Designing a Solution

In the last decade, digital technology has been increasingly used to inspire, connect, and sustain student leadership and activism across post-secondary institutions (Gismondi & Osteen, 2017). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and shift to virtual learning further highlights the capacity for digital technology to sustain connection and facilitate collaboration. As such, we sought to leverage digital technology in our solution to the previously identified problems.

We also knew that the project needed to tackle specific goals of STLHE and 3M Canada, such as addressing the future of post-secondary education, specific actions for encouraging diverse perspectives and engagement to support diversity and inclusion in post-secondary education, and knowledge mobilization by fostering collaborations for innovative thinking, while adhering to the $25,000 funding budget provided. Most of our initial meetings focused on selecting our topic of focus for this project and considering the feasibility of each proposed idea. Many of our ideas focused on fostering connection and collaboration between student groups, which may have been influenced by the increased feelings of loneliness and isolation that many Canadians were experiencing at this time (Dozois, 2021).

We proposed the development of a free and bilingual online resource hub and forum, which we named CANnect: Cross Campus Collaborations. Through the development and launch of CANnect, we hoped to enhance national collaboration and bridge geographic divides across student groups in Canada, unify diverse student leaders in their efforts to transform higher education, ensure equal access to knowledge about student-led initiatives, provide a safe space for students to share

ideas, and encourage student collaboration across diverse backgrounds and disciplines in an effort to maximize the impact and success of student-led initiatives. Since the Fellowship is only one year in duration, we also thought it was critical to put systems in place that would ensure the sustainability of CANnect beyond our term of Fellowship.

The Process: Building the Platform

Although we considered building a conference or workshop series, we decided that an online platform featuring an updated national resource hub for student advocacy groups and a student forum would be the most accessible and sustainable method to increase student connection and collaboration, with sustainability being defined as continued use of the platform by a nationally representative group of students for at least 24 months. Furthermore, we recognized that many students were experiencing "Zoom Fatigue" and we aimed to avoid synchronous sessions that would further perpetuate this phenomenon (Riedl, 2021). Finally, we identified the importance of the platform being available to users in both English and French to increase accessibility across Canada.

We identified several risks associated with creating an online resource hub and forum. Firstly, as with any web-based platform, there were concerns regarding the stability and security of the application. Secondly, an open web-based forum with the option of anonymity had the potential to proliferate hate speech and criminal activity if left unmoderated. Furthermore, we were mindful of the fact that engagement on the platform would be limited if it was poorly suited to the needs and wants of the end-users.

To mitigate these risks, we sought out external expertise in constructing the web platform, as this knowledge and experience did not exist within our cohort. Although we considered several independent web services' hosting platforms, we decided to partner with STLHE and host CANnect on their existing website as this would create the most traffic, increase the platform's legitimacy, make use of existing STLHE web security protocols, ensure continued website maintenance, and reaffirm the shared goals of STHLE and CANnect. Therefore, under the direction and vision of our cohort, STHLE website and administration staff contributed the technical expertise required to create the platform.

However, we encountered a gap in staffing capacity to address the day-to-day challenges of maintaining the platform, including forum moderation and content creation to populate the website. To address this gap, we used the bulk of our funding to hire a forum moderator (see Table 1). The position was advertised nationally and required commitment to a year-long contract to ensure continuity and sustainability. It was also important that the successful candidate have strong independent problem-solving abilities, and proficiency in both French and English. Although there were difficulties with recruiting for a position limited to 20 hours per month, the vacancy was eventually filled by a highly qualified candidate.

Table 1

Budget Outline for CANnect: Cross Campus Collaborations.

Expense	Amount Budgeted
Website creation	$10,000
Moderator salary ($25.00/hr x 20hr/month x 24 months)	$12,000
Event launch and buffer expenses	$2,000
Total	$24,000

Note: The total amount of funding available was $25,000, with no option for renewal.

The resource hub component of the website required significant collaboration to develop a nationally comprehensive list of advocacy organizations, as our cohort did not fully represent all Canadian provinces and territories, let alone post-secondary institutions. We began by populating the hub with organizations from our own universities and communities. We then created a Google form to solicit submissions for resources from website users so that the resource hub can continue to grow with user-generated content. The forum moderator is tasked with updating content and resources.

CANnect officially launched on December 8th, 2021, 19 months after our cohort was brought together by the shared vision of 3M and STLHE. The platform can be accessed at www.stlhe.ca/cannect. The launch was advertised by STLHE and the 3MNSF cohort via social media, as well as through personal networks.

Discussion

The 2020 3MNSFs spent one year developing CANnect: Cross Campus Collaborations, an online bilingual resource hub and forum connecting post-secondary student leaders across Canada with the hopes of increasing collaboration, strengthening students' voices, and enhancing student impact. Although we were the first cohort of 3MNSFs to receive project funding, and the primary focus of this article is to reflect on the development and launch of our project, we also want to emphasize that the value of this Fellowship goes far beyond any amount of financial stipend. As we worked together to develop and launch CANnect, each of us was personally and professionally challenged, allowing us to develop invaluable leadership skills such as project management, flexibility and adaptability, teamwork, and effective communication. Moreover, the relationships we developed with each

other will almost certainly lead to future academic and leadership collaborations as we each move forward with our careers.

With the recent launch of CANnect, the main platform limitations we have identified are long-term sustainability and usership. Nearly half the project funding was allocated to hiring a part-time forum moderator for two years following the platform launch, thereby securing its sustainability until December 2023 (see Table 1). However, we have not yet decided what will happen once the initial funding has been exhausted. One possibility is that CANnect could operate on a volunteer basis. However, this presents additional challenges, such as ensuring volunteers are properly screened and trained, and engaging in continuous volunteer recruitment and supervision.

Given that our Fellowship officially ended in June 2021, the inherent challenge for this project, as will be the case for all future 3MNSF projects, is the continuity of the leadership team. We recommend that future cohorts carefully consider the question of long-term sustainability when they engage in their project planning. Students should consider whether they are willing to engage in the project on a volunteer basis after their Fellowship has ended. If not, they may be better suited to develop a project with a clear endpoint that does not require ongoing commitment or supervision following its launch, such as developing a one-time event, running a speaker series, or creating a static resource. In general, individuals engage in projects for longer periods of time and with greater interest when they are intrinsically, rather than extrinsically, motivated (Dorner, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000) because of the sense of meaning they derive from engaging in such projects (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). Therefore, we recommend future cohorts take time to reflect on and identify their collective purpose before deciding on a project that aligns with this purpose.

There are currently 10 registered members on the CANnect forum, but no activity apart from the prompts authored by the moderator. Therefore, we will also need to find ways to increase platform usership over the coming months. We believe that integrating CANnect into STLHE's website was a valuable decision as this continues to increase individual's awareness of, and interest in, our project. However, additional efforts are needed to further disseminate this work. For example, we may consider different ways to partner with universities across Canada to advertise CANnect to their students and centrally update the resource hub with their school-specific supports, clubs, and student initiatives.

Through our individual research and outreach, we created 43 organization profiles, which are displayed in CANnect's resource hub. Because of the geographical representation of our cohort, there are currently no organizations listed for Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nunavut, Yukon, or the Northwest Territories. As such, reaching out to individual universities and connecting with organizational leaders will be a critical next step to achieving our goal of creating equal access to and representation of post-secondary student initiatives across

Canada. As a cohort, we are still in the process of getting accustomed to the platform ourselves and hope that, moving forward, it may be a medium for us to continue collaborating on projects that enhance teaching and learning in higher education.

Throughout the project ideation and development process, our cohort encountered some challenges related to working in a remote environment that may have, at times, limited our creativity and productivity. Specifically, the transition to remote learning in 2020 meant that many of us spent increasingly longer hours at a desk in front of a computer and many of us were experiencing the effects of "Zoom fatigue" (Riedl, 2021; Shockley et al., 2021; Wiederhold, 2020). Moreover, the unique aspects of remote work caused some communication difficulties. Without a retreat at the beginning of the Fellowship, as would normally occur to introduce 3MNSFs to one another and catalyze the formation of relationships, it took longer for us to get to know each other, learn about each other's interests, understand individual nuances, and develop trust, the latter of which is especially important for virtual teamwork (Breuer et al., 2016; Mathieu et al., 2019). During our initial brainstorming sessions, we often went into breakout rooms to discuss ideas. Although this allowed for more intimate conversations, we quickly realized that it also caused divides and misunderstandings since groups discussed different ideas and reached differing conclusions that we found challenging to integrate upon returning to the main room. Once this problem was identified, we discontinued the use of breakout rooms, which significantly improved our communication and collaboration.

Indeed, communication is one of the biggest barriers to effective teamwork and, as reflected in our cohort's experience, online work environments are known to create or exacerbate communication challenges (Breuer et al., 2016; Mathieu et al., 2019). Importantly, however, the dramatic increase in remote work triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is predicted to continue in a post-pandemic era (Fenwick et al., 2020), so the knowledge, skills, and experiences we gained by engaging in this Fellowship virtually will be foundational to our future success, both personally and professionally. Furthermore, there are notable advantages to remote work and a majority of Canadians seem to prefer the possibility of working both in person and remotely after the pandemic (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021). Our project capitalized on the benefits associated with virtual teams, such as the ability to bridge the geographical divide between Canadian provinces and territories.

Conclusion

CANnect: Cross Campus Collaborations (www.stlhe.ca/cannect) is an online forum and resource hub created by the 2020 3M National Student Fellows that aims to enhance national collaboration between post-secondary student advocacy groups across Canada. The development of this project reflects a commitment to enhancing the post-secondary environment for students by creating accessible opportunities for collaboration between diverse groups. Challenges in the post-launch era include low user engagement and uncertainties regarding the long-term sustainability of the platform. The development of the project was initiated at the beginning of the

COVID-19 pandemic, which challenged us to adapt our communication and collaboration skills to a virtual format. As such, the impact of the Fellowship reaches beyond the resulting platform by enhancing our own leadership skills and creating a national network of collaborators aiming to enhance teaching and learning in higher education.

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Appendix A – Plain Text Version of Figure 1

Figure 1 provides a project timeline for developing CANnect. The project timeline spans May 2020 to December 2021.

- May 2020, our 3M Fellowship was awarded.
- June 2020, we began brainstorming and generating ideas.
- January 2021, our group selected an idea and began developing our proposal.
- April 2021, our proposal was approved and we started developing our platform.
- September 2021, we hired a moderator.
- November 2021, marked the end of platform development
- December 2021, CANnect launched.

About the Authors

Leighton Schreyer, BSc is an award-winning medical student, author, activist, and poet, who is interested in the intersection of health, art, and the humanities. Their work has been published or is forthcoming in CMAJ, JAMA, The British Journal of Psychiatry, Academic Medicine, and numerous literary magazines and newspapers, including The Sun. As a future physician, emerging writer, and ardent activist, Leighton turns to stories as a tool for healing and connection. They were a 2020 3M National Student Fellow.

Ariane Freynet-Gagné completed her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) at the University of Manitoba and is completing her doctoral studies in clinical psychology at the Université de Sherbrooke. Her thesis aims to investigate the effects of arts engagement on identity development. She was a 3M National Student Fellow (2020-2021) and is currently a Baxter and Alma Fellow (2021-2024). She was also the president of the Conseil jeunesse provincial in Manitoba (2018-2021) and the vice-president of the Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française (2020-2021).

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