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Importance of social innovation reflected in the evolution of Laurier's renowned Schlegel entrepreneurship centre

WATERLOO - Wilfrid Laurier University is emphasizing the importance of social innovation with an evolution in the name of its flagship entrepreneurship centre and the appointment of a new executive director with a background in public and private social entrepreneurship.

The Schlegel Centre for Entrepreneurship will now be called the Schlegel Centre for Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation, a combination that highlights the value of applying business strategy and entrepreneurial spirit to solving urgent social challenges. The university has also appointed Joanne Benham Rennick, an associate professor in global studies and director of Social Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation at Laurier, as the executive director of the Schlegel Centre.

"I am delighted to announce Professor Benham Rennick's appointment," said Micheál J. Kelly, dean of the Lazaridis School of Business & Economics. "Her directorship of the Schlegel Centre will allow the consolidation of all Laurier entrepreneurship activity and funding, including the university's recent initiatives in the social entrepreneurship area, under the Schlegel umbrella."

In addition to leading social entrepreneurship learning opportunities at Laurier, Benham Rennick taught in Laurier Brantford's Contemporary Studies program, was director of an international service-learning program at St. Jerome's University at the University of Waterloo, and has more than a decade of combined experience working as a program director in the public and voluntary sectors, as an information technology specialist in the private sector, and as an independent business owner.

The Schlegel Centre is inspired by the vital role entrepreneurs play in the Canadian economy, and is dedicated to enhancing academic research in entrepreneurship and building and supporting entrepreneurship and social innovation in the Laurier community. The centre supports the programs taught within Laurier's [Lazaridis School of Business & Economics](#) and the [social entrepreneurship program](#), provides opportunities for Laurier students to work within the entrepreneurial community, and facilitates the incubation of student business ideas.

The addition of "social innovation" to the centre's name, along with Benham Rennick's appointment, reflects key developments in social entrepreneurship and social innovation at Laurier. In March, Laurier became only the second university in Canada to receive the **Changemaker Campus** designation from **Ashoka U**. The designation recognizes Laurier as a global leader in social entrepreneurship and social innovation education.

The Changemaker Campus consortium is an international network of colleges and universities that support one another in making the world a better place.

The Changemaker network is driven by the Ashoka philosophy, which is based on two related concepts: "social entrepreneurship" and "social innovation." Social entrepreneurship takes practices that are often associated with business — goal setting, the measurement of results, financial sustainability, and the creation of systems that can be scaled or extended — and applies them to address social challenges.

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Social innovation involves the development of new strategies and novel approaches to addressing social needs and sustainability issues.

Laurier is also a member of the national **RECODE network**, a collaborative group focused on social entrepreneurship and social innovation. A three-year, \$500,000 grant from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation is helping Laurier build capacity by supplementing the university's academic programs and funding co-curricular activities, including student activities, mentorship initiatives and new social enterprises.

"I'm very pleased to be appointed in a role that consolidates Laurier's vision of 'inspiring lives of leadership and purpose' with our expertise in entrepreneurship and social impact education," said Benham Rennick. "The amalgamation of these areas aligns with our collaboration through the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation's RECODE project and our new designation as an Ashoka Changemaker Campus."

Laurier's Changemaker and RECODE activities build on the university's strong foundation of integrating academic excellence with experiential learning, social purpose and community engagement.

In addition to its entrepreneurship core program, which supports third-year students in turning their start-up ideas into real going concerns, Laurier is the first Canadian university to offer an undergraduate social entrepreneurship program grounded in the liberal arts, which is available as a [Social Entrepreneurship Option](#) to all undergraduate students enrolled in an honours program.

Additional examples of Laurier's entrepreneurship and social innovation initiatives associated with the Schlegel Centre include:

- [LaunchPad](#), a hands-on entrepreneurship program that encourages students, faculty, staff, alumni and members of the community to collaborate, create enterprises, and share venture-creation knowledge.
- Social innovation zones, such as the **Purpose Lab**, which provide collaboration space for students, faculty and staff to work together on social innovation projects.
- A [Social Innovation and Venture Creation](#) strategy integrating a number of faculties to forge links between Laurier's entrepreneurship and innovation activities, and to provide structure and resources to ensure their success.

The Schlegel Centre was founded in 2002 under the direction of Steve Farlow, who currently serves as acting director of the new Lazaridis Institute for the Management of Technology Enterprises.

"I would like to thank Steve for his contributions over the past 14 years in leading the Schlegel Centre as its founding executive director," said Kelly. "The centre has achieved incredible success over the years under Steve's leadership."

The Schlegel Centre is named after Robert and Myrna Schlegel. Robert received a BA in Economics from Laurier in 1972, and the couple were married in the chapel of the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. Kirby, one of the Schlegel's four children, completed his MBA at Laurier in 2003. Laurier awarded Robert and Myrna honorary doctorates in 1998 to recognize their business success and public service.

Benham Rennick's three-year term began May 1. She is cross-appointed to the Lazaridis School of Business and Economics and Laurier's Faculty of Arts. In her new role, she will continue as Ashoka change leader, leader of the RECODE project, and take on the additional responsibilities of the Schlegel Centre. In addition to Benham Rennick, the Schlegel Centre will be guided by an advisory board comprised of university stakeholders and community members.