

Intersecting Assets: How Successful Community Engagement Built a Leading Social Procurement Program at York University in Toronto, Canada

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Abstract

This article investigates how strategic community partnerships form the bedrock of successful institutional community engagement activities. In this investigation, these engagements encourage institutional practitioners to consider how truly effective community economic development materializes when the university assumes a reactionary role by tailoring activity to respond to outcomes community defines for itself. Using the formation and development of York University's successful social procurement program as test case, the article explores how key community partnerships have led to successful program outcomes – which, to date, have amounted to over \$8 million spent on diverse suppliers and 63 apprenticeship opportunities created. To demonstrate this evidence, the article considers how to identify and align with community champions to create tangible outcomes as well as how those defined outcomes are translated into creating activities that are aligned with what the institution can reasonably deliver to achieve the community's stated outcomes. In this article, this will be considered as it explores York's Social Procurement Vendor Portal and how its formation and refinement was directly attributed to community need. Finally, the investigation considers the interplay between how institutions can design impactful reporting that responds to community need.

Keywords: York university, social procurement, community engagement, inclusive economic development, anchor institution

Introduction

In December 2019, York University, the third largest University in Canada, made a historic announcement: after many months of internal and external stakeholder discussions, the University received Board approval for a fully comprehensive Social Procurement Policy (York University, n.d.). This policy and subsequent program were the first of its kind in the Province of Ontario to commit a post-secondary institution to social procurement. By enacting this policy, York University formally committed the university to consider community economic development in its purchasing and hiring practices. Since then, York University has been steadily developing one of the preeminent programs across the country. To date, the University has overseen more than \$8 million CDN community benefit purchases. It has created opportunities for 63 equity-deserving (York University, 2023) construction apprenticeship opportunities totaling over 49,000 hours worked across York University job sites, as well as numerous tools to support a vibrant university ecosystem that marries institutional ambition and community ability to meet the University's needs when it purchases goods and services. (York University, 2019).

The primary focus of this examination will offer a critical examination of effective community engagement and how that effective engagement is critical to building a fully comprehensive social procurement policy. This analysis will explore how community engagement informs institutional activity, identifies critical support gaps within ecosystems, and, finally, how successful engagement can inform immediate and long-term impact reporting. This paper will consider these three substantive pillars through the program's fruition and provide insight into the success and challenges of these pillars.

Delving into the heart of community engagement requires a more cursory evaluation of the landscape that fostered successful collaboration. Founded in 1959, York University is home to over 55,000 students, tracing its origins to 178 different countries; York University's diversity has given rise to a plethora of diverse culture, experience, and knowledge development on its campus in northwestern Toronto. Surrounding York University are two neighbourhoods, Jane-Finch, and Black Creek, both of whom parallel in their collective histories. Both regions were home to farming communities that were repurposed for industrial usage. After the collapse of industry in much of Toronto, these neighborhoods were largely abandoned by city planners who devoted little resources and infrastructure to a burgeoning international community. Jane-Finch and Black Creek were and remain to this day an area populated by newcomers with higher proportions of low-income housing than city averages and often ranking in the lowest quadrants of neighborhood community health indices run by the City of Toronto. (City of Toronto, 2014, 1). However, where disinvestment became constant, local action, community organizing, and entrepreneurial spirit rose to counter historical and systemic barriers to community economic empowerment. And it is this sentiment that largely forms the basis by which our present

investigation can begin.

Building Trust Within Community Networks

At first glance, the interests of the university as an institution and that of community wealth-building activities appear not to be natural bedfellows. Where traditionally the university, by its mandate to educate and promote its research interests globally, lends naturally to a focus outside of immediate community interests, save that of student wellbeing. Within this traditional context, the university, through its insular focus –the borders of university property – left the debate between community economic development between residents and their local governments. In recent decades, within Canada; however, that historical narrative has started to shift. There are several competing theories as to why the University increasingly found itself thrust into the sphere of community engagement. Some, by virtue of population sprawl and resource strain from university and community perspectives, and others through the need to integrate infrastructure that collectively serves campus and community needs that have been pressed upon them by governments. There has been a trend to examine the mutuality of both university success and neighboring communities through partnerships based on reciprocity. At York University, those external pressures largely contributed to a more robust commitment to community engagement.

There has been an interplay between the university and its neighboring communities since York University's founding in 1959. What were often individual relationships held with community partners, York University increasingly took a more institutional approach to seeking partnerships and playing a more active role in aligning with community aspirations. In 2008, York University opened its Community Engagement Centre, located off campus in a community shopping mall. This allowed deeper partnerships and identification of shared objectives, including access to post-secondary education, student and research opportunities, and shared planning to address the socio-economic needs of the community (York University, 2024).

By 2018, York University was gaining momentum in identifying ways that its Anchor mission would solidly place us as a key partner in the economic development space in the community. We worked with groups and individuals who could substantively and meaningfully contribute towards a vision of longer-term solutions for inclusive economic development, including those with expertise in community benefit agreements and social procurement (City of Toronto, 2023).

Two primary groups brought a unique blend of local expertise and vision: the Jane-Finch Centre and the Toronto Community Benefits Network. This analysis will briefly outline their work in hopes that their activity might help identify replicable or similar activity within other jurisdictions. The Jane-Finch Centre (hereafter JFC) has been engaged with York University in various capacities since its formation in the 1970s. Over the years, there have been residents engaged with this community organization who have moved on to employment with York

University, and many faculty whose research interests align with community economic development have been actively engaged with the center. Furthermore, the JFC played an influential role in supporting the creation of a York University and TD Bank initiative to create a community space for learning and community resourcing within a major mall within the Jane-Finch community. However, for the purposes of our investigation, the JFC had a robust community advocacy program with honed channels to champion resident concerns to government and funding agencies alike. These included extensive studies on community economic development as well as development plans for the region (United Way Greater Toronto, 2023). They were, in essence, a vital community anchor. York University understood that its insight into community needs would be critical to developing a social procurement program aligned with community expectations in the immediate term, but also to ensure the program's growth will reflect changing community needs.

The second key partner was a newly formed association of community agencies and labor union partners who formed the Toronto Community Benefits Network (hereafter TCBN). The TCBN had formed with the mandate to build advocacy around the notion of community benefits agreements, which, for the sake of this investigation, was to consider workforce development opportunities for neighborhoods most impacted by large capital construction projects. The TCBN had successfully lobbied the municipal and provincial governments to include community benefits language on large infrastructure projects (Toronto Community Benefits Network, 2021). Their leadership in community benefits allowed York University to adopt best practices in building its workforce development plans within the construction space. The University also invited other subject matter experts – including Buy Social Canada, a national-reaching social procurement advocacy organization, and Anchor TO, a coalition of municipalities, universities, schools, and hospital organizations across Toronto exploring the concept of Anchor institutions – and social procurement practitioners who were able to guide the policy development framework. While not able to comment on immediate community concerns, these groups of stakeholders were able to help operationalize the goals and expectations set forth by the community. With a retinue of experts committed to the successful implementation of a social procurement program at York University, York University staff were ready to begin to investigate what social procurement could envelop at the University.

The Institutional Response

With a contingent established, York University staff and several community partners began to identify the hallmarks of a directional statement that would serve to guide the principles of social procurement at York University, and in turn, form the basis of a fully comprehensive policy hitherto unforeseen anywhere in the province. The issue was determining a synthesis or key nexus that melded community aspirations for community economic development with activities York University could target as a public sector institution. As a result of numerous stakeholder

and community consultations held in tandem with the community and subject matter expert partners, the community distilled their objectives to two pathways: York University should use its procurement to leverage the creation of local jobs through purchasing, and support local, equity-deserving businesses.

With community outcomes identified, the task then befell the University to understand how those outcomes could be appropriately transferred to a procurement setting. Chief among the considerations was how to satisfy Provincial, Federal, and International treaty and legislative commitments – which, for the sake of brevity, will not be explored within this paper. (See for instance Government of Ontario, n.d). A short investigation into the University’s procurement activity led the task force to consider construction projects because of its demands for considerable labor to complete projects and the necessity of local businesses to supply the tools and materials to complete the work. Moreover, a focus on construction aligned with existing community efforts to develop pathways with trade unions to work for communities underrepresented in the trades. (Toronto Community Benefits Network, n.d.a).

Crafting the Policy with community-defined outcomes allowed York University to approach policy language and development in a different way: policy development could instead investigate how university activity might satisfy these longitudinal and, indeed, generational goals that the community identified. The policy development, therefore, was framed as a response to the policy’s outcomes already affirmed by key community partners who would largely be the benefactors of York University’s social procurement work. To craft the language of the policy, York University considered how its activities could contribute towards the impact the community working group sought to achieve.



FIGURE 1. Multiplier effect in local purchasing.

To understand how local purchasing benefits the community, York University worked alongside a group of local businesses to understand how purchases made by the university benefitted local ecosystems. An important item for the discussion was that these effects are not unique to York University's unique context as these relationships may be broadly applied. From these discussions, a pattern emerged, as evidenced in Figure 1.0. Our investigation considered how businesses responded to opportunities to provide goods and services to York University and how far-reaching local businesses extend to secondary and tertiary impacts, both directly involved with the purchase and indirectly as well. From the investigation, the first direct benefit was the space where the purchase is made: funds flow from the university to the business to complete the work. This exchange is reflected in the blue circle above. Tracing the journey of those funds beyond that immediate exchange identified the extent to which university funds can permeate into the community. To respond to the purchase, local vendors indicated that they would often hire workers to meet the demands of the contract. From the community consultations, we determined that local businesses had a hire percentage from within the community and were indeed preferential to local workers due to transit concerns and some affinities towards seeing community businesses thrive. Moving on from the initial transaction, our investigation also determined that local vendors routinely sought out other local subcontractors to complete the purchase when fulfilling contracts for York University. While these transactions occurred largely outside the university's control, identifying the strong affinity for local businesses that routinely partner to complete larger projects was a value that could not be ignored when assessing the value of a local purchase.

Finally, a tertiary benefit identified was the ability of a purchase to generate local economic activity. The premise identified was that because local businesses overwhelmingly employ local staff, there were strong affinities for staff's consumer activity to be concentrated with other local businesses, thus extending the initial investment of the contract value to other businesses wholly outside the scope of the contract. This correlation was apparent in a recent Community Action Plan published by the City of Toronto (City of Toronto, 2024). The findings we echoed in a Government of Canada research study examining the impacts more broadly on the impact of social procurement on local communities (Office of the Procurement Ombudsman, 2020). Furthermore, there was a strong correlation identified from both reports between business owners and observed needs within community. The reports identified that many business owners were often involved in Business Improvement Area networking as well as extra-curricular activities that promoted healthy community outcomes. For instance, some business owners reported sponsoring local sports teams as a means to provide healthy activities for kids within the community. Others donated to or provided goods to charitable endeavors where the recipients were often community members, contributing to healthier community outcomes. From this observation, the merits of local purchasing by York University could have a considerable multifaceted impact within the communities. While this observation considered local business more broadly, feedback from equity-deserving businesses and social enterprises demonstrated

similar patterns. In York University’s particular circumstances, where patterns of historical disinvestment have occurred, the impacts are even more vital in contributing to healthy community economic development. The information clearly identified a need to strategically incorporate a clear channel to identify those businesses to increase purchasing with these vendors. The challenge that yet befell the university was a means to identify those businesses in a way that seamlessly linked businesses and purchasers while reducing barriers to public sector procurement.

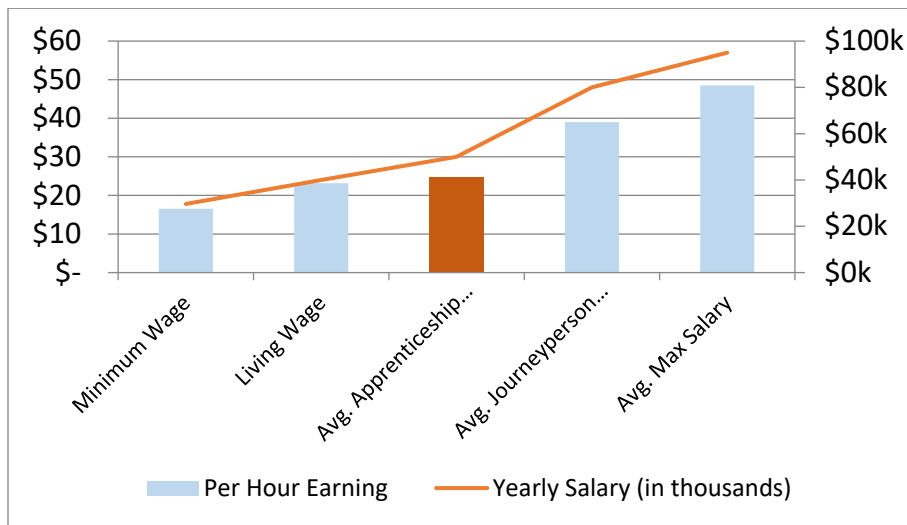


FIGURE 2. Apprenticeship pathways.

The second area identified by the community focused broadly on creating job opportunities for community members. Figure 1 identified that procurements to local and equity-deserving vendors had a tertiary positive impact on creating employment by creating more business opportunities to encourage business growth, but more inquiry was needed to understand how York University might leverage procurement to create better employment metrics within the community. On the one hand, procurement was somewhat limited – procurement is not routinely engaged in hiring, so the working group evaluated how the *types* of procurement activity might naturally lend to employment opportunities for the community. After an investigation into contemporary practices (Toronto Community Benefits Network, *Learn About CBAs*, n.d.b) around community benefit agreements underway across Toronto, the community identified construction as a possible way to explore job creation opportunities apart from York University’s human resource practices (York University, 2020). These community conversations were somewhat fortuitous as York University was preparing to build a new School of Continuing Studies building on its main campus as well as building a new campus in Markham, Ontario, a growing suburb of Toronto some twenty kilometers north of Toronto. Due to the size of these projects, facilities experts confirmed that the demand for trade union labor would be significant. General contractors would need subcontractors who, in turn, would request laborers from the union halls to complete the job. Construction also seemed well suited because of the finite duration of construction projects – benefits would be easy to observe in a relatively short period

of time.

Moving forward with those opportunities, York University needed to evaluate how supporting apprenticeship opportunities would promote employment opportunities identified within the policy – how these opportunities would allow community members to increase their economic agency and independence and, ideally, transition individuals away from survival and temp-based work. To understand the impact, York University performed a jurisdictional scan to consider both the immediate and long-term economic impacts for individuals joining the trades. Our investigation included two data points to inform analysis. The first was to consider hourly wages, combined with yearly salaries. Both sets of data provided a holistic picture of one’s economic agency in terms of day-to-day living, as hourly wage sets can indicate alongside yearly salaries, which can inform longer trend analyses. The framework of our investigation considered Canadian minimum wage jobs, the Living Wage in the Greater Toronto Area (Ontario Living Wage Network, 2023) alongside average wage trends within the construction industry. Within the construction industry we set out to examine broadly, the economic agency gained at varying degrees of an individual’s construction journey; namely at the apprenticeship stage, average salaries upon graduation to a journeyperson, and the average earning potential for someone at the apex of their career. As Figure 2.0 demonstrates, there is a slight increase in hourly and yearly earnings above and beyond a job paying a living wage. But, when compared with career trajectories, a Living Wage job will not increase nearly as far as someone graduating the stages of an apprenticeship. From York University’s perspective, the evidence of supporting apprenticeship opportunities was abundantly clear – mandating apprenticeship opportunities be created within its procurement contracts we could support individuals historically marginalized from those opportunities to create considerably more economic agency within community.

After evaluating York University’s potential to contribute to the outcomes defined by community partners meaningfully, York University developed a policy that would require the university to consider community impact when making purchasing decisions:

The Social Procurement Policy aims to demonstrate the University’s commitment to use its purchasing power to benefit local economies and provide fair access to its procurements by providing additional opportunities for underrepresented businesses and communities. It establishes the framework of values and principles, listed below, for enhancing community impact and gives direction to staff in approaching procurement. (York University, 2019).

What followed from the policy statement included areas of concentration where York University could conduct activities to promote social procurement awareness and support the ambitions of the policy. Most notably, this included a commitment to creating a culture of adoption on campus through learning and activity and actively identifying opportunities to support

businesses. While the workforce development piece was implemented quickly, the path to creating opportunities for local, equity-deserving businesses was somewhat less clear.

The Social Procurement Vendor Portal

One of the primary challenges that quickly became a significant barrier to the program's success was a suitable infrastructure by which local, equity-deserving businesses could list their business in such a way that could be utilized by purchasers at York University. In Canada, unlike in the United States, businesses do not have to declare diversity demographics on their business forming documents. Nor has the federal government, aside from Indigenous business commitments, engaged in any large-scale supplier diversity program. What had existed was a small network of supplier diversity business councils that had previously specialized in the private sector. However, these business networks have not penetrated local markets in ways conducive to growing a social procurement program. There were also smaller grassroots non-profit networks that provided government funding to non-profit social enterprises and listed their grantees publicly. Still, in the absence of a central strategy or repository of supplier information, these lists are often difficult to find. Therefore, in the absence of existing infrastructure to draw upon, a solution tailor-made to public sector procurement portal would need to be created.

Much like the trajectory of the social procurement program, the Portal was the product of community engagement that determined the parameters of a successful program. The portal could only be successful if it could be easily accessed by community members and clarify requisite information useful for procurement staff. In a sense, the portal needed, on the one hand, to identify but also clarify to both audiences to create a truly dynamic marketplace that supported the objectives of York University's social procurement program. When community groups and local businesses were consulted, similar themes soon emerged. Namely, that they were interested in a registry that would minimize costs and be comprehensive enough so that other institutions would want to use York University's platform. Businesses were concerned about having to repeat similar application processes for other institutions following York University's path.

In response to the concerns raised, York University decided to create a digital solution using internal expertise and infrastructure that was free for businesses to access and enroll. On the second concern – creating a solution that could be both substantive and comprehensive for other institutions – required considerably more attention. Building a tool with that mandate required several considerations. From the vendor side, they needed the tool to highlight their expertise effectively, as well as the social value that the business created. For purchasers, businesses needed to be easily discoverable, which mimicked how purchasers traditionally search for vendors for the goods and services they require. Very quickly during the Portal's creation, York University determined that to bring about the maximum exposure, the Portal needed to exist beyond York University's immediate purchasing needs. The rationale was simple, in the absence

of a central directory for diverse suppliers and social enterprises, York University, despite its size, could only reach so far. To build a robust system whereby more suppliers felt inclined to register, and more purchasers who had access to the directory, the greater chance purchasers could find their goods and services there. To do this, York University decided to make the Portal open-sourced. This meant that the directory was free for vendors to apply and have their business listed and free for other institutions and their purchasers to access. This required considerable outreach and engagement – promoting the concept to institutions across Ontario and promoting the opportunity to suppliers across Ontario. For the purposes of this investigation, only the supplier engagement piece will be considered.

To appeal to businesses who supported the tenets of York University’s Social Procurement Policy, the Portal needed to meet vendors within their diverse supplier business communities for maximum uptake. To do this, York University undertook an investigation to understand which networks existed and whether they could form a partnership for the Portal. The investigation considered two facets: the first, the network’s ability to support primarily equity-deserving businesses and advocacy efforts and secondly, the existence of a vetting program for membership that supported the common understanding of supplier diversity (51% ownership and control) to confirm with federal standards. (Office of the Procurement Ombudsman, 2020). If the organization could satisfy those two requirements, York University could enter into a partnership with that organization to fast-track applications for vendors to the Portal. This was a relationship grounded in reciprocity: business networks could use the Portal as a value adds for their membership, and York University, it meant that the business would not need to demonstrate their eligibility for diverse supplier status. This takes considerably fewer resources to process and allows York University to align its expectations with what the community has already affirmed by admitting entry to membership to that business. Moreover, by building these foundational relationships, York University was able to rely on the support of these community business leaders to promote York University’s program and enhance its work and reputation in the community considerably.

In its effort to be an inclusive vehicle to recognize diverse suppliers and social enterprises, York University also designed a channel to accommodate vendors who did not belong to a particular business community by offering a direct application. In this pathway, the vendor, in addition to the application, also submits their business forming documents and a document demonstrating belonging to an equity-deserving community by the majority of its owners. If the business can demonstrate its suitability, they are added to the Portal’s directory. Once the vendor appears on the directory, the Portal does not distinguish the pathways of entry. To present the vendor’s unique selling point and social value creation in a way that is easily understood by purchasers, the Portal seeks to blend social value creation and its unique selling point in searchable ways. To apply, vendors are asked to describe their service offerings to potential buyers. Secondly, they are also asked to describe their community impact in similar terms before selecting a merchant

category by which they would like to be classified. Vendors can also add their category (York University, 2022). Once that information is collected, it is collated to be searchable by various channels. The Portal allows buyers to search for vendors by commodity type, keywords – including social impact terms – mentioned anywhere within their application and postal codes. Once a search has been performed, the buyer can then connect with a vendor with the information. Importantly, this Portal does not facilitate financial transactions. Still, it does connect buyers with diverse suppliers and social enterprises in a way that will hopefully continue to expand across the province.

Impact Reporting

The final analysis of this investigation linked the research, tools, and policy work that created the social procurement program – that of its impact measurement. Like the sections discussed beforehand, strong community partnerships played a pivotal role in shaping effective impact reporting. While there is much more to be said than what can reasonably be considered at present, the purpose of this investigation considered how York University has used impact reporting as a way to respond to the objectives and outcomes the community had initially set forth. Referring back to earlier in our investigation, the community identified job creation and greater purchasing within local, equity-deserving businesses as social procurement’s primary pursuits.

To effectively convey the impact to the community, York University looked at impact from a broad spectrum to convey the merits of the program. York University has done this from an individual perspective, project perspective, and program outlook. Each perspective helps to shape a grander narrative of how community and institutions like York University can work together to create longer term economic development. From the individual perspective, where apprentices or local, equity-deserving businesses are involved, York University conducts qualitative and quantitative analysis. Beginning with the qualitative, York University routinely conducts interviews to understand the impact the social procurement program has had on their personal and professional journey. This first-hand data provides useful feedback on barriers that may still exist and where further program enhancements may be required. Moreover, the interviews also provide an opportunity for participants to speak to their own community about their experiences on how they too could navigate a similar path for themselves. This information is often helpful for community groups in their advocacy of, for example, joining a construction apprenticeship. From a quantitative perspective, York University tracks the hours worked on construction projects. It measures the time they spend on York University projects against the job-site requirements of their apprenticeship program, as seen in Figure 3 below.

Apprenticeship Target: 4 multidisciplinary apprentices from the local area from an Equity-Deserving group.

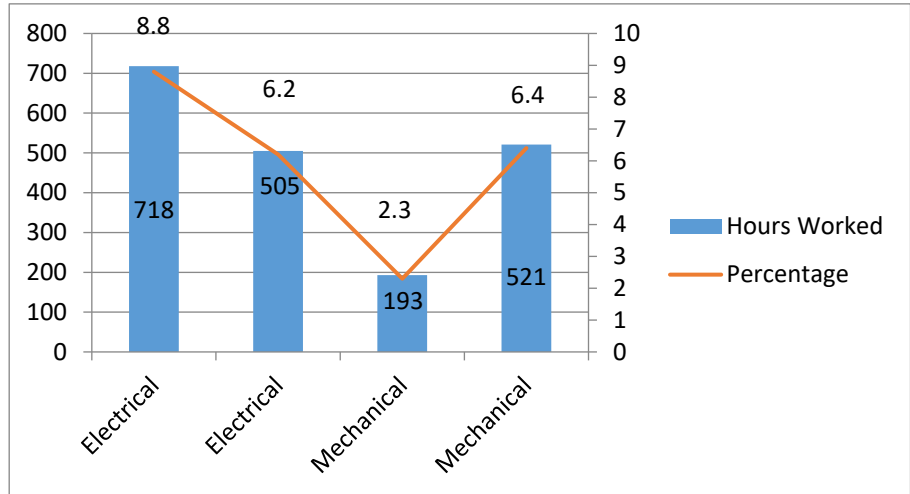


FIGURE 3. Project deliverables.

On the left side of Figure 3.0 is the stated project objectives. These objectives are embedded into the contract, and successful bidders are required to ensure that they, at a minimum, meet the targets set out. Vendors are always encouraged to exceed these targets where there is an opportunity. As Figure 3.0 identifies, this particular contractor successfully met these targets, which created four apprenticeship opportunities for local, equity-deserving community members. There might also be spending requirements for a construction contract in other projects. Those dollars are also tracked against the project objectives and sorted by local, equity-deserving, and social enterprise spending. Figure 3.0 also distills the apprenticeship impact further. In this chart, individual apprentices are identified by the apprenticeship program in which the participant is currently enrolled. Using the Province of Ontario’s requirements (Skilled Trades Ontario, 2022) for job site hours, the graph demonstrates the total hours worked as well as a percentage of how the program has been completed. The percentages are helpful but also subjective in appearance. While the graph above has particularly low percentages, this is on account of the small nature of the project and the lengthy apprenticeship program involved for those in mechanical and electrical trades. On other projects not captured above, where a combination of a larger and, therefore, longer project with apprenticeships that are considerably shorter, the numbers appear higher. For instance, there have been some apprentices who have worked enough hours to complete their job site requirements for their apprenticeship fully. The critical perspective, however, is to evaluate how social procurement opportunities enhance those opportunities as they exist. Finally, by taking the summation of all activity across its projects and spending on the Portal, York University can provide concrete evidence in the introduction to this investigation that it is actively responding to those crucial impacts the community set for us to achieve.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this investigation presented the idea that community partners are instrumental in creating a successful vision for community economic development. Through York University's journey of building a successful social procurement program, the investigation established that community partners are best placed to understand their community needs. Often, these community groups are actively engaged in research and advocacy to support the investments known through lived experience and community consultation. By listening to community stakeholders' voices in shaping the outcomes, the institution can concentrate on designing a successful program to satisfy those ends. As this investigation has sought to demonstrate, when the community validates the outcome, the institution can work strategically to identify gaps in the system created to reduce barriers further. This extends to creating tools like the Social Procurement Vendor Portal to effectively communicate the impact that speaks to the community's defined outcomes from both micro and macro perspectives. Furthermore, it will also provide the necessary framework to begin to examine the long-term impacts that social procurement has on community economic development.

While this investigation examined key pillars of a successful social procurement program, we did not consider other wraparound supports necessary for success – all of which certainly require further investigation. In York University's experience, there remains further work to be done around capacity building in order for smaller businesses to be able to compete for public sector projects successfully. Similarly, considerable work must be done to educate buyers on seeking community impact when purchasing on behalf of the institution. In conclusion, while York University's social procurement program remains a work in progress, the critical building blocks of strong community engagement are well-founded. This framework, built in cooperation with community partners, will ensure its continued growth and success going forward.

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Appendix A

York University Apprentice Interview Template

1. Why are you interested in a career in construction?
2. Where do you see yourself in the industry after your apprenticeship is complete?
3. What would you say to people in your community who might be considering a career in construction?
4. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are principles that guide everything we do at York University. What does it mean to you that York University is actively engaged in seeing our operations – like on our construction sites – more accurately reflect the diversity we see in our communities?