

Saskatchewan School Boards Association speech
Monday, November 14th, 2016-11-04

When I read the news each day I am reminded of how lucky we are to live where we do – in a great country and a great province – what I heard someone recently refer to as the conscience of Canada

I'm also reminded of how important the work is that we all in this room do. A generation ago we were not concerned about whether or not we all had a future or a good one – only worried about how to make it better.

Now we're in a world whose future is uncertain, whose environment is fragile and damaged, and whose values are being questioned.

Values of inclusiveness, diversity, tolerance, compassion.

Education is the key to planning a sustainable future -- economically and environmentally. Education is the key to ensuring those values of inclusiveness and diversity and tolerance and compassion endure.

It's the very foundation of democracy. True democracy has always been tied to reading – to a literate citizenship with the vehicles at hand to understand and therefore to be free: books, newspapers, now social media, and schools. When democracy has been imperilled historically, it has always because people are prevented access to one or more of those. And because education systems have not flourished, or have been used to control thought, not to broaden it.

So all of us in this room are part of maybe the most important institution of our time – education. Schools are needed now more than they have ever been. And universities are needed more now than they have ever been.

“Education is the single most important job of the human race” right now – George Lucas

And I know you feel that because I read in the SSBA's Vision 2025 that a desired outcome by that year is that “Education is the highest priority endeavour in the province.”

Our recent Vision document states that “we will help forge a sustainable future” and will “promote diversity and meaningful change”.
Your document states that by 2025 “All students achieve at the highest level globally.”

Ours says that we are producing “engaged global citizens.”

Yours states that those achieving at the highest level globally “include our most vulnerable” and that “SK has eliminated the education gap for all students.” Ours states that we will be “an outstanding institution of research, learning, knowledge-keeping, reconciliation, and inclusion with and by Aboriginal peoples and communities” and a recent MoU signed with all 24 postsecondary institutions in SK claimed that we would work together to “close the education gap.” Not identical, but very close.

We are aligned in our purpose, therefore. And because you are entrusting us with your most valuable asset – your graduating students – our alignment is both crucial and full of potential for making good on our respective aspirations.

We’re also aligned with the province’s plan for growth, which foresees “Educating, training and developing a skilled workforce” and “advancing Saskatchewan’s natural resource strengths, particularly through innovation, to build the next economy.”

Together, we’re also aligned with the federal government’s economic plan and “inclusive innovation agenda”:

after a decade of low growth, Canada is looking to its education systems to turn that around particularly to its universities to move discoveries into the marketplace to educate more people with the right skills to promote innovation, to attract the world’s best and brightest (potentially a little easier now)

all of this while public funding for universities is flowing at a decreasing rate, universities are under greater scrutiny, presidencies are imperiled as never before, what is taught and how it’s taught is debated, curiosity-driven research is often questioned, tuition costs are rising, universities are the lightning rods for the fault lines of social and political and racial discourse, research funding from corporations is questioned, and students are questioning whether or not they’re getting their money’s worth from their degrees.

It was in this hothouse postsecondary education environment that I was announced as the next president of the U of S; when the province was starting to comment on “transformational change”; and when universities world-wide were undergoing significant upheaval.

“I left Princeton for the governorship of New Jersey in order to get out of politics” – Woodrow Wilson

When I was announced as the next president: “inquire, inform, innovate, indigenize”
Challenges we face:

Fiscal: public funding will not go up = fundraising, other sources of revenue;
strategic use of resources; identifying strengths so as to be successful receiving targeted federal funding (signature areas, etc.)

Ensure we're distinctive in SK for being a research-intensive medical-doctoral university, member of the U15 – every province needs one

Ensure we have a clarity of purpose: “help build a sustainable future” + national and global leader + RSAW/teaching/engagement

Ensure diversity: aboriginal (education is the key to reconciliation)+ gender + internationalization

Ensure we identify and help meet some of the world's great challenges: water and food security; medical innovation; promote the fine arts & humanities;

Ensure we communicate all we do and the value of it: a culture of engagement

Ensure we are innovative in programming: research at undergrad level + InterD + student mobility + experiential learning (Kristina Groves: “excellence is a transferable skill” – Huskies)

In sum: we're doing the most important thing in the world; we're aligned in our goals; we're going to succeed.

Remember: “A person who has never gone to school may steal a freight car; but a person who has gone to university can steal the whole railroad” – Teddy Roosevelt