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## The University of Lethbridge – Alberta's Destination University

### **An Open Letter to our University Communities**

**Michael J. Mahon, President & Vice-Chancellor**

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As I approach the end of my second year as President, I am reflecting on what I have learned about the University of Lethbridge and I am energized by our potential. I have had many opportunities to listen and talk to members of the U of L community about the future of our University. We have discussed the importance of being intentional, the significance of being bold. As we approach the beginning of our next strategic planning process, I am writing this letter to outline some of my thoughts on a way forward for our University and how we might put this shared vision into action.

Forty-five years of creativity, discipline, and commitment have given us many reasons to be proud of who we are in 2012. We have reached the largest student enrolment in our history across our campuses in Lethbridge, Calgary, and Edmonton; we have substantially increased our research income; and we have over 33,000 alumni who live and work throughout Alberta, across our country, and in 66 countries around the world.

While we should certainly celebrate our accomplishments, we also need to recognize we remain at an early stage in our development as a university. Several key factors will shape our path and decisions as we chart a course for our future. We face an increasingly competitive post-secondary environment, with a projected decline in the 18-24 year old population. Post-secondary institutions across the province and country are redefining themselves to capture a larger share of the population, in the face of limited funding. While we continue to receive modest government funding increases today, the future is uncertain. Yet, this is not the first time we have endured challenging times. I am confident we will once again navigate our way successfully.

In my Fall 2011 Fiat Lux Address, I indicated that we are poised strategically to make the tough, complex decisions that will be required of us in the foreseeable future. Significant consultation led to our 2009-2013 Strategic Plan. This foundational plan captures the aspirations of our University and details the values we continue to build upon. Under this plan we can boast many accomplishments, far too many to list in this letter.

What is evident is that we are making thoughtful and deliberate choices that align with our Strategic Plan. Recent examples of this include our decisions to partner with Concordia University and our move to downtown Calgary with our partners Athabasca University, Olds College, and Bow Valley College. This type of collaborative, purposeful action will improve access to post-secondary education in this province. Our decision to construct a new student residence complex and increase our on-campus housing capacity to 1,000 beds directly ties to our commitment to enhance the student experience. These are two significant outcomes that were achieved cooperatively through intention.

We have become a strategically-focused, research-rich university that enhances undergraduate and graduate student experiences. We do this within the framework of liberal education and discipline-based and interdisciplinary inquiry and creative activities. Together our accomplishments provide a solid foundation as we enter the next strategic planning process, our 2014 – 2019 Strategic Plan.

### **Alberta's Destination University**

We are Alberta's destination university – an institution sought out by students and faculty across the province and beyond. My comfort in making this assertion comes from our high quality academic programming, faculty strength, supportive staff, and unique location. We are a destination university because over 70% of our students enroll in our multi-campus structure from outside of Lethbridge and we have succeeded in attracting scholars from across Canada and all over the world. The founders of the University of Lethbridge boldly envisaged a liberal education-based university in southern Alberta on the banks of the Old Man River, which would provide a unique student experience. Their foresight included the importance of being different than the other universities in the province. This vision, arrived at more than 45 years ago, provides the foundation for our destination university, and I am committed to honoring this. The U of L has many enduring and exceptional attributes. Our commitment to liberal education is prominent. Our rigorous standards in academic programming will not be compromised, and our commitment to research and creative excellence will never waiver. Our campus locations are unique and attractive—each providing a smaller, welcoming, and sustainable environment. The members of our faculty are renowned within their respective fields; our employees are committed

to the student experience; and our students enroll from areas throughout Alberta, Canada, and the world. In selecting the University of Lethbridge, our students are choosing to attend a university that has the attributes and experiences we offer. This is who we are today.

It is time to reinforce our position as Alberta's destination university. We need to ensure that everyone understands who we are and how we provide a unique academic experience. Let me outline how we might add some of the attributes that will enable the defining characteristics of a destination university to better emerge.

### **Enrolment: Undergraduate, Graduate, International, and First Nations**

Our current enrolment sits at about 8,500 students. This represents significant growth over the course of our history and more than 50% growth over the last 15 years. However, destination universities do not grow for the sake of more growth. They grow strategically, with programs that enhance their integrity. And they may not grow at all.

I firmly believe our future is rooted in the medium size of approximately 10,000 students and our future growth will be carefully planned and strategic. Undergraduate and graduate growth comes from a significant investment, and so we will expand only when we have the resources to do so. Given the changing demographics and post-secondary landscape, it is possible we may see limited growth opportunities in the foreseeable future. This will allow us to further invest in the quality of the student experience that is characteristic of a destination university. Growth will not come at the expense of excellence.

So how does this affect recruitment and retention? Recruitment and retention will remain top priorities, but we must rethink how we recruit, including targeting high achievers with enhanced scholarships and developing innovative programs for those who require additional support. Boosting student retention is also critical, and efforts in this area will include ongoing projects such as a student portal and increased residence space. We have the ability to define a new way to provide access to an outstanding education, and this definition should embrace high-quality academic programs and exceptional student experiences.

We will place greater focus on recruiting and retaining Blackfoot and other First Nations, Metis and Inuit students, the fastest growing young adult population in Canada. However, enrolment is not the only reason to focus on this population. Creating opportunity and an inclusive campus environment for all students is simply the right thing to do.

We must ensure that gender, race, ethnicity, ability/disability, sexual orientation, and other historic factors of discrimination are not impediments to students, faculty, or staff on our campus.

Such effort requires the involvement of our entire community. Increased acceptance and support for all is another hallmark of a destination university.

Internationalization presents important opportunities for our University. Integrating an international or intercultural aspect into the delivery of education and research is a multi-faceted exercise. We will develop an international strategy that builds on our present activities in research, student and faculty recruitment and exchange, and study-abroad opportunities while advancing new directions.

### **Academic and Research Structure**

To a large degree, students enroll in a destination university because of the academic and research opportunities. A critical part of our success in research has been in building strength-focused areas. Going forward, facilitating the development of Research Centres and Institutes will be an important part of attracting students and faculty. The task will be to find ways to support those areas that are on this path, and to identify and encourage emerging areas of research and graduate education potential. We will also continue to think about new programs, keeping in mind the current funding climate.

I have given much thought to the present constitution and structure of our academic units and whether our current profile positions us to meet the vision of a destination university. Planning is now underway for a new academic building. This project will create modern science teaching and research laboratories, environments that facilitate collaboration and interdisciplinary activities, and revitalize University Hall. This will be a catalyst for considering how best to align academic programs, support disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching, and empower the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

There has been much discussion about the need to separate the Faculty of Arts and Science into two Faculties: one of Arts and another of Science. This discussion must be formalized within the academic community and conducted in a timely manner. But it should not be limited to considering the two traditional entities of Arts and Science, nor should it solely reflect structures within academic units. It is also critical that the discussion allow the entire university community to be involved. We will create a forum for this dialogue, ensuring thorough consultation, and a willingness to be decisive.

Our newest Faculty on campus, the Faculty of Health Sciences has made tremendous progress. Health care, and in particular the streams of public health, preventative health, and health services for older adults, will continue to challenge our society. The Faculty of Health Sciences can respond to these challenges by introducing new and innovative academic initiatives and

expanding existing programs. The move of the Department of Kinesiology into the Faculty of Health Sciences is something we will consider. Collectively, elements of Health Sciences, Nursing, and Addictions Counseling could provide the scientific and evidence-based foundation for a strong academic program focused on prevention and primary health care. New programs could then be considered to add to the breadth and depth of such an endeavor. This discussion will be initiated.

Our Strategic Plan 2009 – 2013 commits to maintaining our focus on liberal education. Today, more than ever, there is a great need for liberal education to assist society to grapple with a world that has become increasingly complex. Creative thinkers and leaders are required to address complex problems and arrive at innovative solutions. There are numerous competencies that will be required by our future graduating classes.

We must carefully consider how best to re-define liberal education within our rapidly evolving society. I believe the best approach is to house liberal education in an inter-faculty School of Liberal Education. The current general liberal education requirements of our programs are overly complicated. The value of this complexity does not appear to be understood by our students and many of our faculty. The repositioning of liberal education within a stand-alone School dedicated to liberal education in an interdisciplinary context could be a hallmark of our destination university. There is an opportunity for this School to give rise to innovative programming. As an example, our approach to internationalization and community engagement could fit within a School of Liberal Education. Faculty and staff who are engaged in study abroad, experiential learning, integrated experience programs, cooperative and applied studies, or service learning are already ahead in this regard. Implementing a new framework for liberal education at the University of Lethbridge will be at the core of how we define our future.

### **Integrating and Collaborating**

Given the current and predicted fiscal conditions, it will be important for us to look at ways to integrate and collaborate. We have grown so significantly that, in our rush to keep pace, we have potentially lost important connections in some of the areas key to moving forward with our vision. We will need to become more integrated and unified in our finance, marketing and communications efforts. Working together across the academy will be important as we move to reach our potential. Indeed, our budget review initiated this past year is a significant step towards achieving collaboration across units and Faculties. Discussions regarding the elements of structure that I have identified will require cooperation across both academic and non-academic units. Information Technology is critical to our future and thus, in an ever-changing context, we must develop a service-focused integrated model of IT management.

We must ensure the student experience is not hampered by a lack of collaboration across units and campuses. Only by working together will we achieve our preferred future. Collaboration must be a defining characteristic of U of L business.

Not only is it important that we build our internal community, we must also maintain and grow the strong connections that we have developed with the external communities that we serve. We have been committed to building a university culture that promotes social responsibility and community engagement. Just as liberal education is at the core of Alberta's destination university, community engagement will be developed as a way to enhance the quality of our academic experience. Faculty and staff who are engaged in integrated experience programs, cooperative and applied studies, or service learning are helping build this vision. This is important work that must be continued and expanded throughout the curriculum to inspire all students to understand their role as citizens.

Though we are already actively engaged with our communities, a more intentional strategy and investment will make this a critical component of our reputation as a destination university. Students will graduate from the University of Lethbridge having had a uniquely personal community experience. Community engagement will be another defining attribute of the University.

## **What Happens Next**

I firmly believe that the time has come for us to differentiate ourselves within the post-secondary landscape. The attributes I have outlined are the beginnings of a path forward to embody our vision as Alberta's destination university.

This open letter marks the beginning of what I hope will be a valued dialogue. Beginning in Fall 2012, the University of Lethbridge Strategic Planning Committee will consult the University and broader community on achieving our vision, summarize its findings, and craft the 2014-2019 Strategic Plan for recommendation to our governing bodies.

I am looking forward to both formal and informal opportunities for discussion and encourage all members of our community to participate. We will continue to address and implement the priorities that move our institution forward.

Our University has made tremendous gains over the past 45 years. We have earned the right to be proud of who we are and what we have achieved. We are Alberta's Destination University.



**Michael J. Mahon**

**President & Vice-Chancellor**