From the Director

Over the past year, continued significant growth in Learning Exchange programs has occurred. More than 2,000 UBC students engaged in community-based experiential learning in several communities in British Columbia, including the Downtown Eastside and other parts of the Metro Vancouver area, as well as smaller communities in northern BC. These students engaged in a wide variety of activities. For example:

- Involving elementary school children in writing poetry, doing science experiments, and building vegetable gardens
- Facilitating Aboriginal song circles
- Doing research for Neighbourhood Houses to enable them to support immigrants more effectively
- Tutoring high school students in academic subjects in after-school programs
- Helping small businesses develop marketing plans

More than 60% of these students did their work in the community as part of an academic course. The number of students doing course-based Community Service Learning or Community-Based Research increased 30% over last year. Students who participated in non-course-based Community Service Learning through the Trek Program either did ongoing weekly placements in Vancouver schools and non-profit organizations or participated in the largest-ever effort to organize Reading Week projects in schools, with many projects focusing on Olympic-related themes.

Programs at our storefront on Main Street also expanded. The ESL conversation program supported by HSBC Bank Canada filled almost 1,000 spaces for ESL learners. Forty-nine people from the local community acted as facilitators for the ESL conversation groups. Participation in the basic and advanced computer skills workshops, also supported by HSBC, increased by more than 50% to 320 spaces, thanks to the donation of ten laptops from Bell Canada. Several special events were hosted at the storefront, including a discussion of women’s story-telling (part of the Heart of the City Festival) and the installation of a donated house post carved by native elder Simon Charlie. The house post installation was followed by a screening and discussion of a powerful documentary film by UBC Professor Leonie Sandercock that describes the relationships between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in northern BC communities.

The growth in our programs has been made possible by generous gifts from a variety of external sources as well as strong support from the university which, this year, made a commitment to provide ongoing core funding to the Learning Exchange.

While these quantitative indicators of success are important, it is the personal stories from individuals that best demonstrate the impacts of our work. That is why we are focusing our report this year on inspiring stories from people who have stepped outside their comfort zones, engaged with people and issues that were unfamiliar, and discovered the power of a “learning exchange.”

~Margo Fryer, Director, UBC Learning Exchange and UBC-Community Learning Initiative

“The work of the Learning Exchange is based in the belief that people from the university and people from diverse community settings have a great deal to learn from each other, and when these people all work together to achieve shared goals, new ideas emerge and are acted upon—ideas that otherwise would not have come to light. This is the promise inherent in community-university engagement.”

~Margo Fryer
Since 1999 the Trek Program has engaged almost 5,000 UBC students in the work of non-profit organizations and schools in Vancouver. This year, 440 Trek students took part in weekly volunteer placements on their own time, outside of their coursework. Seventy percent of these students worked in Vancouver schools, doing a variety of Community Service Learning activities that aligned with each school’s goals. Activities included acting as literacy or math mentors, coaching sports or arts-related activities, serving as homework tutors, and providing other in-class and after-school support. Overall, about 5000 children and youth benefited from the efforts of UBC students. Much of our work in the schools is supported by HSBC Bank Canada.

Thirty percent of Trek students work with non-profit organizations. For example:

- At the YWCA Welcome to My Life and Boys 4 Real Programs, Trek students co-facilitated a program to help Grade seven students transition from elementary to high school. Exploring concepts like healthy relationships and the impact of the media in relation to body image, UBC students facilitated a variety of group activities designed to foster self-esteem.
- Trek students volunteered in the programs at the Dr. Peter Centre, working with residents of the Centre as well as participants in the day programs. Through their work, students learned about the challenges faced by people with HIV/AIDS and came to appreciate their resilience.
- At Frontier College, Trek students worked with women who were live-in caregivers or nannies from the West Coast Domestic Workers Association. Students developed their tutoring skills by helping women practice their conversational English. Here too, Trek students learned about the challenges faced by the people they were working with, while gaining a new appreciation for their strengths.

“This student and I have continued to work together over the last few months. I have seen her grow more confident in both her reading skills and herself. This may have nothing to do with me, though I love the idea that I may have played even a tiny part in it. There is a small chance that when this girl looks back on her days in elementary school and forms her own list of influential people that I might make an appearance. Even if I do not make her list, she has most certainly made mine. “

~Stephanie McGee, Trek Literacy Mentor, Queen Alexandra Elementary School
Reflections of a Trek Student

When I reflect on my volunteer experience at Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, it is difficult to comprehend the amount of personal growth and insight into my own past gained in such a short amount of time. Even more difficult to believe is the fact that my volunteer placement with the Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House Preteen Program largely occurred by chance. Having recently moved to Vancouver for graduate studies rapidly leading towards a yet undecided career, I was looking for refuge from my daily life. During a particularly slow day at school, I was searching online for something—a volunteer position, a sport—anything that would occupy a few hours per week. A stereotypical unfulfilled graduate student, I did not have lofty expectations from the Learning Exchange program outside of a letter of completion and a safe place to volunteer my time.

From the placement description, there was nothing particularly striking about the Preteen program: an after school drop-in centre for youth, ages 10 to 14. Activities included baking, hiking, and arts and crafts. It sounded like the definition of normal. There was something in the description about the youth being at-risk, but who wasn’t in this crazy day and age? At the time, what was more important to me was whether or not the placement fit into my class schedule and was easily accessible by public transit.

On my first day, I introduced myself to the preteens with mild trepidation, secretly wondering if I had just jumped into a strange community on the wrong side of town with too little forethought. From what I could recall of my own preteen years, that was the time in my life when I was often at odds with authority figures. But I neither had worried as the preteens welcomed me into their group without any questions. They were more mature than I had anticipated, and although I worried they wouldn’t find enough entertainment in the simple activities we had planned, I took great pleasure in working to give them the opportunity to enjoy being kids again. Every week, the preteens would teach me something new about their lives. The popular music and movies had changed since my time, and I was amazed to see how much online networks, such as Facebook, figured into their lives. But what surprised me more was how readily and openly some of the preteens would talk to me about their personal lives and troubles. I was shocked at the similarities to my own childhood.

I grew up in a single-parent home. My father left when I was young, and it was never a fact I was eager to share with my classmates. Because my mother often worked late, I had responsibilities at home that other kids did not have. It was never a burden, and I credit that part of my history for teaching me a lot of lessons that many do not learn until they are much older. Looking back, I realize now with some shock that there were several things about my life that likely put me into the at-risk youth category.

So what had made the difference in my life? I had absolutely no idea. It wasn’t until my volunteer placement with the Preteen Program that I realized the value of my own community back home. My childhood was difficult, but the normalcy of my community kept me grounded, kept me sane, and although I didn’t realize it until now, kept me away from the dangerous activities that too often define the futures of at-risk youth. Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House is not in the best or richest neighbourhood, but the effort the people here put into enhancing the feeling and strength of a community is amazing. My own community supported me in its own way, but I have never been in a community like this, where people are encouraged to talk about the hardships they face and receive unrelenting support, care, and advice in return.

On paper, the Preteen Program does not appear to be anything remarkable, it is this unfailing normalcy that supports and nurtures the preteens in ways their families may not be able to, whether they know it now or not. I am grateful for this opportunity to give back to a community, any community. I do not know if I will ever be able to properly thank my own community for its contribution to my life, but I know volunteering my time at Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House is a good way to start.

~Lisa Wong, Learning Exchange Trek Student
Reading Week 2010

In February and March 2010 the world celebrated the 2010 Winter Games, an event capturing the attention of some three billion people worldwide. It was against this backdrop the UBC Reading Week Projects celebrated the Games-related themes of connecting, playing and inspiring, by bringing teams of UBC students into 16 elementary schools across Vancouver. The UBC student teams were led by staff and senior students from UBC as well as employees from SAP Canada.

For Behshad Darvish — a Human Resources professional at SAP Canada — his experience as a Reading Week 2010 project leader involved working with UBC students and volunteers to teach grade six students at Hastings Elementary School about Ancient Greece and the history of the Olympics. This called for turning classrooms into themed rooms based on Greek city-states (including the Athens, Sparta and Olympia rooms), and celebrating Ancient Greek culture through arts and crafts, and physical activities, such as beanbag tosses (meant to replicate Olympic shot put).

But it was the bonds built between the university students and their elementary school counterparts that Darvish cites as being most memorable, connections he’s proud to have played a role in fostering. In his view, perhaps the biggest takeaway for the Hastings Elementary students was being able to interact with the UBC students, largely through informal conversations about higher education, classes and university life. For their part, Darvish says the biggest takeaway for UBC students and volunteers was leading activities and sharing their knowledge.

Darvish’s favourite project moments came on the final day, when teams were awarded medals at special victory ceremonies, in keeping with Olympic tradition. Watching the joy on the faces of the grade six students as they received their chocolate-coin, gold medals from the UBC students was “really symbolic” for Darvish, underscoring the connections built between students.

For his part, Darvish liked stepping outside his daily SAP life — working with students, sharing [his] experience working in the business world, and leading project activities. Like his fellow SAP colleagues, he also valued the chance to step into the students’ shoes. Indeed, he had such a great experience he’s taking part in Reading Week 2011 — this time as a project coordinator recruiting the next cohort of SAP project leaders.

“The kids inspired me so much, I think it was a great way for students and kids alike to have tons of fun and learn valuable skills.”

-UBC student, Reading Week 2010
The UBC-Community Learning Initiative, part of the Learning Exchange, is working with faculty members and community organizations to integrate Community Service Learning and Community-Based Research into academic courses. Community Service Learning has three key elements: classroom learning; volunteer work that responds to community-identified priorities; and structured reflection activities that challenge students to make connections between what they are studying and their experiences in the community. Community-Based Research is the conduct of research that addresses questions or issues identified by a community organization.

The following story of one CSL project illustrates the benefits of these interactions between UBC students, faculty members, and community organizations.

**Deepening Community Connections, Making a Difference**

IVEFS, better known as the Immigrant Vancouver Ethnographic Field School, is a course offered jointly by the departments of Anthropology and Sociology and supported by the UBC-Community Learning Initiative (UBC-CLI). The course allows students to gain valuable outside-the-classroom experience while better understanding how immigration is transforming Vancouver. It’s an experience bringing UBC, students, and non-profit organizations together.

Denise Lee, an honours anthropology student in her final year, worked with a group of seniors at Gordon Neighbourhood House on rental housing issues. Her IVEFS experience included helping the Seniors Housing Advocacy Group plan and host a successful housing forum involving political leaders from all levels of government. Lee participated in many different ways, including writing slogans, preparing handouts and developing information boards. Both eye-opening and rewarding, Lee’s experience allowed her to get acquainted with issues and a community she didn’t know, look more critically at issues reported in the media, and connect with a different generation in an initiative she credits with enabling her to “draw learning, experience and inspiration” from where she lives.

Ana Maria Bustamante is Gordon Neighbourhood House’s multicultural and community development coordinator. Bustamante, who came to Canada from Colombia 12 years ago, says the ten IVEFS students who’ve come through her doors have offered welcome volunteer support to her organization, and, in Lee’s case with the housing forum, helped raise greater awareness of housing issues faced by seniors and create a forum where “regular people” could voice their concerns. For Bustamante, giving students the chance to “step into somebody else’s shoes” is important in “making the community more cohesive and welcoming.” Bustamante believes initiatives like IVEFS deepen understanding of issues, which, in turn, offers real long-term community benefits.

Jennifer Chun, Assistant Professor of Sociology, and one of the course’s co-initiators, is thrilled IVEFS is going into its third year. She cites stronger UBC/community ties and a legacy of student volunteering as two tangible benefits. Chun also credits the institutional support, meaningful relationships with community partners and “on-the-ground knowledge” of the UBC-CLI team for taking the course from concept to reality. Chun encourages other professors to consider community service learning —both as another pedagogical approach (one that extends far beyond the pages of a book), and for the satisfaction that comes with knowing students are truly being enriched by learning while contributing to community life.

The UBC-Community Learning Initiative is generously supported by a grant from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

“I believe that this was by far the most valuable learning experience I have ever engaged in so far while studying at UBC.”

~Kimberley Lai, UBC student

*not pictured*
“I received more out of my CSL course than any class I've taken at university in the past four years. I've been waiting my whole university career to have a chance to use and develop communication skills that will be crucial for real life application. It was refreshing to get out of the classroom and take an active role in the community. What I learned went way beyond class material. I learned communication skills, writing skills, time management skills, and most importantly, I learned about the potentials and barriers that face communities around Vancouver. I was much more motivated by the potential to help others than to get a satisfactory mark. That motivation correlated into a much better academic performance and a greater sense of achievement.”

~Clay Gruber, UBC student

*not pictured
Learning Exchange Storefront Programs

Computer Access and Training

The Learning Exchange storefront at Main and Keefer in the Downtown Eastside provides a lively focal point for several programs and activities. The afternoon computer drop-in has become an integral part of the neighbourhood, with a daily average of 35 people using the computers and the Internet to connect with family and friends, learn about current events, work on school assignments, conduct job searches, and work on creative projects such as writing novels. The computer training workshops sponsored by HSBC Bank Canada are always filled to capacity.

Based on the success of our ESL program, the Learning Exchange has begun to train and support local residents to also lead basic computer sessions. This is already having a positive impact for computer workshop participants, because the Computer Facilitators work in pairs, and as such they are able to provide participants with more individualized support. Our learners also appreciate that the support is provided by a peer.

From a Participant in the Computer Workshops

Where in Vancouver regardless of your background: educational levels, language fluency, age or even looks can you knock on the door, say, “I would like to learn … Can you help me?” And the response is a non-judgmental “yes” with a welcome smile.

Answer: UBC Learning Exchange

Underemployed, I realized that to make myself more competitive in my profession—research—I needed to advance my skills in Microsoft Word, Excel and Power Point.

The coaching and encouragement conveyed by the staff have given me and my classmates the liberty to ask questions, seek guidance and gain confidence in our learning.

I for one was able to use my new knowledge in Word in successfully submitting an editorial piece that was published by The Washington Post—the paper that world leaders have every morning at their desk. But I have also seen a Chinese Canadian mother in her 50s, with limited English, create for the first time a PowerPoint presentation which is at a level with those done by professional business communicators. I have talked with a man in his 50s who takes time off from his part-time job because the training he is getting is at par with his personal learning capacity and he sees the applications in his current occupation.

In our final PowerPoint class day, we all got to see and hear everyone’s presentations. We were all exuberant at the joy of achieving a project that was appreciated by others.

~Jake Lopez
*not pictured

From a Participant in the Computer Workshops and future IT Facilitator

I came across the Learning Exchange while looking for basic computer classes for my best friend, who couldn’t even turn on a computer. When I originally came in and found our there was computer classes that I could take too, I quickly got the next registration dates. I had been out of work for one year and the Learning Exchange had the programs I needed to get up to date for my field. I participated in the Excel, PowerPoint, and Advanced Word programs; I am confident that the skills I learned will expand my employment options and increase my employability as a medical office administrator.

I found the Learning Exchange to be a welcoming, caring group of people who place a high priority on dealing with issues affecting our community and how to solve these problems. The staff’s dedication and commitment have inspired me to join them in doing what I can for my community by taking training to become an IT and ESL facilitator and will continue to assist staff in expanding the offerings available.

~Bert Holdon
*not pictured
“I learned about myself; I learned I was capable of more than I thought.”

- IT Facilitator

*not pictured
“It [the ESL sessions] have helped a lot and the teachers are very, very nice. I want to speak more and communicate with people.”

~ESL Conversation Participant

* not pictured
From an ESL Conversation Facilitator

My name is Atiya* (not pictured). I started volunteering at the UBC Learning Exchange as an ESL Volunteer Facilitator in January 2009. Originally, my friend and I decided that we would volunteer together because we saw a flier at the YWCA. We were both unemployed and wanted to volunteer somewhere to occupy our time. It turned out she could not volunteer anymore. Despite some anxiety volunteering by myself, I decided to attend the information session anyways. I had no experience facilitating, let alone leading an ESL conversation class, so I was curious to learn what it was about.

I am a single mom and I struggle everyday because I have no family support. All my family is back home. Here, I had to learn quickly how to take care of myself and my daughter. It is a challenge and sometimes I want to give up, but I think of my daughter because she is my life and my number one priority. I struggle to make her life better.

My first term as a facilitator went really well and I wanted to continue to volunteer every week even after the term finished. I worked with lower level English learners and loved seeing their progress. I was excited to see them learn new words and use them appropriately. They are eager to learn, which made the conversation sessions more interesting and exciting at the same time. I found that over time I developed a strong bond with some of the learners and I looked forward to seeing them. The feeling was mutual because the learners thanked me all the time and smiled when they see me enter the classroom. When they say, “Thank you,” it makes you feel so good.

I no longer feel so isolated. I can see that my network has expanded; I am making friends and building connections with other cultures. I learn from the learners just as they learn from me.

Also, I completed the Peer Support Program and was immediately able to “practice” those skills to support new facilitators. Every Friday, I attend the training with the new volunteers and meet with them. I try to make them feel more comfortable and ease their worries about facilitating for the first time. I share my own experience and give them some pointers on leading a session. I am taking a more leadership role and this makes me feel good.

So far, it has been an amazing experience. I think the ESL Conversation Program has changed so many people’s lives by improving their English speaking skills. It also has helped the facilitators to develop leadership skills, confidence and make them feel better about themselves. My goal in life is to provide a happy and fulfilling life for my daughter and all these skills will take me one step closer to securing a stable job in the future.

~ESL Conversation Facilitator
*Name has been changed
Directions for the Coming Year

The Learning Exchange and the UBC-Community Learning Initiative will be pursuing several priorities in the coming year. We will continue to work with our colleagues in the faculties and in the community to engage more students in Community Service Learning and Community-Based Research while strengthening the collaborative networks that are at the heart of both these approaches to experiential learning. The strategic plan that was completed last year will guide these activities and will inform the faculty-specific academic plans that are being developed across the university. We will be expanding the learning opportunities for faculty and graduate students who want to increase their understanding of best practices in Community Service Learning and Community-Based Research. For example, a series of training videos is in development. In addition, we will work with our community partners to determine how the university can best support them to bring students into their organizations. For example, we will initiate a pilot project in several East Vancouver schools that will have student leaders coordinating the work of other student volunteers.

In our storefront programs, we are building on the successful model used in the ESL conversation program by developing a similar peer-based teaching model for the computer workshops. Residents of the Downtown Eastside with computer skills are being trained and supported to lead the storefront computer workshops. As these facilitators gain experience they will be encouraged to bring their training and “IT help-desk” skills to other community organizations where these skills are needed. The purpose of these efforts and other new initiatives that are in the planning stages is to support marginalized citizens in their efforts to contribute their talents and gifts to the community.

We are redesigning the Learning Exchange website and expect to launch the new, more interactive website in January 2011.

As we reflect on the experiences of the people who have been involved in our work over the past year and look forward to another year of growth and innovation, we are grateful for the many ways in which our campus and community partners teach us about what being in community really means.

Thank you

The success of the Learning Exchange would not be possible without the generous support of our donors.

HSBC Bank Canada
J.W. McConnell Family Foundation
British Columbia Ministry of Education
Chapman Family Foundation
SAP Canada
United Way of the Lower Mainland
Face the World Foundation
Kaatza Foundation
Bell Canada
Individual donors
“Everytime I come here I think it's a happy time; I can relax and learn something interesting.”

ESL Conversation Participant
* not pictured
UBC Learning Exchange
612 Main Street
Vancouver, BC V6A 2V3

Ph: 604.408.5164

www.learningexchange.ubc.ca