

Speech to Surrey Board of Trade
September 10, 2008

Thank you for that kind introduction.

Allow me first to express my appreciation to the Surrey Board of Trade for this opportunity to speak today, and, in a public forum, to express my thanks for the kind hospitality that has been afforded my wife and me since our arrival on the West Coast two months ago. It is certainly great to be back in the west, although we never anticipated this far west, and to be living in this marvelous part of the world.

These are heady times for Kwantlen, which now enjoys the name Kwantlen Polytechnic University. I realize this is not a name that flows easily off the tongue, but, at the same time, I am not certain we are entirely comfortable with the abbreviation KPU, or, for that matter, Kwantlen PU or Kwantlen “PU.” Kwantlen, though, is a good name, and in continuing to use this First Nations’ name, there is a clear signal, not only of our past but also our future. “Tireless runner” is exactly what we will need to be over the next while, as we work to transform Kwantlen from one kind of institution into another. This is an opportunity to be grasped because, quite simply, it is not everyday that we get to create a university.

There has been widespread conjecture about what this all means—to say that Kwantlen is a university. Certainly there has been considerable press and editorial comment about the creation of five new universities in a matter of five days, and certainly there is something Biblical about this. It is perhaps too bad that it was not six universities in six days, with a rest on the seventh.

We have all heard comments such as “are these real universities,” “has anything really changed,” “isn’t it just a change in name rather than substance?” But I start by simply discounting these remarks. No university when it is created is created a university. This was no more the case for UBC a hundred years ago than it was for Simon Fraser University a mere forty years ago. I remember very clearly the shaking of heads about the “instant” university on a mountain when SFU came into being. But we look now to the exceptional institution on Burnaby Mountain, and how it has evolved to what it is today. Universities are all about growing tradition, identity, and culture, a process in fact that never stops. This Kwantlen shares with the two larger institutions in the southern B.C. mainland and indeed with all

universities. It is just that our traditions and culture are evolving differently; it is not that they are any more or less legitimate.

What I do know is that Kwantlen worked long and hard to establish the bonafides necessary for the label “university,” and it has no intention of justifying a status that is well deserved and that defines a bright future. To do so demeans the contributions of thousands of people who together have shaped the Kwantlen of today. Their contributions have collectively produced the foundation which allows us to embark on this next grand adventure.

But we also know that Kwantlen is at the beginning of its journey as a university. There is much to be done, and much to be established, and it is this daunting task that we face that will make the future so satisfying. When we look behind us in five years time, we will see an enormous record of achievement that is, quite frankly, only possible when one is young and growing. But—we are still left today with one obvious question: what kind of university will Kwantlen be? And indeed this question just generates a whole series of additional questions concerning the purpose of universities in a world that is transforming at warp speed.

A couple of weekends ago, I took the time to reread David Lodge’s satiric treatment of academic life in his novel *Small World*. Early in the novel, globe trotting Morris Zapp, whose single ambition is to be the highest paid Professor of English in the world, has a conversation with the young Percy McGarrigle, who teaches at Limerick University, which has only recently been transformed from agricultural college into university, and trying to establish its legitimacy in a world where universities are defined by reputation, pedigree, and a healthy sense of self importance. Looking out over the campus of Rummidge University, which is only a thinly veiled label for the University of Birmingham, Professor Zapp remarks,

“See what I mean?” he panted [he was out jogging at the time], with an all-embracing, yet dismissive sweep of his arms. “It’s huge. Heavy. Monolithic. It weighs about a billion tons. You can feel the weight of those buildings, pressing down the earth. Look at the Library—built like a huge warehouse. The whole place says, “We have learning stored here; if you want it, you’ve got to come inside and get it.” Well, that doesn’t apply any more.”

What does Professor Zapp mean? What doesn't apply anymore? Universities are fundamentally medieval institutions. They have been around for a long time, and they must surely be doing something right to have survived in the face of all sorts of adversity. Universities exist because they have always embodied the best of who we are. They have long been places that protect, nurture, and celebrate what is most important to us. And this is an important function. But in the process of doing so, something else sometimes happens. They become places of privilege, and even today, they can still seem aloof, superior, and not altogether transparent.

But universities have also changed. Complex and decentralized as they are, they must be catalysts for change and responsive to society's needs. Of course, it is not that simple—the past or the future. Always within the modern university, one will experience a conflict between the old and the new, the established and cutting edge. One might argue that it is this conflict that engenders and sustains their creativity and ingenuity.

It is also this very situation which I believe places Kwantlen in an enviable position. We started as a college, with all of the humility that comes from being a college in an environment dominated by universities. And then we went to being a university college, a curious hybrid, neither fish nor fowl, part university, part college. Regardless of status, however, Kwantlen has over twenty-five years served Surrey well. During that time over 200,000 students have taken courses of one sort or another from Kwantlen—and we have stayed the course and we have done an exceptional job. And now we are a university, and, if nothing else, we will remember our roots. We have been about serving this community, we have been about access, we have been about giving people a chance, and we have been about being in the community. And while we might be of humble origins, we are not humble in our aspirations. Sometimes, it is much better to be the terrier grabbing the ankle of the elephant rather than the elephant itself.

So what now? Well, I go back to my Library story. Kwantlen has a new Library, and it is a marvelous facility. But it is not heavy, it breathes light, it has space, and it welcomes. It is a building that reaches out; it encourages learning. This building is the very antithesis of the Library observed by Professor Zapp. As the centre of the Surrey campus, it signals everything the institution must aspire to be. While history is important to us, this is not the time to hang on to the past, or to adopt a “wanna be” attitude, where we want to be like every other university in Canada.

There is already too much of this, and it leads, inevitably to ubiquity and a culture of predictability. By contrast, Kwantlen as a university must be open, responsive, nimble, and above all courageous in mapping out its own future; we are not here simply to replicate what already is. This is the opportunity the government of British Columbia and the people of British Columbia, and most certainly the people of Surrey have given us, and we have a responsibility not to disappoint.

It is about taking our responsibility seriously, about being responsive and aware of the society we serve, sensitive to the diverse needs of our students, aware that to be different from the rest is not a bad thing, to know that change is good and that established preconceptions about what constitutes a university are not necessarily for us.

And how are we going to do this? We must, first and foremost, remember who we are and be true to those roots. Kwantlen must be an institution that prepares students for a real world with real problems. Our courses in philosophy and sociology must be as much about the real world as our programs in auto mechanics and welding.

We hear much today about innovation and its importance in driving our economy, and that the universities as major research institutions are crucial to the innovation agenda. Of this there is no doubt. But we need to keep firmly in mind that the universities' most important product is the educated students that they produce. It is these students that will shape the future.

Our challenge is to determine how best to do that, keeping in mind always that universities should aspire to do three things: 1. to prepare students for a good life; 2. to prepare them to be responsible contributors to civil society; and 3. to prepare them for successful careers—remembering all the while that if one does not have a good job it is pretty difficult have a good life or make a contribution. Yes, we are about all three of these things. But our emphasis will remain on identifying the needs of British Columbia, determining how we can respond to these needs, and ensuring that students are prepared in real and tangible ways to make their way in a world of daunting challenge.

To achieve this goal, we need to do more listening and less telling. Universities are not as vehicles for social policy. Nor must they behave as

institutions who believe they know it all. But it is still the case that they exist to serve society. It is important that we listen to what that society wants and expects, especially when it is providing the lion's share of our funding sources. Our responsibility is to ensure that our products, and our graduates, are prepared to adjust and to grow in an infinitely variable world. And if we are going to do this, we must work hard to be aware of what that world expects, even as we ourselves try to shape it.

Critical here, is that we recognize that students have changed. While there are many students who still want a traditional four-year liberal arts experience, this number is dwindling. Students today are often older, and want focused education available in a way that accommodates their complicated lives. And even our younger students are more often than not carrying jobs, involved with families, volunteering in the community, and pursuing other interests, all of which together constitute a new kind of education that is far more than about going to university.

I have been in the business of higher education for a long time, and I have seen Canadian universities grow and change. But in all this, one thing continues to disappoint me. Canada is hampered because there is no coordination, no planning, and no goal-setting relative to higher education. We are still struggling with issues that have long been on the table: quality, transferability, recognition of prior learning, and human resource planning. We really have no articulated sense of what our country needs, and how our institutions might meet these needs. That we have got as far as we have is a testament to the institutions themselves and the people who work so hard to make them successful.

It is in this context, then, that we should welcome the B.C. government's initiative to create a series of teacher-driven, learning-focused undergraduate institutions in the province, and to distinguish them from the handful of legitimate research universities in British Columbia. This is something new and unique in Canada—in some ways it is decidedly not Canadian. Like any such report, the Report on Higher Education in British Columbia produced by Geoff Plant received a mixed response. But one cannot deny that certain of its recommendations were far-reaching in their scope, although I would argue that what it ultimately recommends is a system not unlike the one that has existed in the U.S. for a long time: a tiered system in which different institutions have different responsibilities. It recognizes that one size does not fit all, and that differentiation is a good thing. It confronts, moreover,

established definitions of higher education, distinctions between disciplines, and the relative value of university and college education. It asserts that what is truly important is a learning that prepares students for the future.

Moreover, creating teaching universities should not be interpreted as an abandonment of research; quite the contrary. Not every institution in the province can aspire to have a TRIUMF or a Synchrotron, but this does not mitigate the need for research for how it informs and enriches teaching. Universities are not in the business of derivative knowledge; our job is to pass onto our students the things we ourselves are discovering.

There are all kinds of reasons why students decide to go to college or university, and many other reasons why they do not. In this regard Kwantlen is clearly positioned to play a major role in the future of Surrey. According to the 2006 census, 62% of young people aged 20-24 living in Surrey have no education beyond high school, although this number does improve for the 25-34 year old group, suggesting that many people come back to university or college a number of years after leaving high school.

Of concern is how Kwantlen's catchment area, which includes Surrey, lags behind with respect to those having university degrees. According to the 2006 census, 18% of the population has a university degree compared with 25% for the GVRD. We endeavour therefore to ensure that students who have typically not had access to higher education have that opportunity. This is not simply a matter, however, of creating additional spaces. It is not a matter of create it and they will come.

It is a matter of changing attitudes about higher education and about providing not just any opportunity but, rather, the right kind of opportunity for students who might not be considered competitive according to established admission standards. It is about reaching out to these potential students, and ensuring that we provide an environment that encourages their success rather than one that reinforces their perceived sense of limitation. Kwantlen has long had an open admission policy, which provides opportunity for students who are willing to work hard.

What, then, are we about? We are about the 47 year-old former forestry student who I met at Student Orientation last week, who simply had enough and knew that he must make changes if he is to support his family. We are about the 50 year old man who had owned a small publishing firm but now

wanted to adjust his life, and indeed perhaps get a life. We are about a new kind of “tweener,” those between 25 and 30, who have not graduated from high school, but now, with the benefit of maturity recognize the need for an education but simply don’t know how to get through the door.

Granted open admission policies are a two-edged sword. They provide opportunity for students who might have missed earlier opportunities to access higher education or who simply do not have the necessary academic background. But they also leave an institution open to the accusation of low standards and to a lack of commitment to excellence, which has long been the cornerstone of university culture.

But maybe we should leave behind these old chestnuts, and strike out on our own. Universities are about allowing students to succeed in a way appropriate to what they bring in the way of background and talent. It then becomes the responsibility of the institution to assist its students to discover what this talent might be, and to provide support to allow him or her to realize this potential.

The fact is that the differences between colleges and universities are disappearing. Some might call this credential creep, which, for me, suggests a kind of arrogance unacceptable in the modern university. Kwantlen will remain an institution which provides credentials in welding at the same time as it does accounting, where one can earn credentials as a journeyman electrician as well as a degree in English. Strange bedfellows—perhaps.

Or is it that in this complicated world, the demands of becoming an electrician are every bit as challenging as earning a degree in, say sociology. Let’s purge that perception, still often repeated—can’t get into university, why not pursue a trade? Learning is learning, and that is our business. And we don’t differentiate, and we don’t make value judgments about what are good and not so good choices.

What we do ask, though, is that this community continue to be behind us, support us, tell us when we are doing things right and indeed when we could do them better. We have been with you for 27 years, and have come a long way with your help. Perhaps in some ways you know us too well because you have seen us grow. But this is a new time, and I ask that you be part of our community, as we in turn work hard to sustain and support yours.