

School of Cities
New urban research platform
Rob Jowett

The latest in collaborative urban innovation spaces has been unveiled by the **University of Toronto**. Launching July 1st, its School of Cities is intended to be a place where experts in a range of disciplines will work together to solve pressing urban issues.

“The opportunity with the School of Cities is to create a platform to bring all of those people together in... new, collaborative, collegial ways,” UofT urban studies program director **Shauna Brail** told *NRU*.

An initiative of planner, urban theorist and university president **Meric Gertler**, he sees it as one way the university can take advantage of its urban location to become more engaged in city planning.

“President Gertler... understood both the challenge but also the opportunity of being able to bring together urbanists from across the university,” says Brail.

She says there is an increasing public expectation of universities to become more engaged in their communities and contribute to solving urban challenges.

“This [expectation] really brought people from the university and ideas together about how we could actually implement the [concept] and how we could think about engaging and accelerating the role that we could play.”

Students, over 200 urban researchers, planners, and policy makers will all be part of the school, where they will explore a broad spectrum of challenges concerning how cities work. Brail says the school will help to advance an understanding of the building blocks for creating a city and how cities develop based on a set of criteria.

Problems that cities face are interrelated, so solutions have to take the same approach, says **Canadian Urban Institute** executive director **Peter Halsall**.

“You can’t solve transit without dealing with housing or dealing with income disparity or dealing with all sorts of other infrastructure issues.”

He says that the university is right to integrate its work and to harness its academic power.

“I think it’s a good thing for the university to connect the dots within their work.”

Ryerson City Building Institute research manager **Graham Haines** says that urban issues are becoming increasingly important and in need of more urgent solutions.

“We look to collaborate with a variety of different professionals and professors from different departments... [to make] sure that we have good perspectives and diverse perspectives on the work we do.”

Halsall says that people often do not consider all of the factors that can affect an issue.

“A solution that doesn’t at least recognize the diversity of impacts that can affect the outcome is never going to work. How you get to a solution that recognizes the multitude of inputs is the question.”

When asked about the seeming proliferation of collaborations to stimulate urban innovation—York University’s **CITY Institute**, Ryerson’s **City Building Institute**, George Brown’s **Institute without Boundaries** and the city’s new **Civic Hall Toronto**, to name a few—Halsall says it’s very positive to see this happening.

“Would we want only one lab in the world looking into breast cancer research? You need a lot of different people coming at it with different perspectives.”

Brail agrees.

“It may be easiest to work just within your own discipline or within the group that you feel most comfortable, but we know that we don’t make progress in the same effective ways if that’s all we do,” says Brail.

Institute without Boundaries academic advisor **Chris Pandolfi** says that real collaborative problem solving comes from having a shared set of goals and constant communication.

“We believe that [you] need to be bringing in people from a wide variety of audiences and disciplines.”

Initially the School of Cities will not offer degrees or other credentials, but Brail anticipates that will likely change in the next academic year.