

Unite to Unlock

Engineers Without Borders National Conference 2015

Conference report by Melissa Nielsen
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Summary

Ten members of the Concordia chapter of Engineers Without Borders (EWB) attended the 2015 Engineers Without Borders National Conference – *Unite to Unlock*. The conference was held in downtown Montreal from January 16-18. Additionally there was a Leadership Day for all chapter leaders on January 15, which I attended.

This conference had close to one hundred sessions and approximately one thousand delegates. Therefore, rather than try to distill our ten delegates' experiences into one report, I will only detail my own experience and the sessions I attended.

This conference was organised around EWB's 5 Portfolios:

- 1) Small and growing businesses that drive social good
- 2) Adaptive public services that are responsive to citizens' needs
- 3) Food systems that are resilient and support livelihoods
- 4) Engineering leaders who contribute to solving societal challenges in the 21st Century
- 5) Canadian companies that are global leaders in socially responsible mining in Africa

Leadership Day

Leadership day is an annual event that results in significant shaping of the next year of Engineers Without Borders. This year, the main question of the day was, "What should EWB's strategy regarding climate change be?" We were led through several brainstorming exercises to get an idea of what everyone thought. The debate was about whether EWB Canada should take an aggressive stance on climate change, for example, by only allowing sponsorships from companies who have excellent environmental records, or a more mild stance, for example, by educating members and ventures on where they could be doing a better job. No real decisions have been made yet about EWB's approach to this issue, however, it seemed that most people were leaning towards having a milder approach.

Sessions Attended

- The Intersection of Mining and Development
- Risk vs. (Social) Returns
- System Forces: The Dynamics of Human Systems that Affect Collaboration
- Enabling Policy Effectiveness
- Alternatives to Capitalism: Building a New, Inclusive Economy

- Public Infrastructure Service Delivery – World Action Café
- Supporting Governance from Your Own Backyard
- The Social Life of a Bus – a documentary screening by Dr. Govind Gopakumar, a Concordia professor

Facilitation

I was invited to facilitate the *Public Infrastructure Service Delivery – World Action Café* session at conference. In this session, five people who worked on various infrastructure projects around the world were asked to bring problems that they were facing in their work to a group of people. The session attendees then split into smaller groups to work towards solving that person's problem.

I learned a lot from this experience. In addition to valuable feedback that I got on my own facilitation style, I also realized in this session that the approach to solving infrastructure problems around the world is surprising similar. It was easy to draw direct parallels between the water problems that I was working with in Malawi last year and one of the presenters' problems of an aboriginal community in Northern Manitoba that has been on a boil water alert for 20 years.

Global Engineering Community

As I am the VP Global Engineering at Concordia, this conference gave me the opportunity to meet with the EWB Global Engineering Community across the country. I learned about the Global Engineering Initiative and the Global Engineering Certificate that is starting to be rolled out in schools across the country. So far, it has been started at Memorial University of Newfoundland and will soon be in effect at University of Calgary. We were given tips on how to bring this into our own schools; I would like to discuss at a future council meeting whether this is something that the ECA would be interested in. As well, I had the opportunity to collaborate with the global engineering representative at McGill's EWB chapter. This has already resulted in a coordination of our Global Engineering weeks, which will have shared events and take place from March 16-20.

Junior Fellowship

Each year, the Concordia chapter of EWB sends one person overseas to work with one of Engineers Without Borders African ventures. I was the Junior Fellow last year and I worked in Malawi in the Water and Sanitation sector. This year, we have chosen Maxime Desharnais, a 2nd year civil Engineering student, as our Junior Fellow. This conference gave Maxime an opportunity to get to know the organization and all of the ventures that he could be working for.

Fundraising Strategizing

During the course of the conference, EWB Concordia held several planning meetings with outside members of the organization in order to make a plan for fundraising for the upcoming semester in order to send our Junior Fellow overseas. These meetings were extremely productive and many good ideas came out of them. Based on the ideas put forward here, we will be hosting the following fundraising events in the upcoming semester:

- "20 First Dates" speed dating event
- Sustainable Computer Cleaning

- Weekly Samosa Sales
- Nintendo 64 Tournament

Key Learnings

- Systems of people in organizations can be just as important as systems of machines
- Many Canadian mining companies are doing an unsatisfactory job in their overseas mining endeavours; The Canadian government has a strategy to only support mining companies who are doing 'good development'
- The role of business development in international development is a messy endeavour where monetary risk must be measured against social impact; it is difficult to find any satisfactory metrics to measure this
- Many other schools across the country are having successes in global engineering by putting pressure on faculty members
- Facilitating a session caused me to pay close attention to other presenters' facilitation styles; through this I got many ideas for facilitating member learning sessions in Concordia EWB's Member Learning Meetings

Going Forward

This conference hugely revitalized the Concordia Chapter of EWB. It gave everyone a great opportunity to connect with EWB members from across the country. We have already planned several events for the upcoming semester based on what was learned at conference. We have been able to shape our chapter's future much more clearly now that so many of our chapter members understand what EWB does both in Africa and in Canada, and how engineering intersects with international development.