

Transcript - Dr. Annette Trimbee - Presidential Installation Address - November 7, 2020

Thank you, Dr. Monk.

And thank you to everyone who is joining us today.

I would like to personally welcome Her Honour, the Honourable Salma Lakhani, Lieutenant Governor of Alberta; and His Honour, Dr. Zaheer Lakhani along with Carolyn Graham, Chair of the Board of Governors of MacEwan University, and acknowledge my family for being here.

Thank you as well to my esteemed colleagues and friends.

Listening to the remarks of the speakers before me reminds me of the personal and professional connections we share – the many people I've had the privilege to learn from, relate to and serve with during my education, personal life, in multiple government ministries, and, most recently, as a university president. They have all played a part in leading me here today.

The job of a university president is to look forward. To plan and shape our institutions in ways that respond to the world around us.

When I think about forging a path into the future, I think of Senator Murray Sinclair, former chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. One of the most memorable events from my time at UWinnipeg was the Duff Roblin dinner where we honoured Senator Sinclair.

It is an evening I will never forget. The discussions were difficult but filled with such hope and optimism. It was also the first time I heard Senator Sinclair refer to four fundamental questions educators must help students address: Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? Who am I?

These are not questions I considered during my own education. I left Winnipeg the first time at the age of 24 with two degrees yet no knowledge of treaties, residential schools or my own Métis history. I had unfinished business and things about me that I needed to understand.

That's not to say that my university experience wasn't transformational. It certainly was – just as it is for all undergraduate students who are attending university during a time in their lives when they are full of hope.

Answering those big questions involves far more than a transfer of knowledge. A university education isn't only about content, it's about intent. It's human. It's about mentorship and relationships. It's about how students learn. The work we do in universities is not transactional. It is life changing. That's why employment rates, work-integrated learning statistics and other metrics don't tell the whole story. The metric I believe matters most is that transformational change: the sum of the deltas that happen from the moment a student arrives at university to the time they leave.

Because it is the transformational change our graduates experience that positions them for miyo-pimâtisiwin – Cree for “to live a good life.”

MacEwan University is in the midst of its own transformational change. We face many challenges – doing more with less, addressing critical social justice issues, helping our province diversify its industries and economy, claiming our place in Alberta's future post-secondary landscape, shaping our institution and shifting our teaching paradigm to fit a post-pandemic world.

In light of all of this, looking forward in a meaningful way means that we too should be asking ourselves a variation of Senator Sinclair's questions: Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why are we here? Who are we?

Answering these questions and addressing the complex – even daunting – issues we face will be challenging. But it also affords us a tremendous opportunity—the chance to take what we already have and build it back even better post COVID-19.

So, where do we come from?

As we approach MacEwan University's 50th anniversary, I believe that we need to look back and consider what came before us and the big decisions that led us to today:

Our connection and responsibilities to askiy iyiniwak, Cree for the “earth people,” who first lived on this land.

The historical significance of being located on what were once the Old Canadian National rail yards that connected Edmonton to the rest of the world.

The decision to build a campus downtown and embed ourselves in the heart of Edmonton, to create MacEwan's first university transfer program, to become a university, to retain our diploma and certificate programs, and to consolidate our campuses downtown.

When MacEwan became Alberta's sixth university on September 24, 2009, I was the deputy minister of Advanced Education and Technology. I remember the joyful celebration in the Robbins Health Learning Centre, standing on the grand staircase that looks out onto a busy 104 Avenue and the city beyond, and seeing the always happy President Paul Byrne look even more jubilant than ever.

There's something about downtown universities – of being in the heart of things – that I find so compelling. It's more than the physical footprint of downtown campuses. We add to the vibrancy of our cities, and bring energy, fresh ideas and a keen interest in tackling the issues of our time.

As a downtown university, we are “all in.” We are “all in” when it comes to the issues our neighbours face – the individuals, businesses and organizations who surround us – affect us too. We can't shy away from the role we play in finding solutions to those issues and contributing to our city's resiliency, economic recovery and social health.

Because answering the question, “Where do we come from?” isn't only about geography and physical space. It's very much about people. It's about the cumulative impact of the individuals who came before us and shaped MacEwan into what it is today.

Universities are not defined by their classrooms, buildings, or technology – they are defined by their people.

The students who fill our classrooms – physical and virtual. The alumni who they become. The dedicated faculty and staff who provide the personalized experiences MacEwan has always been known for.

The faculty who go beyond sharing knowledge to put students at the centre of all they do; who create new knowledge and with it opportunities for students to work on projects and issues that matter; who innovate and inspire their students to go out into the world as alumni and continue to do great things.

It is people who create the transformational change that defines an undergraduate university experience. That is why considering who we have included – and who we have not – is so important.

In my twenties and thirties, when I was an active researcher, I studied ecology and the impact of perturbations on freshwater aquatic ecosystems. One of the many things I learned during my time on the water is that ecosystems under stress bounce back more quickly when they are diverse.

Inclusion and excellence go together. Too often, we think about equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives in a way that speaks to gaps in outcomes for individuals and misses the point about the talent they bring and the need for all people and all ways of knowing in dealing with complex problems.

“Where are we going?” and “Why are we here?”

As we embark on our next iteration of strategic planning, we have many big questions to ask ourselves.

What do we want MacEwan to be in 2030? What are the most impactful things we can do to help create a brighter future for our city and region? How can we support and prepare our students for the future? What must we protect as we change?

Because there are many things we should protect.

The big strategic decisions made over the past half-century, I believe, are part of what gives MacEwan University a strategic advantage. The decisions to position ourselves downtown, to consolidate our campuses, to transition to an undergraduate university.

While other institutions begin to look at adding micro-credentials as a way to more efficiently help students learn specific competencies, MacEwan has always designed educational experiences that are stackable, personalized, practical and inspiring. Even the creation of today's virtual event became a practical learning experience for many of our incredibly talented students. Our faculty have always acted as mentors focused on their students' success. We have always placed students at the centre of our decisions.

Those are things you don't do not throw away.

But we must also ask ourselves about the things we need to change.

To really put students at the centre, we need to think deeply about the future they are graduating into. We are at a turning point. We cannot take our relevance for granted and we have some choices to make. Our plans must be more than incremental, we must be bold. We must think like futurists.

So, who are we? Or perhaps more clearly, who do we want to be?

As Senator Sinclair says, the answer to “Who am I?” is not static. It relies on the answers to the other questions – it’s about recognizing where we come from. It’s about our purpose. It’s about asking ourselves what we need to change to be relevant today. And it’s about our relationships.

As we move forward as a university community and set out to answer this final important question, we have much to consider.

MacEwan is Edmonton’s downtown University. More so than ever before, we must be an engine of growth.

How can we scale up and speed up our contributions to revitalizing downtown Edmonton? How can we help strengthen and grow new industries and companies that require a deeper pool of skilled people? How do we ensure this growth includes everyone, and that all Albertans have the opportunity to fully participate in our province’s economy?

We must be an agent for change in our communities.

One recent example is the role of our kihêw waciston Indigenous Centre in the adoption of Indigenous names for the City of Edmonton’s 12 municipal wards. When the new boundaries take effect later this year, MacEwan University will reside in O-day’min, which is Anishinaabe for strawberry or heart-berry – the heart through which the North Saskatchewan River runs.

Our participation in that change says something important about who we are, where we come from and where we are going.

We must serve our community by sharing the expertise and scholarly work of our faculty and students – pursuing research does not need to happen at the expense of teaching. It is not an either-or situation. Scholarly activity enhances our teaching and serves our community.

We must think globally but focus on solving issues here at home. Innovation happens when people with different perspectives and ways of thinking have opportunities to share spaces in which they can collide and connect. This, I believe, is one of our university’s greatest strengths.

We must figure out exactly how we fit into the ecosystem of post-secondary education. This is critical. We want to be best in kind, but our “kind” – downtown universities – are built on collaboration. Good partnerships are reciprocal, and we must find ways to work together with our post-secondary colleagues, local businesses and our community.

This is a time of transformation for MacEwan University, and I know it will be a transformational time for me too.

I always say that going to Winnipeg in 2014 to become a university president took me full circle. It was a return to my childhood home and the university that tapped me on the shoulder in high school and offered me a scholarship that made all the difference in the world to me.

Returning to Edmonton completes a different circle for me. I’ve spent most of my adult life in this city. It’s where I built my career. It’s where my children were born and raised and where they live today. I feel like I have unfinished business here.

Much of my public service career was in ministries that aimed to diversify Alberta’s economy, and there is still much work to be done on that front. I care about Edmonton. I care about Alberta’s future.

And I’m hopeful that the journey we are on together will help us build back better.

Thank you.