



Spark a brighter world.

SPARK: A CENTRE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH INNOVATION

2023-2024 Annual Report



Spark:
a centre for social
research innovation

Spark: a centre for social research innovation connects researchers to the people, skills and tools needed to stand at the forefront of social research innovation.

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Through partnerships, training, and consultation, our mission is to engage with researchers and the community to expand methodological boundaries and harness the full power of social research to build a brighter world.



Spark Team Photo, Staff Retreat - May 2024

I. Centre Overview

Spark: a centre for social research innovation, a hub of social research, is thrilled to provide a recap of our accomplishments this year and showcase pivotal areas of advancement as part of our ongoing journey of supporting research innovation.

During Spark's five years of operation, we have interacted with countless McMaster Faculty members and graduate students, as well as internal and external research partners, by providing research support, training, and research infrastructure.

We wish to offer a special acknowledgement to our exceptional team for their invaluable contributions to our Center, which have played a pivotal role in propelling our success, learning, and growth.

Looking ahead, we are committed to building upon our achievements and continuing to leverage our expertise to drive positive change and impact in research for the next 5, 10, 15 years (and beyond).

We invite you to look back on this year, through this report, to explore our evolution, accomplishments, and vision for the future with the ultimate goal of fostering a brighter world.



This year, Spark:

- Co-hosted a two-part workshop with The Canadian Research Data Centre Network (CRDCN) and the Institute for Replication in June 2023 titled “Reproducibility/Replication Games” on creating and disseminating reproducible quantitative social science works.
- Hosted the virtual campaign #SparkResearchReplay on our twitter over Summer 2024, to look back on some of our favorite Spark Talks from the academic year.
- Offered the Social Research Short Course called “Impact Evaluation” with instructor Paul Bakker in Fall 2023 (5 days from 2-5pm)
- Held weekly virtual talks by researchers from around the world doing interesting work in interesting ways. These Spark Talks have generated tremendous interest, live and in the video archives.
- Continued offering Research Consultations, administering FSS Qualtrics licenses, and partnering with researchers on new initiatives.
- Launched the Data Champions Project funded through a SSHRC Connections RDM Grant in partnership with Danica Evering and Isacc Pratt, Spark supported 5 PIs' Graduate Student RAs to implement RDM into their projects and film the process.
- Deepened partnerships with several not-for-profits, helping them better measure and communicate their impact as part of our Brighter Spark Applied Research.
- Supported 15 active projects in accessing secure data through SEAL.

2. Strategic Priorities & Objectives

At Spark, our work advances the strategic priorities of both McMaster University and the Faculty of Social Sciences. Our commitment to discovery, communication, and preservation of knowledge is reflected in the following key activities during 2023-24.

1. Research excellence, including promotion of interdisciplinary approaches. Spark’s educational programming and training and research support activities all advance this University and Faculty priority. Our Spark Talks and related educational programming highlight methodological challenges or innovations that span the social sciences, and our Co-Lab Working Space offers opportunities for graduate students and faculty to informally connect and share insights. Spark’s Qualitative Suite and Secure Empirical Analysis Lab (SEAL) also advance the University and Faculty’s research excellence priorities. We directly supported 5 McMaster research teams with SSHRC-based funding and training for their research assistants to become Data Champions, or research data management (RDM) experts.

2. Teaching and Learning, including Experiential Learning. Providing extracurricular opportunities to learn and apply innovative research methods consistent with University and Faculty priorities is central to Spark’s mission. We advance these priorities through our Spark Talks; short courses on the use of research methods, like Impact Evaluation; invited presentations in graduate courses; and one-on-one research advice in our Research Conversation services. Some students also gain valuable experiential learning opportunities through our Brighter Spark Applied Research Apprenticeship for Students.

3. Inclusive Excellence and Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Indigenous Strategies (EDIIS). Spark advances the University’s and Faculty’s EDIIS goals by recruiting and supporting a diverse workforce, including work experiences supported by the Student Success Centre, and by advancing research that highlights systemic barriers to equity and inclusion, through our Spark Talks and Brighter Spark Applied Research with community partners.

4. Engaging Local, National, Indigenous, and Global Communities. Spark advances this strategic priority through its partnerships within McMaster, such as the University’s Office of Community Engagement and the Faculty’s Community Research Platform, and its Brighter Spark Applied Research collaborations with local and regional community organizations. Leading global experts also share their research insights with the McMaster community through our virtual Spark Talks.

5. Operational Excellence. Spark advances the University’s and Faculty’s commitment to operational excellence by supporting the professional development of our staff as well as through our communication strategies. Spark is a first stop for researchers looking for access to research software, data, or extracurricular training opportunities. Our bi-weekly newsletter, Spark Connections, our website, and social media activities help connect researchers to new tools, methods, or opportunities. This year, the introduction of methodological toolkits on our website also makes curated research resources more widely available.

3. What we do at Spark

We support research excellence and innovation across a wide range social research approaches and methods. Our activities fall into a handful broad categories that are the focus of the rest of this report.

- 1) Educational Programming & Training: Our goal is to bring the best of methodology to the challenge of understanding and responding to social dilemmas in ways that are innovative and transformative. Our training supports graduate students, faculty taking on new methods/approaches, and policymakers and practitioners wanting to integrate the collection and interpretation of evidence into how they do their work.
- 2) Research support: We seek to serve the needs of all social researchers with an ever-growing body of knowledge and services, both by curating, building, and maintaining excellent research tools and facilities, and by providing custom support and services.
- 3) Communication: We connect researchers to each other and the facilities, tools, methods, or opportunities that support innovative and rigorous social research. Key to these efforts are our newsletter, continuously published every other week since early 2021, and our website, which was significantly updated and revised in 2023-24.

4. Staffing & Governance

Centre Leadership

Allison A. Van (BS/BA, University of Washington & MPP, Harvard University), Executive Director, joined Spark (formerly CRESS) in July 2019. Allison specializes in mixed-methods complex systems analysis, community/academic partnerships, and the translation of research into social change. Her career has traversed sectors and disciplines, including extensive work in agricultural and rural development, poverty, child welfare and juvenile justice, social entrepreneurship, and medical innovation. In addition, she brings to McMaster significant research experience working with community organizations and in program evaluation.

This year, Allison has remained central to the growth, development, and vision of spark, actively setting goals, collaborating, and making pivotal decisions that steer the course for Spark. Through a strategic mindset, Allison navigates challenges and seizes opportunities.



Allison A. Van, Executive Director

Michelle L. Dion (BA, University of Texas & MA/Ph.D., University of North Carolina), Professor of Political Science and Senator William McMaster Chair in Gender & Methodology, serves as Spark's Academic Director (2020-2025). She has a strong record of interdisciplinary research at McMaster, focusing on public policy, cross-national public opinion, and the sociology of social science and drawing upon a range of qualitative and quantitative evidence and methodologies to advance our understanding of political and social dynamics. She has over 20 years of experience teaching research design and quantitative

methods in the social sciences, including as a visiting instructor in the University of Michigan Inter- University Consortium for Social and Political Research (ICPSR) Summer Program. In 2024, Michelle concluded her four-year term as a Co-Editor of the *American Political Science Review*, one of the discipline's highest impact journals, where she handled most methodological papers and helped advance the journal's research data transparency policies and practices.



Michelle L. Dion, Academic Director

Michelle continues to support and bolster Spark's research direction, actively participating in the evolution and execution of academic programming, educational initiatives, and administrative tasks. Michelle plays a pivotal role in shaping and executing research-related activities, programs, and applications for Spark.

Centre Governance

As a Senate-approved Centre, Spark reports to its **Governing Board**, which is Chaired by the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, **Dr. Jeremiah Hurley**, who is also Professor and former Chair in Economics. Other Board Members include **Dr. James Dunn** (Professor, Health, Aging & Society and Senator William McMaster Chair in Urban Health Equity and Associate Dean for Research in the FSS), **Dr. Tina Fetner** (Professor and Chair of Sociology).

Drs. Hurley and Fetner chaired the original working group that developed the core vision for the Centre, and Dr. Dunn was a member.

Spark's Advisory Committee

Spark's Advisory Committee meets yearly and provides input regarding Spark's scholarly priorities and strategic directions.

The Committee includes: Bradley Ruffle (Economics), Cliff van der Linden (Political Science), Jay Brodeur (McMaster Library/Sherman Centre), Andrea Zeffiro (Communications/Sherman Centre), Melanie Heath (Sociology), Judy Fudge (Labour Studies), Adrienne Xavier (Indigenous Studies/Anthropology), and Katherine Hesson-Bolton (Student Success Centre).

We are so excited to have a structured forum for members to collaboratively contribute to the development of Spark. We truly value their effort and input.

Centre Staff

Spark involves multiple arms of programming, which require lots of coordination and administration. We are extremely fortunate to have the continued expertise of **Lynn Holland** guiding our Administrative Team. Lynn brings a wealth of knowledge and a kind approach to everything.



Lynn Holland



Equity Burke

In addition, **Equity Burke**, who also works at the Gilbrea Centre, has been an enthusiastic addition to our team.



Lance Marwood, Lynn Holland, Lily Wang, Allison Van

Lily Wang continues in their role of Lab Manager for Spark's Secure Empirical Analysis Lab (SEAL). Lily has a background in Physics and Computer Science and is passionate about data security, fair use, and Research Data Management. This year, Lily has grown SEAL strategically, implementing server upgrades to offer a new tier of service to researchers in 2024-25.



Lily Wang, SEAL Manager

Lance Marwood advances and implements Spark's communication strategies, including our newsletter, social media, website, and print promotional materials.



Lance Marwood, Marketing & Events Associate

Evan Gravely lends his expertise in applied research and community engagement to the BSAR team, where he helps Spark provide robust applied research services to our community-based clients and partners.



Evan Gravely, BSAR

Spark benefits from its uniquely talented team of exceptionally skilled individuals. This year, our team consisted of current or former undergraduate and graduate students who worked alongside non-student staff to implement programming, training, research support, knowledge mobilization, communications, and marketing.

Students conducted work doing website development, accessibility, videography, event coordination, applied statistics, community engaged research and co-developing curricula. The Spark team included graduate students in Social Work, Sociology, and Engineering, and Undergraduates in Arts & Sciences, Economics, and Science Communications.

Brighter Spark Applied Research



Ver-se Denga



Saud Haseeb



Jordan Lentinello

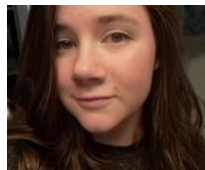
Current or former McMaster students contribute to Spark's research services and as Brighter Spark Applied Research Apprentices. Our team offers opportunities for hands on experience within a social research centre, which can be extremely valuable for early researchers and students looking for more active involvement and mentorship by those conducting research.

Communications Team

A number of current or former students also contribute to our knowledge mobilization or communication efforts, often supported with external funding for specific projects.



Sobia Khan (Information
Technology Analyst)



Amy Hutchinson (YouTube
Page Launch)



Celine Keomany (Data
Champions Graphic Design)



David Boda (Data Champions
Video Production)

Until next time & best wishes!

We would like to wish a bittersweet goodbye and thank you to the following students who have supported and contributed to the Centre's success during 2023-24 but are leaving us due to the completion of their academic journeys at McMaster and/or as a result of moving on to other opportunities:

- Moyosore Sogalou: Brighter Spark Team and Spark's Data Champion
- Shannon Boss: Brighter Spark Team
- Wendy Riu: Communications Support
- Chenfei (Alina) Li: Captioning Analyst

We wish them all of the best in their future endeavors.

5. Educational Programming & Training

Research Data Management

Building on the momentum of last year's Data Champions project funded by the Digital Research Alliance of Canada, Spark secured SSHRC funding for a new collaboration with McMaster's Research Data Management (RDM) experts to develop resources for social science researchers.

Spark helped develop a new set of McMaster & Social Sciences specific RDM Templates for the [Data Management Plan \(DMP\) Assistant](#).

In addition, this year's SSHRC-funded initiative focused on creating enjoyable videos highlighting real challenges and best practices in RDM by following the experiences of real research teams. As part of building the videos, we plan to bring to life animated avatars of our Data Champions.



The Data Champions were student RAs who received funding and training through Spark's grant to implement RDM best practices in their research teams led by McMaster faculty members. They also received an honorarium and certificate for their training attendance. Training was developed and delivered by Allison Van (Spark), Danica Evering (Library), and Isaac Pratt (Library).

The Data Champions also recorded confessional-style videos about their adventures in RDM and research. The videos, and the animated sequences that will be part of them, should be ready for a fall premiere on YouTube.

Carly Richards, PhD Student, Sociology
Working with Dr. Marisa Young, Sociology



Liz Grigg, PhD Student, Social Work
Working with Dr. Mirna Carranza, Social Work



Helen Beny, PhD Student, Political Science
Working with Dr. Sara Bannerman, Communication
Studies & Media Arts



Pamphilious (Phil) Faanu, PhD Student, Political
Science
Working with Dr. Nathan Andrews, Political Science



Moyosore Sogaolu, PhD Student, Economics
Working with Allison Van, Brighter Spark Applied
Research, Spark



Short Course: Impact Evaluation

This course was led by Paul Bakker in Fall 2023 (Sept 19, 26th, Oct 3rd, 17th and 24th). Paul has led the evaluation consultancy, Social Impact Squared, for over a decade, completing over 75 research and evaluation projects.



This short course dug into when and how to conduct an impact evaluation. By the end of the course, learners will be better able to define and answer questions about lasting changes emerging from an initiative, in different contexts and with different groups of people. It reviewed the fundamental concepts of evaluation and delved into impact evaluation questions to uncover ways to measure impact.

Social Research Short Courses



This short course was rescheduled from Winter 2023 to Fall 2023 to better recruit and capture those entering the new academic year in September. The workshop had a total of 14 participants, including both McMaster and external affiliates.

Spark Talks

Our annual Spark Talks research series kicked off again in Fall 2023. The weekly hybrid seminars featured researchers from around the globe with expertise spanning a range of social research disciplines including topics on innovative methods and findings.



Each session was one hour and included an interactive Q&A session to give a chance for the speaker and participants to discuss and learn from each other.

In this year's series, some of methods explored included:

- [Duo Ethnography \(Doing Duo: a collaborative and feminist method as praxis with Jessica Hardin\)](#)
- [Large Language Models \(The "Augmented" Social Scientist: Using Sequential Transfer Learning to Annotate Millions of Texts with Human-Level Accuracy with Salomé Do\)](#)
- [Literature Review/Network Analysis Mash-up \(Mapping Literatures with Networks with Adeline Lo\)](#)
- [Multinomial Logistic Regression \(Identifying racism in predictive policing with Andrea DaViera\)](#)

More than 24 scholars from around the world presented their research in Spark Talks last year. Recorded videos are archived on Spark's [MacVideo Channel](#) for future access and viewing.

Planning is already in the works for a 2024-25 academic year full of informative sessions by some great methodologists.

6. Research Support, Facilities, & Activities

Research Conversations

Research can be complex and daunting, especially when starting a new project or facing unexpected challenges. To address these pain points, Spark offers a valuable service called Research Conversations to anyone involved or interested in research — students, staff, and faculty from any Faculty at McMaster or community-based researchers involved or interested in research collaborations at McMaster. It provides up to four hours of free expert advice and coaching on research methods on a research project to:

- Refine research question(s);
- Facilitate connections with other researchers and resources;
- Identify relevant research methods, tools and software;
- Advise on data management and storage;
- Overcome research barriers;
- Help with research ethics application materials; and/or
- Suggest knowledge mobilization strategies, and more.

Between May 2023 and May 2024 Spark held research conversations with two dozen faculty members, graduate students, staff, and community researchers.

Enhancing Accessibility in Spark's Co-Lab

The CoLab is available to all research teams, faculty members and graduate students from across McMaster as well as community research partners. The CoLab offers open space with fifteen 2-4 person tables, a conversation area, two 2-person offices, two small conversations rooms and a meeting room that can seat 12.

In our continuous effort to create an inclusive and supportive environment for all researchers and students we are excited to announce accessibility upgrades to the CoLab. This initiative was generously funded by the *Vice President of Research* through the *Research Centres and Institutes Fund*.

Accessibility upgrades include:

- A self-opening door, ensuring easy and independent access;
- Two height-adjustable worktables, catering to the diverse needs of our community and providing comfortable and adaptable workspaces for users; and
- Braille signs to each room within the CoLab

We're proud of these enhancements and grateful for the support from Nick Marquis in FSS who did the accessibility assessment of our space.



Qualitative Suite

The Qualitative Suite is a solution to the many logistical challenges faced by researchers conducting qualitative studies. Equipped with two small rooms that comfortably accommodate up to four participants and a researcher, and a large room fit for twelve seated participants or thirty in more dynamic setups, the suite is versatile. It includes an attached viewing room, making it perfect for larger focus groups or interactive sessions.

This year, the Qualitative Suite has been through a technology refresh and is available this summer (until Sept 2024) for pilot testing for free to Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) faculty, graduate students, and researcher teams.

Post-September 2024, the Qualitative Suite will be available for rent to researchers and marketing firms both inside and outside McMaster University. This initiative not only enhances the research capabilities at Spark but also opens doors for broader collaborations and partnerships.

The launch of the Qualitative Suite is a pivotal step towards enhancing the qualitative research landscape at McMaster University and beyond. We look forward to seeing the diverse and innovative studies that will emerge from this space.



SEAL, a secure data enclave

Secure Empirical Analysis Lab (SEAL) is a high-security lab for secure storage of confidential data that is valuable for research. At Spark, we understand the importance of safeguarding sensitive research data, and that's why we're excited to share recent improvements to SEAL's infrastructure and services.



SEAL has evolved to support users working with proprietary data, large but non-sensitive datasets, health data, data linkage projects, data sharing and more. Whether handling business and government data, health records, the stories of individuals, or other sensitive information, SEAL ensures that your data is protected while helping enable ground-breaking research.

Remote access to our secure environment has always been a cornerstone of SEAL. With our new pool system, the experience becomes more stable, streamlined, and easy to use. Users are automatically connected to a virtual machine on the server that suits their research needs.

SEAL's lab manager has also readied SEAL servers for a new tier of service we'll be offering to users in the coming months.

During 2023-24, SEAL held 15 active projects with research teams around the world, including: McMaster University, University of Toulouse Economics, University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, University of Regina, and more.

Brighter Spark Applied Research

To fund our mission, Spark established a fee-for-service consultancy called Brighter Spark Applied Research (BSAR). BSAR offers game-changing, custom, applied research and evaluation services to community organizations, filling a much-needed gap in expert applied research support that marries academic rigor and practicality.

Spark offers Brighter Spark Applied Research Apprenticeships to current or former students, allowing them to become an active member of the Brighter Spark Team, engage in unique training opportunities, practical research experience, leadership, creativity and action orientated impact.

While our primary focus is on service to the community, we have come to see the tremendous impact that being part of Brighter Spark has had on our student team members. We are excited to continue providing direct experience to the next generation of applied researchers.

During 2023-24, the BSAR team provided research and evaluation services for Cochrane Canada, Empowerment Squared, Banyan Community Services, and Hamilton Community Foundation. BSAR collaborated with Dr. Luca Berardi (Sociology) and two of his doctoral students to complete the first phase of a multi-year project with Banyan Community Services. Likewise, our work for Hamilton Community Foundation will continue into 2024-25.

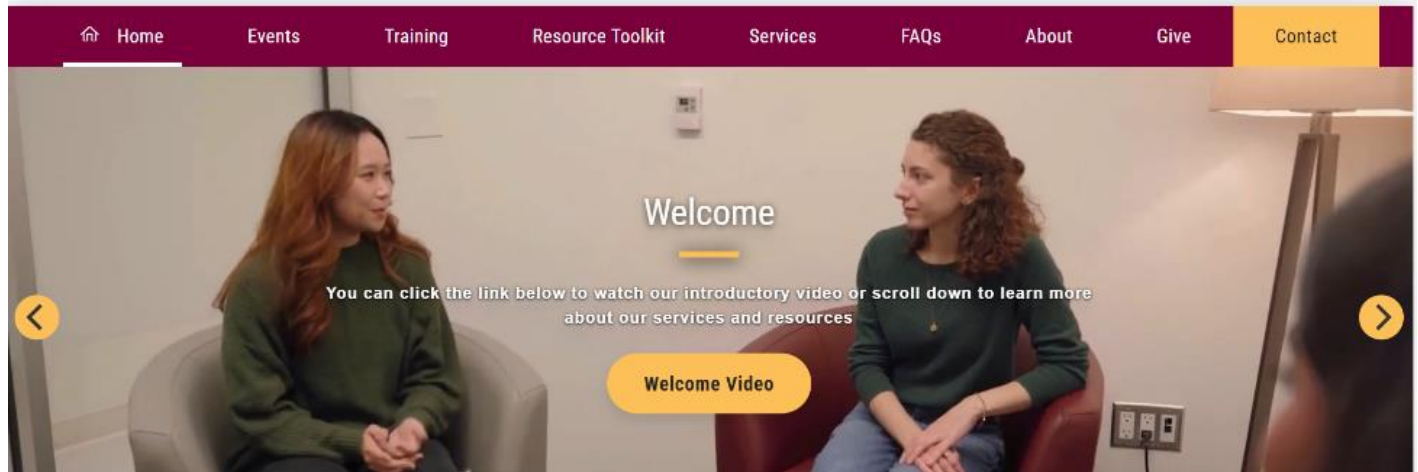
Spark's Annual Open House 2023

Spark hosted its annual Open House Event on September 22nd, 2023, from 12-2pm. It was a fun day – full of time for networking, information about research methods, tours of the SEAL Lab and Qualitative Suite, and details about what Spark is all about.

Community Engagement Day 2024

On March 28th 2024, Spark proudly participated in the first annual Community-Engaged Research Day, sponsored by the Office of Community Engagement (OCE). It was about celebrating what we've done and exploring opportunities and challenges yet to be resolved. We answered any question community members or researchers had about how they might explore a research or evaluation question. We look forward to another year of advancing, conversation by conversation, project by project, community-engaged research in Hamilton.





7. Communication

Our New Website








This year, we launched our new website and are so excited and proud to showcase all of our new content, resources, and information in an accessible and visually appealing format.

What's the point of having great services if they aren't promoted in an accessible and understandable way? Our new website features a

page dedicated to Spark Events, Training, Services (including those free or available for a fee), and more!

We sought to create a hub of information, a go-to-destination for all things research, but also to provide helpful information on all things Spark.

Our new Research Toolkits are curated collections of the very best online resources, including videos, blog posts, books, articles, or other multimedia.

 <p>Basic Qualitative Toolkit</p> <p>Explore our repository of resources related to qualitative research.</p> <p>Explore Toolkit →</p>	 <p>Basic Quantitative Toolkit</p> <p>Explore our repository of resources related to basic quantitative analysis.</p> <p>Explore Toolkit →</p>	 <p>Empowerment, Equity, and Community Engagement</p> <p>Explore our repository of resources related to empowerment, equity, and community engagement.</p> <p>Explore Toolkit →</p>	 <p>Advanced Quantitative Toolkit</p> <p>Explore our repository of resources related to advanced quantitative research.</p> <p>Explore Toolkit →</p>
 <p>Addressing Complexity and Systems Thinking</p> <p>Explore our repository of resources related to systems thinking.</p> <p>Explore Toolkit →</p>	 <p>Research Quality</p> <p>Explore our repository of resources related to research quality.</p> <p>Explore Toolkit →</p>	 <p>Knowledge Mobilization</p> <p>Explore our repository of resources related to knowledge mobilization.</p> <p>Explore Toolkit →</p>	



Resources for Research

Take a moment to delve into our short, informative video to get a vivid overview of the resources that await you. At Spark, we're all about fueling your journey to research excellence with the right resources. Come, unlock the wealth of knowledge we have in store for you.

Our goal was to focus specifically on the “how” of research and offer easy to understand practical starter resources around every social research method we could think of. It is broken up into 7 toolkits where we have grouped similar research methods.



Spark Connections Newsletter

Since early 2021, Spark has published its bi-weekly newsletter “Spark Connections,” featuring a wide array of topics and attracting a larger audience with each issue. Spark currently has a distribution list of over 500 people and readership between 2000-3000 per newsletter.

We appreciate all of the positive feedback on the content disseminated in our newsletter and invite researchers to connect with us by sharing their own research and work through this medium which contributes to the knowledge base and “connection” among the McMaster research community.

Social Media and Networking

Spark continues to utilize our social media X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn pages to share updates about Spark and as a way to reach both internal and external researchers.

Our Spark Communications team works hard to keep all platforms updated with content, resources and information that are readily available for use by researchers.



A goal for the year ahead for our communications team is to enhance brand awareness and expand audience engagement by increasing organic reach and visibility across key social media platforms.

8. Looking ahead

In our fifth year of operation, Spark is only just starting its journey and we as a Centre look forward to the growth, learning, and development that will come our way over time. We would like to take this time to thank our valuable research community of faculty, graduate students, and community partners – while also acknowledging the ongoing support from the Faculty of Social Sciences at McMaster University. We take pride in our initial five years, and eagerly anticipate the ones ahead.

In 2024-2025, Spark is excited to kick off another year of growth and learning by developing new, helpful and innovative programming, educational offerings and research services which meet the needs of our research community. We look forward to leveraging our team's assets and skillsets to provide support to the McMaster and Hamilton communities through our Research Conversations and Brighter Spark Applied Research services. As researchers, we look forward to continuing to consult with students, faculty, and the community to cultivate essential and sought-after training resources and tools.

In 2024-25, we will also undergo our first external five-year review as part of McMaster's governance process for Senate-approved research centres. This will provide an opportunity for the Centre and Faculty of Social Sciences leadership to reflect on our progress and make evidence-based decisions about the Centre's future development and growth.