



Community-campus engagement toward community safety and well-being: Reflections on a three-year pilot project

A report prepared for the City of Thunder Bay
January 2026





Acknowledgments

Many of the community-oriented values and principles outlined in this report, including relationship, trust, reciprocity, collaboration, and repair, reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The City of Thunder Bay, and the Thunder Bay-area campuses engaged in this research (NOSM University, Lakehead University, and Confederation College), are located on Anishinaabe land originally known as Anemki Wequedong, the traditional territory of the Fort William First Nation, Signatory to the Robinson Superior Treaty of 1850. NOSM University's Greater Sudbury campus is located on the territory of Atikameksheng Anishnabek and Wahnapiatae First Nation. We recognize that Bruyère Health Research Institute and the University of Ottawa sit on the traditional, unceded territory of the Omamìwìni Anishnàbeg (Algonquin) people. It is with the utmost respect and humility that we not only acknowledge the land on which these partnerships occur, but also the relationships between people, the Land, the Plants, the Water, and Mother Earth, and the teachings that they bestow.

This research centers, and is committed to community engagement, cross-institutional collaboration, reciprocal learning, and the creation and sharing of useful knowledge. We would like to extend a sincere thank you to the individuals and groups who have contributed to the research by providing key data and who have shaped this report through ongoing consultations and peer review, including our interview participants, city and community partners, and all the people who champion community-campus engagement such that this work is possible.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	05
Introduction	07
The CityStudio Thunder Bay Pilot	08
Objectives	10
Findings	11
Challenges and Opportunities for Growth	15
Conclusions and Implications	20
References	21
Appendix 1: Detailed Methods	22
Appendix 2: The CityStudio Model	23

Executive Summary

The City of Thunder Bay is committed to building a healthy, connected, and inclusive community through initiatives and strategies such as Thunder Bay Drug Strategy, Net-Zero Strategy, Indigenous Relations & Inclusion Strategy, and the Community Safety & Well-Being (CSWB) Plan, to address root causes of community issues and find long-term solutions. To support these initiatives, the City of Thunder Bay partnered on a Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)-funded initiative to pilot CityStudio Thunder Bay, a project-based model of community-campus engagement (CCE) that brings together the City, local higher education institutions, and community partner organizations to create innovative solutions to the City's priorities.

Through this CIHR-funded project, our research team conducted interviews and focus groups with 44 students, faculty, community partners, and municipal staff involved in CCE projects that addressed five shared CSWB priorities between the cities of Ottawa and Thunder Bay. We asked about their experiences participating in the projects, the engagement practices that occurred with partners and the community, and how final deliverables were shared back with the community.



This report provides an overview of key findings from these interviews, with illustrative examples of successes, challenges, and learnings, with several recommendations or “wise practices” to guide future collaborations.

Executive Summary

Here's what we learned about how participants perceived CCE's potential to address key City priorities:

1. CCE's collaborative nature facilitates the building of relationships, trust, empathy, and respect across historically siloed groups, ultimately increasing institutional and community capacity
2. CCE presents opportunities for civic engagement through integrated, transformative learning experiences
3. CCE builds career-ready skills and encourages local talent attraction and retention
4. CCE has the potential to contribute to health equity and community safety and well-being through increased capacity, civic engagement, and collaboration

Overall, we see that implementing a CCE model can support municipal and community-led initiatives to address local community and health priorities while also promoting career learning and skill development, civic engagement, and cross-organizational collaboration.

“It's all about connections, intersectoral collaboration, and overlapping circles.”
- Academic faculty

Introduction



Community-campus engagement, or CCE, is a term that describes collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions, municipalities, and communities in order to achieve or address a community-identified goal.^{1,2} CCE can take many forms, including community-based and participatory action research, community service learning, engaged scholarship, and co-education, all of which strive towards the collaborative creation of knowledge, capacity building, and action that benefits both community and campus partners, with an emphasis on addressing societal challenges.^{3,4}

CCE facilitates research- and data-informed decision-making at the local level, and engagement with community provides local context that helps tailor solutions and ensures that the knowledge is grounded in lived experience.^{2,4} Through CCE, higher education institutions can also practice social accountability by contributing to and prioritizing community-driven health research and education that addresses key social issues.^{5,6} CCE can support municipalities' health goals for cities and regions by driving community-oriented work and research by providing institutional resources and student perspectives on key health issues.^{1,2,7} For example, it has contributed to, and even exemplifies, the City of Thunder Bay's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan, anchored in the principle of Maamawe ("All Together") and its goals of safety and well-being, growth, and sustainability.⁸

The CityStudio Thunder Bay Pilot



Since 2019, Ontario municipalities have been required to develop and implement CSWB Plans that identify local safety and well-being concerns and provide evidence-based solutions or initiatives that work toward addressing them.⁹

A project-based CCE model was implemented in Thunder Bay in 2023 as part of a larger CIHR-funded study that aimed to understand how CCE can help cities contribute to their local health and well-being goals and be a way through which higher education institutions can be accountable to their communities.¹⁰ The pilot brought together the City of Thunder Bay, Lakehead University, Confederation College, the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) University, and other community partners to work towards five CSWB priorities that Thunder Bay shares with Ottawa: racism and discrimination, housing and homelessness, violence and gender-based violence, poverty, and mental health.^{11,12}

Our research team collected data through interviews and focus groups to answer the following questions:

1. How and to what extent could community-campus engagement contribute to improved population health outcomes in two distinct settings, Ottawa and Thunder Bay?
2. How is knowledge translated within CCE projects that address population health?

A full description of the research methods and additional information about the CityStudio model can be found in Appendices 1 and 2.

The CityStudio Thunder Bay Pilot



This work was undertaken not only to answer the research questions, but also to deepen collaborative relationships across institutions and sectors. To date, CityStudio Thunder Bay has completed:

172

PROJECTS WITH

1191

STUDENTS

53

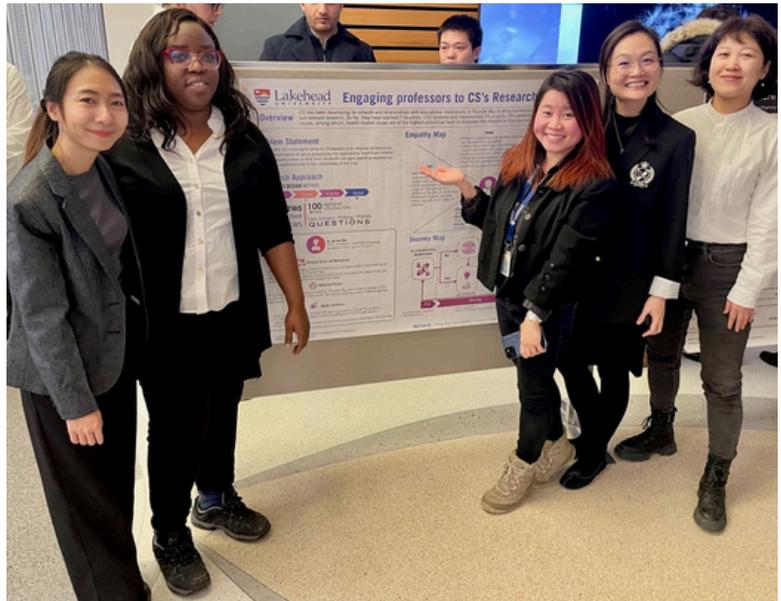
FACULTY

55

COMMUNITY
PARTNERS

87

CITY STAFF



The projects addressed a broad range of issues directly and indirectly supporting the CSWB priorities. For example, students worked to visualize the 2022 Voluntary Local Review of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, produced social media and video material for the Drug Awareness Committee's 'Data, Art, Action' event, and carried out heat-island mapping for the City's emergency management planning. A full list of the projects will be available on the City of Thunder Bay website.

In addition to the individual project impacts, larger-scale scaffolding has been put into place to support collaboration, including a multi-institutional steering committee and signed or pending Memorandums of Understanding between the City of Thunder Bay and higher education institutions.

Objectives

The goal of this report is twofold:

1. **To share back** with the City of Thunder Bay the results of our research on participants' experiences with CityStudio projects in Thunder Bay, and
2. **To support future decision-making** regarding CSWB policy and creating more sustainable and successful CCE pathways in Thunder Bay and beyond.



We present a selection of successes and standout stories, identified areas for improvement, and offered solutions guided by participants' own insights, which acknowledge the unique context of Thunder Bay and highlights the hard work that has been done by all partners and participants to make these partnerships happen. Importantly, the findings presented here are not meant to be universal; this report responds to requests from City and academic partners in relation to specific themes and therefore only captures a subset of the stories and experiences with CCE in Thunder Bay.

We strive to embody the themes of accountability and collaboration that have driven the research. This includes a commitment to maintaining good relationships with our partners through consultations, honoring contributions, and thoughtful knowledge sharing.

Findings

Participants agreed that these collaborative opportunities through CCE have benefits for students, faculty, the City, and the broader community, and that there is a desire to support continued partnerships.

Finding 1: CCE's collaborative nature facilitates the building of relationships, trust, empathy, and respect across historically siloed groups, ultimately increasing institutional and community capacity

- CCE generates spaces for deepened engagement, whether that is a physical space in a classroom or at a showcase, new relationships, or channels of communication
- Being part of CCE networks gives people the opportunity to learn about community health and well-being projects within and across institutions
- Interest in and mutual access to institutional knowledge and resources emerges – data, information, technology – which expands community-campus research capacity
- Good relationship-building practices are modelled by dedicated community connectors and put into practice in new and renewed relationships
- Student energy and ideas invigorate community partners and advance work that would otherwise not have been possible



“I always find [it] really interesting to see what other projects people are working on and presenting, and invariably I found, you know, there's crossover, ‘Oh, you know that project actually relates to what we do as well,’ and I didn't know that that was happening.”

- City partner

“I hope [the coordinator] position stays in place or evolves through time . . . it's a really important bridge and, I think, kind of understated or undervalued, how much time and effort that making those connections it requires and to keep them alive . . .”

- City partner



“. . . It was really excellent in many ways that this project was done, because it raised many of the issues that potentially otherwise would have not been addressed in terms of Indigenous connections and consultations.”

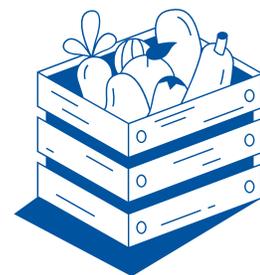
- Academic faculty



Finding 2: CCE presents opportunities for civic engagement through integrated, transformative learning experiences

- Engagement with City staff and community partners produces more civically engaged students who gain a deeper understanding of organizational processes and how to navigate them
- Higher education faculty become aware of their potential impact on community issues, which can contribute to professional development and transform their own community connections
- Students gain awareness of, and contribute to, community health and well-being priorities, how they are being addressed, and what resources are out there for others and themselves
- Projects allow for traditionally underrepresented voices (e.g., students, youth, newcomers to Canada) to be amplified in future planning of relevant policy
- All participants become better situated within their community – projects provide an opportunity for building a sense of place and belonging
- This increased civic engagement strengthens the community's long-term ability to solve issues collaboratively

“And not all students are youth, but a lot of the students we work with are youth. So it’s, again, connecting youth to government service providers, you know, people doing the work in the community.”
- City partner



“. . .as a student, I think it first really helped to uncover some of the answers on ‘what does Indigenized policy look like?’ or ‘what does anti-racism policy look like on the ground level?’ And then also being able to understand, like, what organizations can realistically say in an interview setting like this, and to a student or a research assistant coming in. And what do those conversations look like at the onset?” – Student

Finding 3: CCE builds career-ready skills and encourages talent attraction and retention

- Students build skills that they might use in future jobs and opportunities, from learning how to send a professional email to producing a research poster and presenting in front of an audience of important partners and community members
- Students get to apply learning from in the classroom to real-world scenarios, which helps them build confidence in their skills
- Newcomers to Thunder Bay are made aware of organizations, businesses, and institutions where they might be able to apply the skills and expertise they bring
- Engagement between students and City or community partners before students graduate can lead to future employment or volunteer opportunities
- Students build relationships with City and community partners and add to their professional networks within the city
- Community partners gain skills and self-efficacy through knowledge exchange with students and faculty that they bring to their workplace and future projects
- All CCE participants are better positioned to enter into or grow in community and career leadership roles

“[It was] awesome for my professional development. I got to kind of overcome some imposter syndrome that I had early in the field during my first assessment, and then by the last assessment I was rocking it solo.”

– Student

“That’s one of the things I love about working with some of the students is like they just see things are so easy . . . working with the students has been very good for my self-efficacy”

– Community partner



“. . . There’s a real growth initiative here in the city, like, ‘how do we make students stay?’ But you make students stay by showing them that there’s opportunity for the future.”

– City partner

Finding 4: CCE has the potential to contribute to health equity and community safety and well-being by strengthening research capacity, collaborative networks, and civic engagement

- New networks and improved channels of communication within and between institutions results in more opportunities for health-oriented collaboration
- Students build equity-oriented skills in language use, communication, and empathy, which they use in their future careers in health
- Individual participants and institutions alike gain insight into health systems, institutional processes and cultures, and governance
- International students learn about and contribute to the Canadian health system by bringing in global perspectives that deepen our understanding of health and community systems and view health issues in new ways
- Challenges faced within CCE projects provide insight into systemic issues to health equity and community safety and well-being that mirror larger health system issues (e.g., data collection and sharing)—this ultimately helps with future research and work to re-imagine community health spaces
- Scaffolding developed for CCE reduces the burden of preparatory work for future partnerships, which means it is quicker and easier to make real impacts in health systems and health equity

“I think it was an incredible learning opportunity, especially coming from my Master’s in Public Health. And we talk a lot about policy decisions and involving things on even an individual or community basis compared to much larger public health settings or population health settings. And I think it really set the example of what engagement within communities actually looks like . . . How do we do the background assessments? Who do we need to involve once decisions are made?” – Student



“There’s a lot of things that [my home country’s] health system can actually, I think, work well if they only tried to adapt it . . . But as of now, I’m very inclined to say that, although it’s not a perfect system, it’s also one that’s looking into the human side of things, because it’s very, very different than how people are treated in emergency rooms in [my home country].” – Student

Challenges and Opportunities for Growth



While the value of these collaborative projects is well-supported through our interview participants' feedback, this research has also highlighted some challenges to meaningful engagement and mobilization of knowledge. Identifying these challenges now, however, allows us to make recommendations on how to implement and strengthen future CCE activities and have a bigger community impact in the future.

With each challenge identified, we provide recommended "wise practices" to address them. These suggestions are based primarily on insights from our interview participants, refined with the advice of academic partners with expertise in building and sustaining community-campus partnerships. We present these recommendations with the recognition that funding at various levels is an ever-present barrier, along with a number of systemic factors, all which present challenges to implementing wise practices.



Challenge: Limited access to up-to-date data that represents Thunder Bay and Northern Ontario

- When no data were available, students turned to literature, or to data from other municipalities or even provinces, which does not always capture the unique health challenges of Thunder Bay
- Students, partners, and instructors often filled in gaps in this missing data through local knowledge

“. . . They were looking at Public Health Ontario data, and they were comparing Thunder Bay rates to Ontario rates, and then they noticed that if they took the GTA out of the Ontario rates, it really changed things. And that’s a pretty common thing in small Northern communities, when we get sort of lumped together with Ontario, our results get really, really skewed, because we’re not Toronto. We’re nothing like Toronto, right? . . . They really had to play around with it to see what paints a more accurate picture, because comparing Thunder Bay to Ontario doesn't always paint the most accurate picture.” – Academic faculty

Wise practices:

This pilot has identified gaps in data collection and sharing in and around Thunder Bay across the municipal, post-secondary, health and community partners. While this is not a result of the pilot, it reflects broader systemic barriers to information sharing and multisector planning that are critical for shared understandings of local health and well-being trends. Before projects are underway, it is important to explore what data is available from the City of Thunder Bay, project partners, and publicly available municipal, provincial, and federal databases. A starting point for future collaboration may be the creation of Memoranda of Understanding or the commitment to expanding the existing open data portal for the City of Thunder Bay.

Beyond these projects, there is a need for greater health research capacity in Northern Ontario to collect, organize, and share data that is specific to the region. Partnerships and collaboration exist among institutions in Northern Ontario but strengthening research networks that bring together higher education institutions and local health organizations with the goal of conducting place-based research will be a critical step in ensuring there is data and data skills to respond to the unique context of the area.

Challenge: Misalignments between partners regarding logistics, timelines, software, communication, and expectations



- Academic timelines do not always align with City timelines – this means student work may not be done in time to be used towards a particular need
- Arranging in-class collaboration and presentations between multiple groups presents a barrier, and spaces of engagement are limited by transportation and geographic factors
- Instructors can find it challenging to meet the needs or requests of community and City partners while also ensuring student learning objectives are met
- Mismatched data and communication platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Google, Webex, etc.) and varied institutional policies for those platforms are an ongoing challenge for collaborations

“But the university functions on a Google account, and you can't access that through the public health care's Internet network. So just issues like that, that you didn't even think was going to be a thing. . . ‘Oh, they can't even access the Google drive to upload this data that the students need to use to do this,’ so that causes just like. . . huge roadblocks when you're in like a 4 to 6 week project. That's a really quick turnaround.” – City partner

Wise practices:

Longer, multi-semester or multi-year projects allow for more flexibility with timelines, and a greater ability to collect and implement partner feedback into deliverables. Even if a project is limited to a single semester, establishing a timeline that builds in time for knowledge sharing and post-project follow-up is important. Expectations should be set collaboratively with project partners about engagement, deliverables, communication with students, and how information will be shared. Even actions that seem small can have a big impact, like providing an editable version of a final deliverable. For example, part of project collaboration scoping could include the consideration of communication and data sharing platforms to allow for more seamless collaboration and output sharing.

“I was really excited about the opportunity to do something that could have, like, a tangible outcome. . . . But, I remember really thinking during that period, like, this totally could have been a full-year course. We could have taken a few weeks to decide what the projects were, and . . . have a little bit more of an emphasis of co-creating what that means.” – Student

Challenge: A lack of capacity from project partners, faculty, and students can affect engagement and hinder knowledge sharing

- Participating in CCE projects requires additional time for planning, overseeing, and following up with project partners
- Instructors and project partners face unanticipated work synthesizing student deliverables into shareable packages of knowledge
- Understaffing or constant changing of staff can mean that deliverables handed off to City staff fall through the cracks
- There is a critical need for multiple facilitators to support these partnerships



“It was time and resource constraints, for sure, so [the community partner] essentially [has] one employee. And so there’s only so much we can ask that person beyond their regular day-to-day duties.” – Academic faculty

Wise practices:

It may be helpful to establish a clear goal of creating easily synthesizable outputs (language, formatting) from the outset and determine whose role it will be to do this work of passing deliverables along to decision-makers. Partners must allocate dedicated time to debrief, discuss, and incorporate useful knowledge and deliverables into their work or goals.

Participants reiterated that the role of a liaison is a critical piece to the functioning of these projects. There are several relational and practical tasks, such as scoping mutually beneficial projects, organizing an end-of-year showcasing, mediating challenges, and ensuring projects are wrapped up properly, responsibilities that fall outside the scope of City and community partner staff and faculty. However, this cannot be the role of one person alone, and community-campus partnerships would benefit from having both dedicated institutional resource coordinators and a dedicated City liaison if these roles do not already exist. Collaboration between these roles strengthens cross-institutional dialogue and responsiveness to challenges that arise.

“It’s beyond one person’s capacity to have a facilitator role for all the projects that are running. So there needs to be established some kind of connection that the City knows that there’s potentially a university or college person that is sort of a key person that they can turn to for connection making between faculty and organizations or the City . . . There needs to be folks in the different institutions that are part of it can take on that role or that should take on that role.” – Academic faculty



Challenge: Community voices remain underrepresented, particularly those who are most affected by the work

- Decisions on project topic, structure, and deliverables were often made by City partners and course instructors with limited direct community input
- This reflects a number of systemic challenges and barriers to meaningfully engaging community, including time and resource constraints, as well as ethical considerations

“ . . . And particularly around engaging the students in Indigenous-oriented projects as well, like a lot of them just have not had exposure or interactions with Indigenous people, and so for some of them, like, they do have some Indigenous content and exposure in their first year, but this is not something that is familiar to a lot of our students, so they may come around with very stereotypical ideas of Indigenous communities, Indigenous people, Indigenous values and needs . . . ”

– Academic faculty

Wise practices:

Engagement is an ongoing, dynamic process that takes time, and may require re-visiting engagement practices throughout or between projects. It must also be culturally appropriate and ensure that community practices and values are honored. Principles of harm reduction (careful consideration of language and respect, empowering voices of those with lived experience, acknowledgement of diverse backgrounds, etc.) are not only relevant to health but can be valuable as a guide for co-creation.

Students, including international students, are typically underrepresented groups that are being given a voice through these projects that can offer unique ways of engaging. Student-led engagement could be a good practice when properly supported by faculty and other partners, leading to enhanced professional skills and trust-building with the community. For example, students can play a role in initial scoping and project design or could take the lead on arranging engagement with community partners once an initial connection is established.

Previous recommendations that address time constraints, communication, and scoping challenges will contribute to addressing systemic- and capacity-related barriers to meaningful engagement with relevant and often under-served communities.



Conclusions and Implications

Our research findings suggest that CCE brought about positive relational and capacity-building benefits, and that participants perceived CCE to be an effective model for supporting municipal strategic goals for community health and well-being. For students, these projects impart skills, knowledge, and confidence that are applicable in future careers, but also as they become more engaged citizens. For project partners, these collaborations provide fresh ideas and perspectives, opportunities for parallel learning journeys, and new or deepened partnerships with faculty and instructors.

The networks that have been built through the CityStudio pilot and the lessons learned on how to make potential future projects more effective provide a strong foundation for continued collaboration between the City of Thunder Bay and local higher education institutions. It will be important to be responsive to the insight of our interview participants and employ recommendations when possible and relevant.

As the Community Safety and Well-Being plan is refreshed for 2026-2030, there is an opportunity for the City of Thunder Bay and its community and institutional partners to intentionally integrate CCE as a strategic tool, leveraging student learning journeys and faculty expertise to advance shared community safety and well-being priorities.

“ . . . We’ve always had a good relationship with the City, but I think in the last year I really feel a vibe, you know, a partnership, around health and well-being. . . We socialize and we work really closely in this community. So how do we focus more projects on that as an outcome, [on] health as an outcome, rather than just hopefully a collateral benefit of doing these things?”
– Academic faculty

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Detailed methods

2.1 Study design and setting

This report is one of several outputs from a larger research project that sought to understand the contributions of CCE on population health using theory-based evaluation methods.⁽¹⁰⁾ We developed a Theory of Change in consultation with CCE experts that maps how the engagement might contribute to the observed population health impacts, not to prove causal relationships, but reduce uncertainties about how collaborative projects can contribute to positive health system changes. The evidence collected through the interviews and focus groups discussed in this report provided evidence to validate the theory of change.

2.2 Data collection

Between June and September of 2025, we conducted 22 interviews and 10 focus groups with 44 individuals involved in CityStudio projects in Ottawa and Thunder Bay from 2023-2025. Participants included students and instructors from the five participating academic institutions (Algonquin College, Carleton University, Confederation College, Lakehead University, and The University of Ottawa), project partners from the City of Ottawa and Thunder Bay, and partners from various community organizations. We recruited participants purposively via email or in person, making use of existing relationships and networks from the inception and implementation of CityStudio in Ottawa and Thunder Bay. Students were recruited at Ottawa HUBBUB, the end-of-year public CityStudio showcase, or through their instructors. 2-3 members of the research team would conduct these interviews and focus groups using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews typically lasted 60 minutes, and focus groups typically lasted 75-90 minutes. Participants were offered a \$25 gift card of their choosing as compensation for their time.

2.3 Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using a mix of inductive thematic analysis and deductive content analysis, with different aims; inductive analysis was used to pull themes relating to our broader research questions and deductive coding was used to supplement this exploration, identifying specific evidence of how CityStudio projects contributed to Thunder Bay's strategic goals for the city. Three members of the research team met regularly throughout the analysis process to discuss coding and memos, address any discrepancies, and to develop themes as they emerged. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed using Zoom (version 6.6.0) transcription software and cleaned by members of the research team, and qualitative coding was done using ATLAS.ti (version 25.0.1).

2.4 Ethics

This study was approved by the research ethics boards of the Bruyère Health Research Institute (Study # M16-23-009), and all participating higher education institutions.

Appendix 2: The CityStudio Model

[CityStudio](#) is a transferable, non-profit model of project-oriented community-campus engagement that builds trust-based relationships between students, city staff, faculty, community and partners. It aims to innovate with the ways in which cities are co-created to become healthier communities and to assist community stakeholders to improve their neighborhoods.

The process starts with consultations to identify municipal priorities and needs, then CityStudio matches city and community partners with faculty and students to harness institutional resources and student energy to innovate solutions. CityStudio projects typically span an academic semester, where students gain hands-on experience with projects that are relevant to them or their communities and have the opportunity to present their work to broader public audiences through end-of-year showcase.