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University of Windsor Team to Develop Collaborative Partnership Strategy to Enhance Entrepreneurial, Work-Integrated, Experiential, and Career-Focused Learning

Over the last five years, the University has launched a number of initiatives that reflect its continued, growing commitment to close and reciprocal collaboration with industry, local and global partners, and our communities. Over the next year, a team from four areas whose work has been particularly important to these efforts (EPICentre, Research and Innovation Services, Experiential Learning, and the Centre for Continuing Education) will work together to establish a more coordinated approach, enhancing the reach, impact, and nature of these collaborations. “Partnerships are fundamental to fulfilling the mission of the University,” says provost Jeff Berryman, “whether in terms of student learning, innovation and research, knowledge translation, or community service. We have an important role to play in connecting people, ideas, and knowledge in our communities: we learn with and from those communities, who challenge us to listen, collaborate, innovate, and evolve.”

Working with a broader partnership advisory committee drawing on individuals on and off campus, the team’s goal will be to gauge current partnership status, breadth, and depth on campus, and to gather information about campus and partner experiences, needs, and perspectives. They will also review best practices and the approaches being taken to support partnership models at other institutions. “There are many interesting community and industry engagement models emerging at Canadian universities, and we hope to learn from those as we start to think about how we can enhance partnership capacity, reduce barriers to engagement, and foster collaborative relationships that further learning, knowledge creation, and social and economic wellbeing,” says Judy Bornais, Executive Director, Experiential Learning. This information will provide a solid basis for understanding how partnerships are currently operating and evolving on campus.

Through thoughtfully designed collaborative structures and shared spaces, the team aims to improve efficiency, engage a greater diversity of students and partners, inspire both enterprise and entrepreneurship, and foster increasingly innovative collisions of different ideas, stakeholders, needs, and practices. To achieve these goals, the team will collaboratively shape a more networked approach to the partnership development and support work in their own units, including shared partnership tracking, more systematic contact and referral coordination, and a centralized entry point for potential partners seeking to make contact. Teams from each unit who support entrepreneurial, work-integrated learning, and undergraduate research support will operate in shared spaces, in order to facilitate greater collaboration and knowledge sharing. The move is also intended to encourage students to explore a broader range of experiential learning activities, no matter where they first become interested.

This approach will also improve the respective units’ financial sustainability, an important factor in this era of strained institutional resources. However, as Heather Pratt, executive director, research and innovation, puts it “While this is certainly an effort to operate more efficiently, it is more importantly an effort to improve how we

work with our external partners and to create more holistic, transferable understandings of their concerns, expertise, and goals. At the moment, we're often not aware of what other units are doing or pursuing: from the partner's perspective, this can result in mixed messages and wasted time. Ultimately, it can limit opportunities for the University as a whole."

The project will also leverage the potential of the recently launched Centre for Continuing Education. Under the leadership of executive director Jennie Atkins, the Centre provides non-credit professional development and training, including custom-designed programs intended to meet employers' specific needs. Michael Siu, vice-president, research and innovation, is enthusiastic about the potential of these new collaborative alignments: "I see this as an enormous opportunity to enhance our responsiveness to partners' needs, and to enable the kinds of retraining critical to nimble and diversifying economies. Expertise in cutting edge technologies is pivotal, and often difficult to acquire. The potential of this collaborative approach is enormous. "

It is anticipated that the outcomes from this project will result in shifts in the approach, mission, and activities of the units involved, but not in the University's overall commitment to partnership enhancement or to the important work of each of the units involved. As part of this new partnership strategy, Dr. Francine Schlosser, currently EPICentre's executive director, and the University of Windsor Golden Jubilee Professor in Business, will be taking up a new role as the Odette Professor in Entrepreneurship and Innovation. "We are thrilled that Dr. Schlosser has agreed to take on this influential role in Odette," says dean Mitch Fields, "Her expertise and insight, honed through fifteen years of ground-breaking leadership of multi-disciplinary entrepreneurship centres and programs, are a unique and invaluable resource, and we are extremely glad that she will be focussing on research and teaching leadership within the Faculty. Her nationally recognized contributions to entrepreneurial education have had a profound impact on the student experience and the reputation of the University." Dr. Schlosser will take up this new role on May 1, 2019.

Building on Dr. Schlosser's collaborative legacy and EPICentre's strong tradition of innovation, student entrepreneurialism, collaboration and community partnerships, Wen Teoh, EPICentre's venture start director, will be taking the lead as the Director of EPICentre. Ms. Teoh will be EPICentre's representative on the team as the collaborative relationship with experiential learning, continuing education, and research and innovation on campus evolves.

A key goal of this initiative is envisioning what comes next for EPICentre after its strong initial success: how do we sustainably broaden and deepen the networks of practitioners, researchers, partners, and learners who reflect its ethos of partnership, innovation, enterprise, and collaboration and help it to further evolve? How do we situate its activities and those of the other units involved in this project most accessibly and fruitfully in the institutional context to enhance the student experience? As president Douglas Kneale explains, "EPICentre's continued leadership in collaborative entrepreneurial education is critical to the UWindsor student experience: it is and will remain a flagship program of the University. As a strong and effective proponent of nimble design, reciprocal partnership, and responsive planning, EPICentre's expertise and ethos will play an important role in establishing a common vision and strategy which will ultimately enhance the University's and our region's learning and innovation ecosystem."

The team is committed to working closely with the campus community as well as external partners, and will establish communications plans that facilitate dialogue during the project and that keep stakeholders up to date with progress and findings.