

Social Work and Human Services
Practicum Students
Outcome Harvest 2017

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July 2017

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Introduction and Methodology

Project Overview

CommunityWise Resource Centre (CWRC or CommunityWise) is a non-profit centre and community hub located in Calgary's Beltline neighbourhood, working towards its mission of providing inclusive and affordable space and community development programs to support and strengthen diverse grassroots and non-profit members. CWRC's staff collective manage an historic building and provide community development programming to its tenant and non-tenant member organizations.

CommunityWise staff support practicum students from programs at the University of Calgary (Social Work), Mount Royal University (Social Work), and Columbia College (Human Services). During their placements, practicum students support CWRC projects, such as the Collaborative Framework and the Equity Framework/Anti-Racist Organizational Change (AROC) initiatives, as well as engage in direct support of the work of various member organizations. CWRC is committed to engaging students and academic programs in this way, having consistently hosted multiple practicum placements each year for over five years, despite limited staff resources. Over this course of time, the practicum experience has evolved in response to the needs and potential of students, member organizations, and CWRC itself – however, it has not been formalized into a program, formally evaluated, or explicitly included in organizational strategy documents. The organization's Developmental Evaluation process, including the creation and ongoing revision of a Theory of Change and an Outcome Harvest in 2015, surfaced some impacts created by the practicum experience and highlighted the need for a dedicated evaluation. In 2016-17, such an evaluation was completed, and its results are described in the present document.

Methodology

CommunityWise chose to use the Outcome Harvesting framework to surface and learn from the impacts created by its practicum program. CommunityWise had previously completed an evaluation of the Collaborative Framework project using this methodology¹; the present evaluation builds on the findings and learning of the previous one. Outcome Harvesting is a utilization-focused evaluation methodology originally developed for the international development context² and revised for local community development evaluation in Calgary.³ Its primary innovation consists in its capacity to “not measure progress towards predetermined outcomes or objectives, but rather [to] collect evidence of what has been achieved, and [to] work backward to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change.”⁴ Outcome Harvesting consists of six (typically cyclical) stages: *Planning, Design, Data Harvest, Substantiation, Interpretation* and *Use Planning*. The Outcome Harvest described in this report was carried out as a participatory evaluation, engaging past and present practicum students in the first four stages of the evaluation cycle.

¹ <http://communitywise.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CommunityWise-Resource-Centre---Outcome-Harvest-2015.pdf>

² http://www.managingforimpact.org/sites/default/files/resource/wilsongrau_en_outome_harvesting_brief_revised_nov_2013.pdf

³ https://www.calgarycdli.ca/s/CDLI-Outcome-Harvest-Report_March-2016.pdf

⁴ Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012

Planning and Design

The evaluation team consisted of nine members: seven past and present practicum students (Marylynda D. Peters, Kyla Myles, Josh Carter, Lauren Ray, Sobia Noreen, Diana Harrison and Valerie Stitchman) along with a member of CWRC's staff collective (Erin McFarlane, practicum supervisor for the students) and an external evaluation coach (Roman Katsnelson). The students participated in two half-day action trainings to complete the Planning and Design stages of the Harvest. During these stages, the full team planned the boundaries of the evaluation and designed the evaluation questions (known as "Useable Questions" in Outcome Harvesting). As a result, the set of questions focuses on areas of particular interest to individuals with the lived experience of practicum placements at CommunityWise, as well as to the organization itself.

Data Harvesting

Students were then individually tasked with surfacing and submitting pre-recorded⁵ data relevant to the questions. Permissible data sources included e-mail records, reflective journals, student evaluations, class notes, social media posts, media articles, photos and artwork. Collectively, the evaluation team submitted over 60 documents representing over 100 data points; of these, 75 data points were coded by the external evaluator before saturation was reached. The data points were summarized into a series of hypothetical outcome statements, organized by question. The outcome statements were presented back to the student group to verify saturation (i.e. to ensure that no significant data surfaced by the team was unrepresented) before being substantiated.

Substantiation

The substantiation stage was implemented as a series of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews: two each of (a) past practicum students, (b) CWRC staff collective, (c) CWRC member organizations, and (d) practicum faculty liaisons from the represented academic programs. In accordance with Outcome Harvesting methodology, substantiator groups were selected based on type of change surfaced and social actor identified, and no individual who participated as a designer or harvester could also serve as substantiator. Interviews were carried out by telephone, by the evaluation coach or CWRC practicum supervisor. Input from the substantiation stage was used to finalize the outcome statements.

Interpretation and Use Planning

The final stages of the Outcome Harvest cycle were carried out by the evaluation coach and CWRC practicum supervisor. Findings were mapped onto existing frameworks where applicable, developed into a draft change continuum, and analyzed to surface key contributions of program design. In this way, the impacts presented below may be understood from the perspectives of adult learning and community development, and the learnings from this evaluation used for replication efforts by interested groups.

⁵ The "pre-recorded" stipulation delineates as acceptable only information that was recorded before the questions were designed, in an effort to minimize risks of confirmation bias.

Outcome Harvest

The Outcome Harvest was guided by four evaluation questions, referred to in the methodology as “Useable Questions”:

1. In the past three years, what changes occurred in the **development of practicum students’ understanding of social work models of practice**, and how did the CWRC placement contribute?
2. In the past three years, what changes occurred in the **development of practicum students’ social work identity**, and how did the CWRC placement contribute?
3. In the past three years, how were **relationships between practicum students and member organizations** built during placements, how did they change after practicum completion, and how did the CWRC placement contribute?
4. In the past three years, how has **member organizations’ sense of belonging and integration** to CWRC changed, and how did practicum students contribute?

Information gathered, organized, and substantiated for each useable question yielded a number of outcome statements, which are presented in sequence in this section.

Question 1: Changes in students’ understanding of social work models of practice

Changes in practicum students’ understanding of social work models of practice occurred among three main themes: (a) *exposure to new theoretical and practical frameworks*, (b) *understanding of the integrated nature of distinct modalities*, and (c) *an expanded conceptualization of the skillset that supports effective social work practice*.

1a. For most students, the practicum experience represented their first formal exposure to Community-Based social work – whether because they were at an early stage of their academic program, or because the academic programs tended to focus more explicitly on clinical approaches. Working with “projects instead of clients,” students were exposed to CommunityWise’s efforts to implement Anti-Oppressive Practice. Such exposure took an integrated shape: the practicum provided students with social work literature and other relevant articles to broaden their theoretical base, and built in opportunities to observe, participate in, and design practical implementations and experimentations through project work, governance participation, and ongoing supported reflective practice.

Students were often initially disoriented by exposure to frameworks they had not previously encountered, or had encountered only in theory. “This is social work? I didn’t know this was social work!” However, the supported, but student-led, approach to project selection during the practicum contributed to students’ successful process through the challenges presented

by such ambiguity; it also contributed to their increased capacity to integrate an understanding of Critical Social Work into their conception of social work practice.

1b. Students increased their capacity to see social work practice through a systemic lens, in particular to see that modalities often described as distinct entities in theory (such as Clinical and Community social work), in practice are integrated and exist on a continuum. Exposure to CommunityWise's member organizations' varying missions, values, and projects contributed to students' capacity for system thinking and future ability to craft system-aware responses in their practice.

In some cases, students formed strong normative stances about their new conceptualizations, leading to experiences of frustration when working with academic and professional peers who were not working from the same perspective. Their understanding of the integrated nature of multiple modalities contributed to their capacity to work through that frustration.

1c. Students augmented their conception of what skills are needed for effective social work practice, creating space for such skills as community building, advocacy, critical thinking, evaluative thinking, working with ambiguity, and capacity for practical values alignment with the ideals of social justice. Students' development of an understanding of these practices as relevant skills was supported by their experience in a variety of projects – both internally to CommunityWise and in support of one or more member organizations.

Question 2: Changes in students' Social Work Identity

In combination with the above changes, as students integrated a broadened conceptualization of social work practice and the frameworks and skills that inform it, so too did their social work identity undergo changes to reflect alignment with the values they were exposed to. Students were (a) *more likely to approach work from a non-expert stance*, (b) *more able to engage in critical evaluation of practice*, and (c) *more likely to initiate values-integrated projects of their own*.

2a. After experiencing a variety of ways to participate - in governance initiatives, community meetings, service projects, organizational development efforts - students increased their capacity, confidence, and comfort in approaching practice from a non-expert stance. For those students who focused on community work, this translated to a capacity to contribute meaningfully to change strategies based in communities to which they were being newly exposed. For those who focused on clinical work post-practicum, the non-expert perspective supported more genuine client-centred approaches.

Students' overall comfort in integrating the social worker and community member aspects of their identity increased in parallel, contributing to an increased capacity to effectively work through situations of complexity and ambiguity.

2b. After participating in and reflecting on the breadth of approaches and missions practiced by CommunityWise member organizations, students' grew their capacity to examine the motivations, theoretical foundations, normative beliefs, and biases guiding their own practice and that of other social workers. In guided and supported reflections, students also began to locate themselves and the work of other organizations within broader systems of power, oppression, and equity. The capacity for such locating contributed to students' strengthened understanding of the kinds of values they wanted to align with in their professional work, as well as the ability to more effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice.

2c. Students were more likely to initiate new projects outside of their practicum experience to integrate the values, concepts and practices they participated in at CWRC into their external practice. During the practicum experience, students strove to bring elements like consensus-based decision making and non-hierarchical governance to group work with academic colleagues. After completing their practicum and their degree, many students sought out professional opportunities where they could exercise community values, Critical Social Work, and participate in explicit social justice efforts. Such *initiating* efforts demonstrate a strong integration of concepts and values into students' emerging social work identities.

Question 3: Relationships between students and CWRC member organizations

Despite the limitations of the short duration of the practicum placement, the relationships between students and member organizations were highly developed. Relationships were (a) initiated by facilitated connection opportunities and strengthened by reciprocity and mutual benefit and (b) strengthened by the students' full accountability for their role in them. After the completion of the practicum, (c) many students remained connected to member organizations in a variety of ways ranging from informal to explicit and direct.

3a. The practicum supervisor facilitated initial introductions to a variety of organizations based on students' expressed interests – including both CommunityWise member organizations and external groups. Students created connections with member organizations by participating in facilitated events, and both providing and receiving supports. Member organizations supported students by creating engagement opportunities and offering discounted services (e.g. trainings); students supported member organizations by lending their capacity in both occasional (e.g. event support) and ongoing (e.g. 10 hours per week) ways. In this way, as students' interests came into sharper focus, they were able to get deeper into a particular organization's work. Such reciprocity contributed to the students' project work being rooted in relationships, which in a majority of cases (8 of 9 participating students) were retained after the completion of the practicums.

3b. After an initial introduction facilitated by the practicum supervisor, students took ownership of their relationships with member organizations. Students held responsibility for communication, problem resolution, and broad project accountabilities. Students took the lead in engaging member organizations in both planning and debriefing their practicum project and

its impacts. Students often needed support from the practicum supervisor behind the scenes to manage these accountabilities. Students' positioning as the primary contact and a fully responsible party had an immediate impact of enabling work to happen more quickly, while also contributing to growing the strength of the working relationship.

3c. After completing practicum engagements, students remained connected with CommunityWise and member organizations in a variety of ways. In almost all case, students maintained the relationships by attending events and supporting CommunityWise and member organizations at periodic volunteer opportunities when requested (e.g. working fundraising events, participating in evaluation efforts, clean-up days). In some cases, students also remained engaged in more formal ways by participating in long-term programs offered by member organizations. Some students also supported the work of organizations with ongoing volunteering roles, like serving on Boards of Directors, as well as finding employment opportunities.

Further research would be needed to make more explicit the extent and impact of retained relationships and their impact on students' practice and careers, as well as on the nature of Calgary's social and community sector as a whole.

Question 4: Changes in member organizations' integration

Students participating in CommunityWise practicum placements over the past three years did so within the context of the organization's Collaborative Framework project, and, as such, contributed to the development of an integrated, collaborative community of organizations. Students (a) helped member organizations be more connected by helping cross-member information flow, and, in some cases, (b) augmented the participation capacity of smaller organizations.

4a. Students acted as a liaison and conduit for the flow of information and peer experiences, both among the member organizations and between members and CWRC. In some cases, students initiated and supported projects explicitly aimed at this goal (e.g. the Burnout Prevention League, member profiles on CommunityWise's website), and in other cases they accomplished the role informally, by virtue of participating in conversations with multiple groups and sharing each other's ideas and experiences among them. In both types of cases, students acted as both a logistical resource and a creative implementer, contributing to information flows and connections that would otherwise not have occurred or been greatly diminished.

4b. Students augmented the participation capacity of smaller, less integrated organizations by providing additional flexibility to the CWRC staff collective and new ways of engaging member organizations. Students were able to create additional intentionality for including the less integrated voices, and spend additional time attempting to reach and engage some of these organizations. In some cases this was effective, as in including a broader swath of organizations in drafting CommunityWise's Theory of Change or getting new members to social events. In other cases, excluded voices remained unengaged despite these efforts, due

both to practical reasons (lack of staff, money, time) and deep seated systems of oppression. Recognition of these contributed to the initiation of CommunityWise's Anti-Racist Organizational Change (AROC) project.

Interpretation and Mapping

1. Change Continuum

The impacts surfaced in response to Useable Questions 1 and 2 are deeply intertwined – the development of students' understanding of social work practice and the development of their own social work identities are highly integrated processes. In order to better understand the process of change, we developed a draft *Change Continuum* (Fig 1) and subsequently mapped relevant outcome statements onto it (Fig 2).

A consistent theme in virtually all of the findings related to this process was the initial sense of confusion, sometimes described as disorientation, sometimes as shock, experienced by the students at the early stages of their practicums. This experience – referred to by the students and substantiated by staff collective members, faculty liaisons, and members – is similar to what has been described in the Transformative Learning literature as a “disorienting dilemma.”⁶ Disorienting dilemmas represent a critical juncture at which learners' individual symbolic models are experienced as insufficient to make meaning of some new, significant experiential context. Learners who are appropriately supported through a reflective process develop new symbolic models – in this case, newly integrated understandings of social work practice and individual social work identity. Both the early experience of disorientation and the ongoing experience of supported reflection are intentional design components of the practicum experience at CWRC, resulting in a nearly universal impact of transformative learning.

In the schematic below, the **pink-shaded boxes** represent CommunityWise activities, strategies and tactics; the **green-shaded boxes** represent students' internal states.

The selective process is an important contributing factor to the impacts found in this evaluation. Students are selected on the basis of two primary criteria: (1) a baseline values alignment or a demonstrated interest in some of the work being done at CommunityWise; and (2) student's social location viewed through CommunityWise's equity approach, with a current focus on racial equity.

The practicum's structure then combines *theoretical*, *practical*, and *relational* activities to provide students with a coherent, integral exposure to Anti-Oppressive Practice in action, in the particular context of organizational community development. The resulting disorientation is not an explicit strategic goal of the practicum; however, it has been seen to be both a consistent experience and a critical juncture point in the students' change process. Critical at this stage is the ongoing support – particularly in the form of supported reflective practice used as a supervision technique by the

⁶ Mezirow, Jack. "How critical reflection triggers transformative learning." *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood* 1 (1990): 20; Christie, Michael, et al. "Putting transformative learning theory into practice." *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 55.1 (2015): 9.

practicum supervisor – and the opportunity for the students to actively enact, with full accountability, the principles they are being immersed in. These processes iterate throughout the duration of the practicum and contribute to the development of integrative capacity in the students, which helps the students organize new knowledge, new skills, values, and relationships into a new social work identity. This step is designated by the “Transformational Learning” state in the below figures.

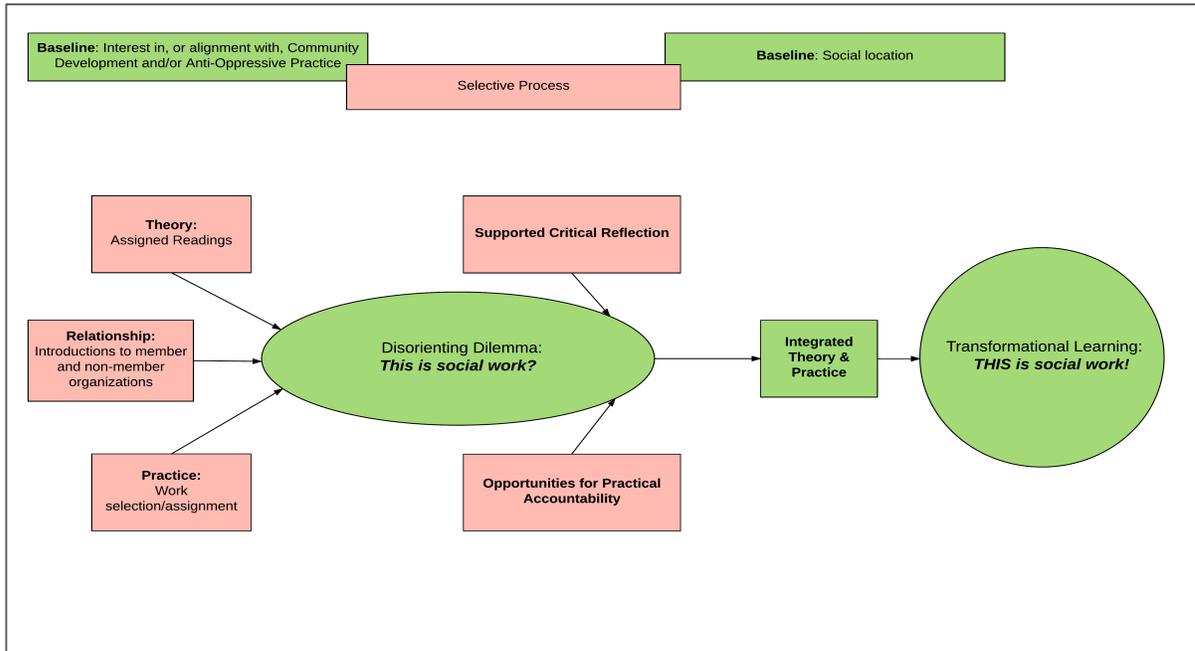


Figure 1 – Practicum Student Change Continuum

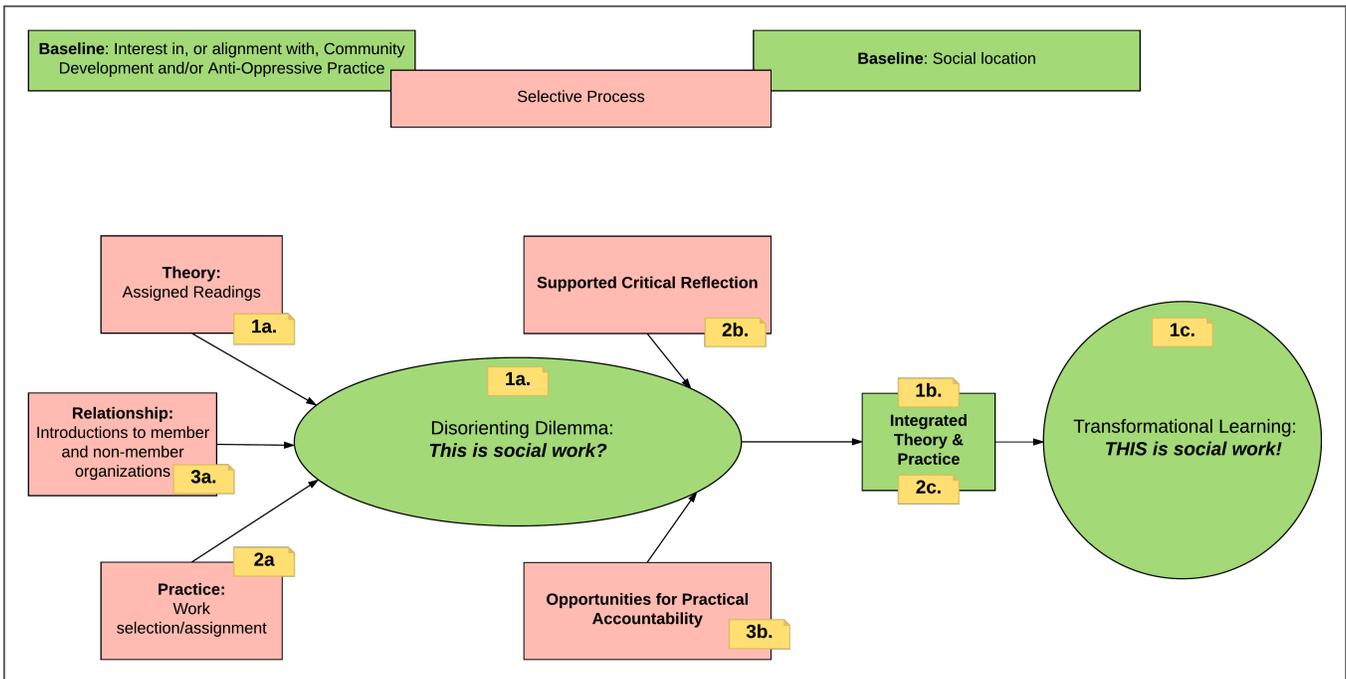


Figure 2 – Change Continuum with OH2017 Impacts mapped

2. Theory of Change

The impacts surfaced in connection with Useable Questions 3 and 4 are directly related to the Collaborative Framework project, and therefore relevant to the existing Theory of Change. Practicum students have been able to create strong and lasting relationships with member organizations (Question 3, statements 1-3), and to contribute to new impacts for member organizations (Question 4, statement 1), while running into systemic issues that could not be resolved with additional resourcing alone (Question 4, statement 2).

Overall, the evaluation shows a positive contribution by the practicum initiative to *all* of the expected outcomes in the Collaborative Framework Theory of Change. To support organizational strategic learning, we mapped the findings onto the relevant Theory of Change elements (Fig 3).

Collaborative Framework Theory of Change - Expected Outcome	Relevant OH Outcome Statement(s)
Increase in participation among "isolated" participants.	4b – new participation due to resourcing, systemic barriers contributing to formalization of Equity Framework
Creation of larger, tangible projects involving cross-member participation.	3a – student projects
Increase in personal connections among CWRC participants.	3a – students’ connections with members 4a – students as information liaisons
Increase in the extent to which CWRC participants seek out collaboration with one another.	3c – students’ ongoing relationships with members
CWRC members use resources more efficiently.	3a – student projects 4a – students as information liaisons 4b – student projects
CWRC members reduce burnout and increase collective care.	4b – student projects

CDLI Outcome Domain Map

Calgary’s Community Development Learning Initiative (CDLI) has engaged the CD sector in developing an Outcome Domain Map (CDODM). The CDODM contains four outcome domains which aim to represent the full scope of Community Development work in Calgary: *Transformational Learning*, *Collective Efficacy*, *Participation & Influence* and *Social Justice*. Insofar as the practicum experience is thoroughly rooted in Community Development principles, values, and methods, the CDODM presents an opportunity to understand its impacts vis-à-vis those being created in other CD initiatives.

CDLI Outcome Domain	Relevant OH Outcome Statement(s)
Transformational Learning	1a. New theory/practice exposure 1b. Systems-aware capacity 1c. Increased scope of constitutive skills 2a. Comfort with ambiguity / non-expert stance 2b. Critical analysis / framework awareness 3b. Accountability capacity
Collective Efficacy	1c. Advocacy skills 3a. Student projects 3c. Long-term reciprocal relationships 4a. Students as information liaisons
Participation & Influence	2c. Student-initiated projects outside of practicum 4a. Students as information liaisons
Social Justice	1a. Anti-oppressive practice in practice 1b. Power analysis 1c. Advocacy skills 2a. Anti-oppressive contribution to community-led projects 2b. Critical analysis 2c. Student-initiated consensus-based projects 4b. Systemic barriers to participation

Notes on CDODM mapping:

- (1) Significant positive impacts were found across all four domains of the CDODM. The demonstrated capacity of social work practicum placements at CWRC to create Community Development impacts across all four domains indicate the strength of its alignment with Community Development principles and values and the practical integration of these with generalist Social Work faculties.
- (2) Transformational Learning and Social Justice were the “heaviest” domains. This is representative of the CWRC’s practicum placement design: a learning experience rooted in the theory and values of Anti-Oppressive Practice. In addition, the significant findings in the Social

Justice domain are important in view of the lack of such findings in previous CDLI evaluations and can therefore form the basis of new sector conversations and learning.

(3) Participation and Influence was the “lightest” domain. Two interpretations for this seem plausible:

- a. *Design*: The combination of the short-term nature of each practicum placement and the division of students’ efforts between internal CWRC projects and member organizations’ projects means that the resources dedicated to increasing members’ participation are highly limited. Both of these contributing factors are elements of design, and seem to fit with the priority given to Transformational Learning and Social Justice within the project. If these priorities should ever shift, project design could shift in parallel in an attempt to bolster impacts in this domain.
- b. *Systemic*: The lack of capacity of many member organizations to host practicum student contributions, even with significant support from CWRC, is a reality in many cases.

Further Information

For clarification about CommunityWise Resource Centre and its practicum student placements please contact Erin McFarlane at erin@communitywise.net.

For information and questions about the Evaluation Framework, Developmental Evaluation and the Theory of Change, please contact Robyn McLean of Tapestry Evaluation and Strategy at robyn@tapestryevaluation.com.

For information and questions about Outcome Harvesting and the findings in this report, please contact Roman Katsnelson of KRD Consulting Group at roman@hellokrd.net.
