

Commerce 4SI3
Innovation for Social Impact
Winter 2026 Course Outline

DeGroote School of Business
McMaster University

INSTRUCTOR AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Sarah Precious

Instructor

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Remote Office Hours

Email to book a meeting

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TA

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Email to book a meeting

Course website: <https://ug.degroote.mcmaster.ca/descriptions/25797-2/>

COURSE ELEMENTS

Credit Value:	3	Leadership:	Yes	IT skills:	No	Global view:	Yes
A2L:	Yes	Ethics:	Yes	Numeracy:	No	Written skills:	Yes
Participation:	Yes	Innovation:	Yes	Group work:	Yes	Oral skills:	Yes
Evidence-based:	Yes	Experiential:	Yes	Final Exam:	No	Guest speaker(s):	Yes

COURSE INFORMATION

Lectures: 3hr x1/wk

Tutorials: N/A

Course Delivery Mode: In-person

Course Description:

The course will provide an introductory understanding of social innovation and related concepts, as well as an understanding of methods of effecting change, including social enterprise, social finance, policy, and activism. Classes will include a mix of case presentations, guest speakers, exercises, and reflection activities.

A key component of the course is for students to work with non-profit organizations on a particular area of need. Engaging in this way will support the course content and students will be asked to reflect on how and why their contribution is or is not useful.

Elements of the course this collaboration will reinforce include:

- Understanding cross-sector contributions in change efforts
- Leadership development for social change
- Systemic approaches to addressing complexity
- The course will use guest speakers, in-class activities, discussion, and a major engaged project with non-profit partners.

IMPORTANT LINKS

- [Mosaic](#)
- [Avenue to Learn](#)
- [Student Accessibility Services - Accommodations](#)
- [McMaster University Library](#)

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to complete the following key tasks:

- Articulate how social innovation is distinct and how it is useful for addressing complex challenges
- Understand and apply systems thinking to identify complex problems and windows of opportunity
- Apply foundational principles to new change practices and approaches
- Understand and foster cross-sector collaboration for change projects

COURSE LEARNING GOALS

Upon completion of this course, students will achieve the following.

- Assess how cross-sector practices can lead to social change.
- Further develop their leadership for social change.
- Develop systemic solutions to address complexity.
- Understand appropriate practices and approaches to effecting social change.

REQUIRED MATERIALS AND TEXTS

These items are an integral part of the lesson plan for the course, and not having these materials could have a negative impact on a student's learning outcomes for the course.

Required: Course content, readings and case materials <http://avenue.mcmaster.ca>

Textbook Listing: A PDF copy of ***Social Innovation Generation: Fostering a Canadian Ecosystem for Systems Change*** will be provided for free to all classroom participants to download.

Link: <https://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/report/social-innovation-generation-book-sig/>

Course Website: This course will have an e-learn website at McMaster Avenue2Learn at <http://avenue.mcmaster.ca>. On the site you will find:

- Links to readings
- Additional information about course evaluation components
- Course documents such as this syllabus, any amendments to the schedule

The Avenue site is an important communication platform for this course. You should develop the habit of checking the course page regularly. It is your responsibility to ensure that your e-mail address and account settings in Avenue are correct for you to receive messages.

CLASS FORMAT

Activity	Delivery	Description	Tools
Readings	Asynch	Weekly 250-500 word responses to a writing prompt tied to lecture and readings. Submit via Avenue to Learn	Readings and lectures
Group Discussions	Both	Synch: Breakouts during class to discuss case questions	Synch: In Person

		Asynch: Students leverage Teams or other Social Media apps to complete group assignments	Asynch: Microsoft Teams / Zoom or students 'preferred mode of collaboration
Live Lectures / Case Discussion	Synch	3-hour live session: Opportunity to elaborate on core content, facilitate case discussion, and engage in discussions	In Person
Live Guest Speakers / Q&A	Synch	30 – 45 min virtual or in-person guest speakers/ panelists to enrich student learning. Allows for interactive Q&A	Synch: In Person or Microsoft Teams / Zoom

COURSE EVALUATION

Missed tests will receive a grade of zero unless the student has submitted and been approved for a Notification of Absence or MSAF. Late assignments will be penalized 25% for each day they are late.

Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

Grade Component	Weight	Description
Engagement (individual)	20%	10%: Classroom Participation (individual) 10%: Reflection Journals (individual)
Writing Assignment	20%	Research Writing Assignment (individual)
Major Project	60%	Major Group Project with Non-Profit Agency (shared) (Theory of Change= 20%, Stakeholder/Asset Map= 20%, Advocacy Plan= 20%)

COURSE DELIVERABLES

Engagement — Individual 20%

Reflection Journals — Individual 10%

Each class in this course focuses on a topic important for understanding social innovation in theory and eventually in practice. To guide your learning, during class you will be presented with a reflection prompt during the last 20 minutes of class. This prompt will relate to the week's assigned readings

and lecture. You will have the opportunity to refine your reflection at home before submitting it at the following week's class. This reflection should be between 250-500 words and submitted via Avenue 2 Learn. Though these are informal reflections, do refer to McMaster University Library's Citation guide in the event that you are referencing sources other than class discussions or readings referred to in the syllabus. You will receive full marks for completion of each reflection, unless there is a distinct lack of effort.

Due Date(s):

Reflection 1- January 14, 2026

Reflection 2- January 21, 2026

Reflection 3- January 28, 2026

Reflection 4- February 4, 2026

Reflection 5- February 11, 2026

Reflection 6- March 4, 2026

Reflection 7- March 11, 2026

Reflection 8- March 18, 2026

Classroom Participation —10%

Weekly classroom discussion represents a unique opportunity for you to develop and enhance your confidence and skill in articulating a personal position, reacting to new ideas, and receiving and providing critical feedback from a group of assertive and demanding colleagues. Social innovation work requires multiple perspectives, debate, testing and providing feedback. Your active participation in this deliberative process is essential to the success of any social innovation. Much of your learning will come from practising this skill with your classmates. You are expected to come to each class having read cases and assigned readings. Most of all, you are expected to come to class with readiness and willingness to contribute to class discussion.

Participation Matrix:

Attendance – 5%

Observed participation in class discussion – 2%

Observed participation in group activities – 3%

A good contribution involves presenting a clear opinion, expressing it civilly, and supporting the opinion with sound logic. These conversations will contribute to understanding the difference between anecdote and evidence. Every student shares the responsibility to create an environment where each member of the class feels comfortable offering his, her or their opinion. Learning from others and contributing to the learning of others through the experience and insights you share is a key part of this learning process. Contribution will be graded based on quality, quantity, and consistency.

Some of the things that will determine a contribution include:

- a) **Relevance** – Do your comments speak directly to the issues and concepts being addressed? Do they extend our understanding of those issues or concepts? Do they reflect your adequate preparation to participate in the discussion?
- b) **Additivity** – Do your comments reflect active listening to the comments of other class members? Have they incorporated insights introduced earlier and built upon them?
- c) **Substance** – Do your comments make a real contribution to the ideas being exchanged? Has anything new been gained from your contribution to the discussion?
- d) **Persuasiveness** – Have your points been well articulated, argued, and supported? Are your arguments convincing?
- e) **Questioning** – Have your comments reasonably questioned the comments of others or challenged their assumptions without disparaging the person who offered them?
- f) **Amount of participation** (this does NOT mean dominating the discussion, rather frequency of additive comments).

Research/Writing Assignment (20%)

You will be asked to research a program or strategy that can be characterized as socially innovative. It could be a program, social enterprise, social financing, social policy, cross-sector action, social movement, or strategy. It is important that it has produced transformative outcomes and that the impact is contemporary, regardless of when the social innovation was introduced. In 1500-2000 words, articulate why it is a social innovation and provide evidence to support your rationale, including

- Outcomes achieved and over what time frame
- Strategies deployed to achieve positive outcomes
- How impact was measured and/or validated as positive and transformative
- Any unintended side effects (good or bad) that happened or may still happen

Please acknowledge intellectual debts and facts and figures in your assignment using a superscript number and endnotes to reports. Draw on the library citation guide paying particular attention to page 6 and page 15 for endnote and citation support. This assignment should be submitted to Avenue 2 Learn.

Due Date: April 1, 2026

Major Project (40%)

The major project will consist of two sub-projects in which students will apply leading social purpose tools in collaboration with partner non-profit organizations. These projects will leverage tools that are at the forefront of social innovation in today's non-profit organizations.

1. **Theory of Change:** Helps you to hone the core idea at the heart of your change efforts. In class you will create a draft theory of change to present to your classmates. The theory of change should

include preconditions, intermediate outcomes, outputs, and indicators. At this point, you need not worry about the visual style or presentation of the TOC, but rather focus on ensuring that the theory is rooted in SMART objectives, cohesive and logical. Part two of this assignment involves working with your group to synthesize peer and instructor feedback on the draft TOC, to produce a final version of the TOC. This should be succinct (one page or less) and can rely on graphical treatments to present the component parts of the TOC. We will not be grading your graphic design skills, but rather the logic and cohesion of the TOC. Examples will be provided.

15%- Assignment

5%- Presentation

Due Date(s):

Draft- March 6, 2026

Final- March 25, 2026

2. **Stakeholder and Asset Map:** Mapping the people, assets and resources in your ecosystem looking at their levels of influence, proximity, size etc. Collaborating with your non-profit partners, you'll map the assets and stakeholders in the organization's ecosystem, focusing on a particular project, program or intervention. How do you design for efficient information collection, synthesis, sharing, and decision making at critical points in the proposed intervention. You will work with your group in class on an initial draft, and then work outside of class on the final submission. Examples will be provided.

Due Date(s):

Draft- February 6, 2026

Final- February 27, 2026

3. **Advocacy Strategy:** Collaborating with the non-profit partners, students will develop an advocacy strategy that will clearly outline an effective plan to bring about change. Advocacy strategies recognize that advocacy and change are not linear and are developed with awareness that strategies may need to shift and adapt in response to external variables. The advocacy plan will broadly articulate the intended audience, where and how it will work, and how the results will be measured. You will work with your group in class on an initial draft, and then work outside of class on the final submission. Examples will be provided.

Due Date(s):

Draft- March 13, 2026

Final- April 1, 2026

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

Missed tests will receive a grade of zero unless the student has submitted and been approved for a Notification of Absence or MSAF. To support universal design, and eliminate the need for an MSAF, a three-day grace period is included for each individual assignment (this does not include group assignments). Late assignments will be penalized 25% for each day they are late.

COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK

Students who wish to correspond with instructors or TAs directly via email must send messages that originate from their official McMaster University email account. This protects the confidentiality and

sensitivity of information as well as confirms the identity of the student. Emails regarding course issues should NOT be sent to the Area Administrative Assistants. All students must receive feedback regarding their progress prior to the final date by which a student may cancel the course without failure by default.

- For Level 1 and Level 2 courses, this feedback must equal a minimum of 20% of the final grade.*
- For Level 3 courses and above, this feedback must equal a minimum of 10% of the final grade.*

Instructors may solicit feedback via an informal course review with students by Week #4 to allow time for modifications in curriculum delivery.

REQUESTING RELIEF FOR MISSED ACADEMIC WORK

In the event of an absence for medical or other reasons, students should review and follow the Academic Regulation in the Undergraduate Calendar [Requests for Relief for Missed Academic Term Work](#) and the link below;

<http://ug.degroote.mcmaster.ca/forms-and-resources/missed-course-work-policy/>

COURSE MODIFICATION

From time to time there may be a need to remove/add topics or to change the schedule or the delivery format. If these are necessary, you will be given as much advance notice as possible.

GENERATIVE AI

USE PROHIBITED

Students are not permitted to use generative AI in this course. In alignment with [McMaster academic integrity policy](#), it “shall be an offence knowingly to … submit academic work for assessment that was purchased or acquired from another source”. This includes work created by generative AI tools. Also state in the policy is the following, “Contract Cheating is the act of “outsourcing of student work to third parties” (Lancaster & Clarke, 2016, p. 639) with or without payment.” Using Generative AI tools is a form of contract cheating. Charges of academic dishonesty will be brought forward to the Office of Academic Integrity.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are expected to exhibit honesty and use ethical behaviour in all aspects of the learning process. Academic credentials you earn are rooted in principles of honesty and academic integrity. **It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty.**

Academic dishonesty is to knowingly act or fail to act in a way that results or could result in unearned academic credit or advantage. This behaviour can result in serious consequences, e.g. the grade of zero on an assignment, loss of credit with a notation on the transcript (notation reads: “Grade of F assigned for academic dishonesty”), and/or suspension or expulsion from the university. For information on the various types of academic dishonesty please refer to the [Academic Integrity Policy](#).

The following illustrates only three forms of academic dishonesty:

- plagiarism, e.g. the submission of work that is not one’s own or for which other credit has been obtained.
- improper collaboration in group work.
- copying or using unauthorized aids in tests and examinations.

AUTHENTICITY/PLAGIARISM DETECTION

Some courses may use a web-based service (Turnitin.com) to reveal authenticity and ownership of student submitted work. For courses using such software, students will be expected to submit their

work electronically either directly to Turnitin.com or via an online learning platform (e.g. Avenue to Learn, etc.) using plagiarism detection (a service supported by Turnitin.com) so it can be checked for academic dishonesty.

Students who do not wish their work to be submitted through the plagiarism detection software must inform the Instructor before the assignment is due. No penalty will be assigned to a student who does not submit work to the plagiarism detection software. **All submitted work is subject to normal verification that standards of academic integrity have been upheld** (e.g., on-line search, other software, etc.). For more details about McMaster's use of Turnitin.com please go to www.mcmaster.ca/academicintegrity

COURSES WITH AN ON-LINE ELEMENT

Some courses may use on-line elements (e.g. e-mail, Avenue to Learn, LearnLink, web pages, capa, Moodle, ThinkingCap, etc.). Students should be aware that, when they access the electronic components of a course using these elements, private information such as first and last names, user names for the McMaster e-mail accounts, and program affiliation may become apparent to all other students in the same course. The available information is dependent on the technology used. Continuation in a course that uses on-line elements will be deemed consent to this disclosure. If you have any questions or concerns about such disclosure please discuss this with the course instructor.

ONLINE PROCTORING

Some courses may use online proctoring software for tests and exams. This software may require students to turn on their video camera, present identification, monitor and record their computer activities, and/or lock/restrict their browser or other applications/software during tests or exams. This software may be required to be installed before the test/exam begins.

CONDUCT EXPECTATIONS

As a McMaster student, you have the right to experience, and the responsibility to demonstrate, respectful and dignified interactions within all of our living, learning and working communities. These expectations are described in the [Code of Student Rights & Responsibilities](http://www.mcmaster.ca/students/rightsresponsibilities) (the "Code"). All students share the responsibility of maintaining a positive environment for the academic and personal growth of all McMaster community members, **whether in person or online**.

It is essential that students be mindful of their interactions online, as the Code remains in effect in virtual learning environments. The Code applies to any interactions that adversely affect, disrupt, or interfere with reasonable participation in University activities. Student disruptions or behaviours that interfere with university functions on online platforms (e.g. use of Avenue 2 Learn, WebEx or Zoom for delivery), will be taken very seriously and will be investigated. Outcomes may include restriction or removal of the involved students' access to these platforms.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities who require academic accommodation must contact [Student Accessibility Services](#) (SAS) at 905-525-9140 ext. 28652 or sas@mcmaster.ca to make arrangements with a Program Coordinator. For further information, consult McMaster University's [Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#) policy.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION FOR RELIGIOUS, INDIGENOUS OR SPIRITUAL OBSERVANCES (RISO)

Students requiring academic accommodation based on religious, indigenous or spiritual observances should follow the procedures set out in the [RISO](#) policy. Students should submit their request to their Faculty Office ***normally within 10 working days*** of the beginning of term in which they anticipate a need for accommodation or to the Registrar's Office prior to their examinations. Students should also contact their instructors as soon as possible to make alternative arrangements for classes, assignments, and tests.

COPYRIGHT AND RECORDING

Students are advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor include copyright protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, ***including lectures*** by University instructors.

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course. Recording may be done by either the instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution, or by a student for the purpose of personal study. Students should be aware that their voice and/or image may be recorded by others during the class. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you.

EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES

The University reserves the right to change the dates and deadlines for any or all courses in extreme circumstances (e.g., severe weather, labour disruptions, etc.). Changes will be communicated through regular McMaster communication channels, such as McMaster Daily News, Avenue to Learn and/or McMaster email.

RESEARCH USING HUMAN SUBJECTS

All researchers conducting research that involves human participants, their records or their biological material are required to receive approval from one of McMaster's Research Ethics Boards before (a) they can recruit participants and (b) collect or access their data. Failure to comply with relevant policies is a research misconduct matter. Contact these boards for further information about your requirements and the application process.

McMaster Research Ethics Board (General board): <https://reo.mcmaster.ca/> Hamilton Integrated Research Ethics Board (Medical board): <http://www.hireb.ca/>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COURSE POLICIES

Your enrolment in Commerce 4SI3 will be considered to be an implicit acknowledgement of the course policies outlined above, or of any other that may be announced during lecture and/or on A2L. **It is your responsibility to read this course outline, to familiarize yourself with the course policies and to act accordingly.**

Lack of awareness of the course policies **cannot be invoked** at any point during this course for failure to meet them. It is your responsibility to ask for clarification on any policies that you do not understand.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Commerce 4SI3 Innovation for Social Impact Winter 2026 Course Schedule

WEEK AND TOPICS	OVERVIEW & LEARNING OUTCOMES	Classroom Activities
MODULE 1: UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION		

Week 1: Jan 7 Introduction to Social Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What constitutes a social innovation? • Distinguish between adaptation and transformation. • Demonstrate understanding of the difference between invention and innovation. 	<p>Discussion: What does social innovation look like?</p> <p>Activity: Working in teams to identify different types of problems amenable to social innovation approaches.</p>
Week 2: Jan 14 An introduction to systems and systems thinking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate ability to recognize systems and their component parts. • Understand the difference between simple, complicated, and complex problems. • Demonstrate an understanding of how complexity shows up in real life. 	<p>Discussion: discussion of required reading text.</p> <p>Activity: Systems Mapping exercise and Iceberg Exercise.</p> <p>Presentation: Non-profit partners present a problem they are trying to address.</p>
Week 3: Jan 21 The Adaptive Cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify where a project or initiative stands on its journey to change. • Identify the traps that can prevent an innovation/idea from scaling successfully. • Identify the types of innovators and where in the adaptive cycle their skills are best applied. 	<p>Presentation: System “stuckness” and overcoming barriers to release and renewal.</p> <p>Activity: Small group discussion applying the Adaptive Cycle to a project, program etc.</p>
Week 4: January 28 Getting to Scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discern at what level an innovation is having an impact. • Ability to articulate whether an innovation has altered lives, policies, beliefs and how. • Develop the capacity to see and take advantage of windows of opportunity in our systems, to have a greater impact with one's work. 	<p>Presentation: Non-profit partners on their organization, what system(s) they operate within, and the people and issues involved.</p> <p>Activity: Introduction to Project 1 - Stakeholder Mapping (project teams work with their SSO partners on their Stakeholder Map draft).</p>

MODULE 2: UNDERSTANDING HOW CHANGE HAPPENS.

<p>Week 5: Feb 4 Power and Partnership in Collaborative Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the concept of “stretch collaboration” and how it is different from the conventional model of collaboration. • Understand the concept of “Nemesis” as it to collaborative groups. • Apply the Collaboration Spectrum to a collaborative relationship to learn the current state of that collaborative partnership. • Recognize core challenges of partnership and collaborations and what shifts are required to mitigate them. 	<p>Activity: Back-to-Back Drawing Exercise; Generative Start Exercise. Guest Speaker: TBD</p>
<p>Week 6: Feb 11 Case Class: My Role in a Complex System</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand social innovation from idea inception through to transformation. • Understand entrepreneurial decision making and engaging unusual allies. Understand the difference between scaling up and scaling out and how to exercise different strategies for different ends. • How to spot windows of opportunity and prepare to take advantage. 	<p>Case: Registered Disability Savings Plan, a transformation decade in the making.</p>
<p>Mid-term break Feb 16-20</p>		
<p>Week 7: Feb 25 Introduction to Social Finance an Social Enterprise</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the suite of options available for sustainable organizational development and resourcing. • Identify social purpose enterprise vs. for profit enterprises without social purpose. 	<p>Presentation: Setting up a social enterprise or social finance vehicle.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop awareness of financing mechanisms that can support social purpose activity. 	
Week 8: Mar 4 Evaluating Change Efforts Chloe to lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the parts of a theory of change. • Recognize types of evaluation, when and how to deploy them to capture the impact of your work. 	Activity: Introduction to Project 2 —begin first Theory of Change draft.
Week 9: Mar 11 Design Processes for Systems Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the role of design in addressing complex problems. • Understand the history and relevance of the design thinking approach. • Understand the basic framework for using a user-centred design process. 	Activity: An Exercise in Design Thinking
MODULE 3: HOW TO AFFECT CHANGE		
Week 10: Mar 18 Role of Advocacy and Activism in Systems Change + the Shadow Side of Social Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a more holistic understanding of approaches to systems change. • Building capacity to impact issue areas one is passionate about. • Understanding ways of creating change from the grassroots through to policy change, as well as the unintended consequences of the tactics you choose. • Demonstrate an understanding of how our intentions do not always produce positive outcomes. • Tie aspects of the traps identified in the Adaptive Cycle, Class 3 and aspects of nemesis discussed in Class 5. 	Discussion: Exploring “inch-deep mile wide” strategies and “mile deep and inch wide” strategies + when good intentions are not enough.

Week 11: March 25 Class Presentations	N/A	Hold for Group Presentations of Group Projects.
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