

October 14, 2010
Installation Speech -- Dr. Michael James Mahon
Friday, October 15, 2010

Welcome and Greetings

YOUR HONOUR Chief Justice of Alberta Catherine Fraser, CHANCELLOR RICHARD DAVIDSON, BOARD CHAIR ROBERT TURNER, SPECIAL GUESTS, MEMBERS OF OUR CAMPUS COMMUNITY, VISITORS TO OUR CAMPUS, and EVERYONE WATCHING ON THE WEB

It is an honour and a pleasure to stand before you today as the sixth president and vice-chancellor of the University of Lethbridge.

Thank you for being here as we celebrate the future of our great University.

In doing so, we reflect on the University's past, the foundation the institution was built on and the many people who have contributed to the emergence of this world-class institution.

Our history begins with the Blackfoot people and the sacred land on which the University sits.

I would like to begin my address with a thank you to the Blackfoot community and the role they have played in the University's rich history. To the Blackfoot People:

NIII TSI KSI NII YII TSI PA, NII TSI TA PII WAH SINI
(Loosely translated, this means "I am grateful and thankful for the Blackfoot way")

Since its founding in 1967, the University of Lethbridge has evolved from a small and very successful primarily undergraduate university to a research-intensive, comprehensive university with a focus on both undergraduate and graduate studies.

This is a place where ideas ignite thanks to inspired teaching combined with superior research.

A place where a collaborative community of scholars and researchers has built a culture of support – for students, both undergraduate and graduate, for each other and for the broader communities of southern Alberta and beyond. Everyone at this university and in this community contributes to our success.

Today, more than 8,500 students from approximately 85 countries call the University of Lethbridge's campuses in Lethbridge, Calgary and Edmonton home.

Our student body has grown by more than 50% in the last 10 years. Despite this growth, we have remained true to who we are – a community focused on the student and grounded in liberal education.

Culture, History, Community

There is no doubt that the history of the University of Lethbridge is one of community.

The success of the University of Lethbridge is a reflection of the many people who have played a role in its development.

More than four decades of students, faculty, boards of governors and senate members, administrators, employees, community supporters and 32,000 alumni have contributed to the emergence of a world-class institution.

Without question, the University has exceeded the expectations of its most optimistic founders.

As I begin my first year as president, I assure you, our university will continue to provide each and every student with the most vital and engaging learning environment in the country.

The last four months have validated all of my impressions of the University and the southern Alberta community.

The experiences my wife Maureen and I have had have brought the U of L to life for us.

As part of my introduction to the University of Lethbridge, I was given the opportunity to meet with every unit on campus and participate in activities that form part of their daily lives.

I spent an early morning with the dedicated staff in caretaking, vacuuming and cleaning classrooms.

I drove a street-sweeper, delivered a baby and got lost in a corn maze. We visited classes in drama, critical thinking and poetry -- learned to line dance again, which brought back memories of our disco years in the 70s.

Through these experiences, Maureen and I have been made to feel very quickly that we are members of the University of Lethbridge family.

Biography

I am struck by how often this term is used as people reference the University of Lethbridge – family. This has truly reaffirmed our decision to join the University of Lethbridge, as family is foundational to us.

I was born in Winnipeg into a very close-knit family of five children. My mother Lucille and two siblings Susan and Patrick are here today and my dad Jim and siblings Kathy and Paul are watching on streaming-video back in Winnipeg.

Growing up in Winnipeg I came to appreciate cold, heat, wind, rain and snow. During our first summer in Lethbridge we have experienced all of this and thus feel right at home.

Maureen and I met in Edmonton in 1981 and have been married for 27 years. Our careers have led us to Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and North Carolina.

I have however, lived in Western Canada for all, but three years of my life, and as a result have a fundamental and deep-rooted connection to the West.

We are fortunate to have three wonderful children in Katie, Brennan and Seann, who are here today, as are a number of Maureen's family members including her mother Cathy.

The support of Maureen, our children, and my extended family has enabled and empowered me throughout my career. I will bring this fundamental belief in the multiple contributions of a family to my new home.

Servant-Leadership

My parents were dedicated to education, volunteerism and diversity. They were role models to me as volunteers, dedicated to community building and in particular supporting the needs of those who are vulnerable.

This commitment to service has been instilled in me since my childhood.

I believe I am here to support and serve the people who make up this University.

I believe in collaboration, in trust, in foresight, listening and empowerment.

My first commitment to you as President is that my role as leader of this University will be to serve and to help enable the dreams and aspirations of all who work, learn, create, and study, at the University of Lethbridge.

I make this same commitment to the community that we as a University serve and are accountable to.

People First and Student First

The foundation of our culture and identity as a University is a commitment to this community of people.

Regardless of whether they are students, faculty, staff or alumni, people form the basis of our strength.

They define the character of the University of Lethbridge. As we strive to realize our aspirations as a University, we cannot lose this defining feature of who we are and what we value.

I believe this includes creating an environment that supports healthy living and balanced lifestyles for students, faculty and staff and takes seriously its role in promoting this in the broader community.

Since its inception, the University of Lethbridge has made a promise to provide a very personal experience to our students.

This promise will be continued and indeed enhanced as we go forward.

We must commit all aspects of our university to taking a Student First approach.

Whether it is in academic programs and research, how we recruit and orient our students, our class sizes, our residences, recreation and sport opportunities, health services, or the environment of our campus, we will all ensure that we bring to life this moniker of the Student First.

A note I received in September from a parent of one of our first year students' sums up the essence of our Student First approach and the value of the people who make up this University:

This Mother Wrote –

“From the first contacts we had with the university last fall through the orientation day, each and every piece of correspondence and every phone call, I have been overwhelmingly impressed with the caliber of the individuals and the overall feeling of satisfaction I have with the University of Lethbridge as an institution and a community. I remain a proud parent of an alumnus and a student at an institution that is, in my mind, a national treasure and truly committed to the individual student thriving in and beyond your campus.”

Research, Graduate Education and the Comprehensive University

Individual people working towards a common goal are an important theme at the University.

It is the story of our founding, and it is the story that has and will continue to lead us to greater success.

Much of this success has been rooted in the principles of interdisciplinary collaboration.

It is this concept that Dr. Arthur Erickson sought to foster through his design of University Hall.

And it is this concept that U of L faculty have used to build research teams and conduct their works of creativity and inquiry.

The importance of research across the academy and the potential for multiple disciplines working together to unlock many of the important questions in our world and to contribute to the furtherance of our society

cannot be emphasized enough.

Our future as a comprehensive university will continue to be rooted in interdisciplinary research and discovery across the academy.

It is the bridge however between teaching and research - to both inform and support undergraduate and graduate education - that is the underlying principle of a comprehensive university.

I arrive at the University of Lethbridge with an abiding respect and enthusiasm for working across our academy, to build our capacity as a comprehensive university but to do it in a way that is respectful of our history and identity.

We must rededicate our university to high quality, student-centered undergraduate liberal education.

In doing so we must also encourage and nurture the research aspirations of our colleagues and their graduate students.

The U of L grew up as a primarily undergraduate university renowned for the quality of its teaching, but has provided thousands of undergraduate students with research experience and the opportunity to work with our world-class faculty researchers - an experience that is reserved for masters and doctoral students at most other universities, and one we should continue to embrace.

Recently, the U of L has also dedicated itself to creating more opportunities for graduate education.

We must use our experience and commitment to excellence in undergraduate education as a spring-board for the development and improving access to graduate level programming.

We must however ensure that our commitment to and successes in graduate education and research are balanced across all disciplines.

There is no model I look to that will guide us in this achievement, we will continue to create our own.

Community-based Experience

My entire educational experience was rooted in the philosophy of liberal education.

These liberal education roots are the same as those of the University of Lethbridge.

This includes a fundamental belief in the importance of community service learning outside of the classroom.

I was in grade 11, during a community service-learning experience, when I had a life changing and career-focusing experience.

As part of a school based volunteer requirement, I worked at an institution for children and adults with severe intellectual disabilities.

This experience was the impetus for 33 years of work dedicated to understanding and supporting people with disabilities.

My high school volunteer experience and subsequent career in disability studies had a significant influence on my philosophy of education.

In keeping with that philosophy, it is my goal to ensure that during my tenure as President and continuing thereafter, each of our U of L students has an opportunity to complete at least one community-based experience during their undergraduate program.

We are committed to building a University culture that promotes social responsibility and community engagement.

We have an obligation to give back to the community that supports us, and our students have an obligation to give back to the community that welcomes them and enables their education.

Abigail Adams, an advocate of women's rights and the abolishment of slavery in the 19th century United States, summarizes this obligation very well by saying, "If we do not lay out ourselves in the service of mankind, whom should we serve?"

Destination University & Internationalization

The University of Lethbridge is a treasure: a treasure that is recognized throughout the province and across the country – approximately 70% of our students come from outside of our city.

While this is an impressive measure of our reputation, one of our goals must be to ensure that the citizens of Lethbridge and southern Alberta continue to take great pride in the University of Lethbridge as their university.

That it be the University of choice for their children.

At the same time it is important to recognize the opportunity and need to continue to promote the U of L as a university of choice for students from across Canada and indeed the world.

Every student we bring from outside Lethbridge, makes significant contributions to this community.

During my tenure as President, I wish to see the U of L truly recognized as a premier Canadian comprehensive university dedicated to providing a second to none student experience for both undergraduate and graduate students.

To achieve this vision, we must continue to build our capacity to house students on campus, by increasing residence space.

In turn, this will ensure increased access to affordable housing in the city for Lethbridge residents.

We must promote ourselves and continue to vocally and publicly celebrate the successes of our colleagues in the faculty and staff ranks, of our students and of our graduates and alumni.

We must ensure that we no longer hear that we are, "One of Alberta's best kept secrets."

Instead, we will hear that we are one of Canada's top destination universities.

Our journey forward will continue to recognize the importance of internationalization.

With over 85 countries represented in our current student population, the University of Lethbridge is already an international campus.

Our goal of becoming a destination university will be achieved in part through our ability to continue to attract international students.

These students contribute immeasurably to our campus. They must be made to feel welcome at the University and in the city of Lethbridge.

Internationalization is also about providing opportunities for Canadian students to grow through an international experience offered as part of select academic programs and to be exposed to an international,

multi-cultural campus.

The Promise

Our Strategic Plan provides an exciting vision for our university; one that has been embraced by our campus community and a vision I completely endorse.

As I have heard repeated, it is a path we have chosen to follow, not a set of railroad tracks that will dictate where we will end.

It is not a directive – it is a vision we collectively must contribute to or we will be unsuccessful in achieving it. Each of us has a unique role to play in this endeavor.

I am committed to doing my part to get us there.

There is a wonderful promise outlined in the academic calendar of the University of Lethbridge.

With slight modification, today I make this promise to you:

To our students, to our faculty and staff and the community of supporters of the University of Lethbridge, I make a promise:

A promise to do my best, so you can be your best.

A promise to foster exploration, to share ideas and information, to teach but also to learn.

A promise to help build the buildings, acquire the technology, cultivate the partnerships, and welcome the people essential to advancing an environment that excites and ignites learning, teaching, research and creativity, while contributing to the sustainability of the environment within which we live.

A promise to create an environment where professors and students are colleagues and everyone grows together, an environment that recognizes the power of every student's dream -- and helps that dream come true.

We will have many new challenges ahead us but I know we are ready to take them on.

Along the way we will be guided by our roots epitomized in the ever-changing light of the prairie landscape.

Fiat Lux- Let there be light!