

September 28, 2011

Fiat Lux Address

As delivered by Dr. Michael James Mahon on Wednesday, September 28, 2011

Welcome to our inaugural Fiat Lux Address.

Today is the commencement of what will be a regular opportunity for this community – our community – to gather to share information and to ask questions about the health and the future of our University. In keeping with our motto, Fiat Lux, Let There Be Light, I have called it the Fiat Lux Address to underscore my commitment to shedding light on all that we are working on and thinking about.

I also see this as an opportunity for you – to bring to light your thoughts on the present and future University of Lethbridge, and to invite you to be an active contributor in the conversations that we will be having on some of our most pressing and exciting initiatives.

As your President, I believe in transparency of information and in connectivity to all of our communities. These values are shared by the leadership team of our University.

I also subscribe to the notion of servant leadership, where I see my role as serving all of our communities, both internal and external.

To effectively serve, one must listen, learn and communicate.

Who we are and where have we come from

Our history is that of a primarily undergraduate, liberal education-based, university.

Today, we are moving swiftly to establish ourselves as a comprehensive academic and research-intensive university.

In the eyes of the province, we are already there, but I think most of us would agree that while we have made significant progress in growing our graduate programs and the scope of research programs and activity, there remains more to be done, to achieve what I think must be our goal; of establishing ourselves as an outstanding comprehensive University.

We have had many successes as we have moved to this new model of continued attention to, and enhancement of, the undergraduate experience while at the same time growing our graduate programs and research.

For example, undergraduate growth continues to be strong with this year's enrollment at 8,457 students.

Our enrolment of graduate students continues at a steady pace with 515 students, due to growth in targeted areas such as PhD, Master of Science (Management), Master of Fine Arts and Master of Music.

Our research income growth over the last decade, according to Research Infosource, has ranked us 2nd amongst undergraduate universities across Canada, with steady growth in Tri-Council funding in the past two years. Just this fall, our Vice-President (Research) spearheaded the creation of the Alliance of Canadian Comprehensive Research Universities designed to support small to medium sized research universities.

Our overall enrolment has grown by more than 50 per cent over the last 15 years. We have accomplished that growth by not replicating what others are doing but by building interdisciplinary research strength and being committed to quality teaching, creative activities and scholarship and by fostering the aspirations and curiosity of our stellar faculty. We are enabled in this by the commitment and skills of our staff members – our Administrative Professional Officers and our Support Staff. As we look forward, we need to be intentional in our actions, responsive to the needs of our community and responsive and nurturing to the aspirations of our faculty and staff.

Defining and achieving our preferred future

I place high expectations on myself as your President, and it is not unreasonable for you to have similarly high expectations of me. I am ultimately responsible for ensuring the health and vitality of this great institution. I am steward of the great works that those before have accomplished and am obligated to make my mark and help propel us forward. I am here today to present and reaffirm my commitment to you, as I did in my installation address.

On that day, October 15, 2010, I promised to do my best to foster an environment that ignites learning, teaching, research and creative activity, to build university capacity and to promote an environment of collaboration amongst all of us.

I am placing these same expectations on our senior leadership team of Vice-Presidents and the university-wide leadership team of Associate Vice-Presidents, Deans and Executive Directors. In fact, to achieve success, this air of expectation must permeate throughout campus to create a collective expectation of us all.

Why do I speak of expectation and commitment?

Because the landscape is changing.

There is increased competition for students with universities positioning themselves in the historic niche of the University of Lethbridge.

There are demographic changes here in southern Alberta and around the world in particular with the 18-24 year-old population segment shrinking.

And, we are in a tough fiscal environment. This year we once again face a challenging budget climate, and the foreseeable future looks much the same. We will be expected to be creative in how we go about running the university. While we have had some recent success in attracting additional funding from government, the funding is restricted to specific uses and helps address specific funding gaps created through the launching of new academic programs.

The future will present new challenges but we must look forward and continue on the path to our goal. The University Budget Committee will ask departments and faculties to envision their future, and at the same time will be faced with some very difficult decisions going forward, given a zero funding increase scenario.

Because we have to make difficult choices, we must be intentional in how we develop and mature as an institution. It is a time to be bold. When I talk to faculty colleagues and hear of their aspirations and what they want to accomplish in the next few years, I have no doubt that they too believe it is a time to be bold. It is also a time to look forward and define and own our future. The consequences of not doing so could well be stagnation and retrenchment.

To that end, we will use the strength of this community to build a road map for our future.

We are in the enviable position of being able to transform the future of our University.

How will we do this?

In two ways:

Firstly, we are moving forward with a series of intentional strategies.

You have heard me speak about being a **student-centred institution**. This can be greeted with cynicism because most universities make similar claims. I truly believe however, as do you, that this is a fundamental value of our University. Historically, we have not only said this, but we have delivered on this promise with smaller class sizes, connectivity to our professors, a smaller campus and a pervasive culture of support. We must nurture and reaffirm this value, even in the face of our growth as a comprehensive university. We must do so in a manner that enables our students to persevere and graduate.

Some of the key activities that have been undertaken to date to address this are the **Recruitment and Retention Project, the Strategic Enrolment Management Committees, new student**

residences and our commitment to quality academic experiences through the **Quality Assurance Program**.

These are important initiatives that support our student-centred university.

In addition, the Provost, Vice-President (Research) and many of you have worked very hard over the past year to develop the **Academic Plan and Research Plan** and the corresponding faculty specific plans that flow from this. Going forward, our budget decisions will be informed by these plans. The budget committee will continue to use the Strategic Plan as it's map, but will use these two new plans that underpin our Strategic Plan as its guide in decision-making.

Another important undertaking to guide our decisions is the **Campus Master Plan**. Last week we had our planning consultants on campus to engage our campus community in a visioning process relative to this plan. As we know, our programs and services are critical to our success, but so too is our campus environment. I attended a fascinating session where I heard some very creative ideas about the potential future of our campus. As one of North America's younger universities, our time to get our campus plan right is now.

Speaking of "getting it right", it is significant that the University of Lethbridge is located on **traditional Blackfoot territory**. The first Department of Native American Studies in Canada was formed at the University of Lethbridge. We have initiated many outstanding faculty based programs such as the Niitsatapi First Nations program in Education, the SPANS program in Nursing, the First Nations Governance Program in Management and the First Nations Transitions Program in Arts & Science. Our proof of success is our amazing alumni.

I believe though that it is time to harness all of the existing energy to build a campus wide framework for recruiting and supporting Blackfoot and First Nations Métis and Inuit students. Why? Because it is the right thing to do at this time. This also happens to be the fastest growing population of young people in Canada, and we not only want to support them in their future but also inform ALL students as to the significance of the Blackfoot and First Nations in Canada.

To accomplish this goal I have asked Dr. Leroy Little Bear to serve as my key advisor on Blackfoot and First Nations issues.

I have also asked Professor and Former Dean of Education Jane O'Dea and Mr. Roy Weaselfat, Vice President (Academic) at Red Crow College to lead this co-ordinated effort and invite all those on campus who have worked to achieve this proud history of service to the Blackfoot and other First Nations people to join us in this initiative.

Many of you have heard me speak about community engagement, and you know that I believe strongly in this as an aspiration for our University. Following extensive consultation during which I heard from many students, faculty and staff about YOUR commitment to community engagement, I am even more motivated to see us build on our history of being a university connected to community.

A small group of faculty and staff that have been meeting on this topic have come to believe that creating a model, based on the notion of EMPOWERMENT, is the best means of fostering community engagement and citizenship, especially with our students. Rather than requiring community engagement as an academic requirement or a requirement to graduate, we have come to believe that we should create a climate of support and encouragement of community engagement, to offer opportunities for community engagement to our students and to welcome the community itself to the University as active participants in this.

A great example of this interaction is how our students, faculty, staff and community intertwine through sport and recreation. Because this is not just about students. We will continue to recognize and encourage faculty and staff who are working to build a better society. Our goal is to ensure this becomes part of the fabric of the University of Lethbridge. Given the high level of engagement and activities already underway I have no doubt that this too is a fundamental value of our University.

These are just some examples of areas that we are intentionally focused toward.

As I mentioned earlier, our funding reality dictates that we be intentional in our development. The reality is that our base operating grant from the Province will once again have a zero increase. We must look at our present budget allocation model and decide if it is structured appropriately to enable our collective goals. Senior Administration and the University Budget Committee have been hard at work, and are already engaged in their own evaluation and data gathering and meeting with people across campus. I firmly believe that our current budget model needs to change to better align with the goals of our University.

Secondly, it is not only a time to be intentional but also a time to consider and purposely plan for the future that lies ahead.

Thus far I have outlined some initiatives that are underway, some begun since my arrival, and others prior to my taking over as President.

In addition to these important initiatives, there are broader discussions about our preferred future that we need to have as a university community.

As we look forward to the next iteration of our strategic plan, there are some significant questions we need to address. The answers we develop will define us for the next generation.

For example, we need to discuss our preferred student body size and make-up. Now is the time to discuss what the size of the University should be. We have a document that has been developed to begin to address this question, called “Setting Enrolment Directions”. It addresses the short-term horizon. But what about the long term? Should we aspire to grow substantially or should we maintain our relative size? What is the appropriate mix of undergraduate and graduate

students? What percentage of our students should be international students? How do we grapple with the concept of accessibility?

The question also exists of how we should **align our university programs and resources** so that we are meeting the needs of society, meeting the needs of faculty, staff, students and the communities that we serve.

For example:

We recently created the **Water Institute for Sustainable Environments** to build on our earlier successes in water and environmental science research and the development of the Alberta Water and Environmental Science Building. What is next in this critical area? And the larger question is what are our next research opportunities and how can we ensure that we are supporting research groups all across campus that have the capacity to blossom?

How are we approaching **Health Sciences**? Currently we have programs in Nursing, Neuroscience, Health Sciences, Kinesiology, Addictions Counseling. What new frontiers might we explore, and what new academic programs might we aspire to create?

What about **professional programs**? Comprehensive Universities service their communities with professional programming opportunities. What should the U of L be exploring in terms of new professional programs?

Given our locale, I think it is also important to consider **Agriculture and Renewable Resources**. Located in the heart of one of the most agriculturally productive and intensive areas on earth, and considering the breadth of the scholarly activity that already takes place at the University related to agricultural activity and renewable resources, we should be discussing how to align ourselves to better support our colleagues' activities and our community's needs.

We also need to think about our **northern campuses**. Recognizing the differences between Calgary and Edmonton is important. We need to know how we can best serve the needs of each community today and ask ourselves how can we do so in the future.

For example, our Calgary campus has grown by over 45 per cent since 2005 and we have made a significant move from the SAIT campus to the Bow Valley College campus in downtown Calgary, with a newly established partnership with Bow Valley College to deliver degree programming. It is clear from our growth in Calgary that we have found an important niche. What are our future niches?

We have a **new academic facility** on the horizon. Two weeks ago Minister Weadick announced \$2.3 million dollars in funding to support the planning for what is likely to be the new Sciences Complex and resulting repositioning of University Hall. We know that this provides an opportunity to not only envision how best to meet our future needs in science, but what does this

also mean in terms of the re-visioning of University Hall and the units that occupy both the new building and those that call University Hall home?

As we continue to contemplate our aspirations as a comprehensive university we must remember that our success in **graduate education and research** is significant. We have worked very hard to accomplish what we have today. We know that, to date, this success has been the result of interdisciplinary collaboration and concentration in specific areas such as water, neuroscience, education and other areas within the sciences. How do we broaden this success to be more inclusive across the academy, to include the social sciences, humanities, management, health sciences and fine arts? What are new interdisciplinary and discipline-based opportunities to be explored?

These are but a handful of some key questions that need to be considered. And remember, this is a PROCESS. We are generating ideas and not prescribing action forward. You are all part of this PROCESS, and the process of envisioning will continue to unfold.

And finally, we should consider the concept of the **University of Lethbridge as a Destination University**. What does this mean? To me, this is about becoming a place where people choose to be, no matter where they presently live. A choice they make when there are competing choices. Not just students, but also faculty and staff. All that we achieve becomes part of this possibility.

Why do I keep speaking of this? Because we are part of a crowded and ever-changing landscape in Campus Alberta and Western Canada. The U of L needs to be creative and forward looking in positioning itself and defining where it fits in the western Canadian post-secondary landscape. We are beginning to believe – and the data supports – that our future success will be in our ability to position the U of L as the Destination University of choice in Western Canada, for students from across Alberta, around Canada and across the globe. This will necessarily include continued and indeed enhanced attention to the development of more student residences, student support services, a vibrant campus community and collaboration with the local community to make Lethbridge and our university a destination of choice.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, I envision my role as President as being that of a servant leader, an enabler to support your successes by ensuring the environment is conducive to your scholarly activities, your activities that support the broad mission of this great institution and your aspirations as students.

I believe that this will be achieved by purposely aligning available resources to achieve our preferred future.

This involves telling “your stories”; supporting the work of faculty, non-academic staff, professional staff, university leadership team members and; ultimately focusing on ensuring that students and their success remain front and centre.

To do this, to raise the funds and profile necessary to support all of your varied aspirations, I will need to focus some of my attention on the external communities of Alberta, Canada and beyond.

At the same time, I remain committed to engaging with the campus community through such opportunities as:

- Open office times with the President
- First come, first serve lunches with the President
- Receptions at my home for departments, units, and student groups

In addition, “Open Mike” in The Legend and UNews will become monthly vehicles for keeping you up to date on my comings and goings, the things I have learned and the opportunities and challenges we have uncovered.

In the winter semester, we will hold a new presidential address to the community. This will take place both in Lethbridge and on our other campuses.

Let me conclude by reinforcing that:

We are an academic institution committed to the student experience, teaching and learning, research and citizenship.

We will continue to develop as a comprehensive university, while maintaining a commitment to the undergraduate experience.

We will become one of Canada’s true destination universities, while continuing to support southern Alberta.

And ... we will achieve these bold aspirations by working together and supporting each other, being intentional and realistic about what we can achieve within the reality of an ever-changing Alberta landscape. The future is ours to define and the choices are ours to make.

Thank you for being here this afternoon. Now, I am pleased to take questions.