

# Creating Dialogue: The Role of Urban and Metropolitan Universities in Fostering Civil Society

Milton K. Wong

## **Abstract**

*In his keynote address to the October 2002 conference of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, Simon Fraser University's Chancellor encourages urban and metropolitan universities to be courageous and creative in meeting new social and economic challenges. To be effective and trusted in a complex and competitive world, universities must be proactive, collaborative, and adaptable.*

I have looked with interest at some of the proceedings of this Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities, and feel that I am among kindred spirits. My hope is to explore some of the strengths of the metropolitan universities movement, to recognize what has been accomplished to date, and to offer my perspective of changing societal forces and their impact. In this way, I hope to push you to think even more ambitiously about your potential contribution to shaping the evolving role of universities.

But first I'd simply like to welcome you to Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Centre for Dialogue and express my pleasure, and perhaps confess my pride, at being able to extend that welcome. My pleasure is as a result of several factors:

The University I am privileged to represent has made a strong statement, first by moving downtown some 14 years ago, and then later by opening this facility with the expressed purpose of enhancing the quality of dialogue—or as my friend Glenn Sigurdson would say: “creating a safe place for difficult conversations.”

I grew up a few blocks east of here in an area now struggling with problems of poverty and addiction. I now work a few blocks west of here in the main business district. Through its programming here, SFU reaches out to both these communities and bridges gaps that are too often left unbridged.

Because I love and admire universities, and especially their potential—the promise involved in young people, and not-so-young people, coming to find ways to reach beyond their present horizons. Here I'd like to mention that, although I have been introduced as the Chancellor, I am not an academic. As many of you will know, Chancellors in Canadian Universities are typically volunteers—an elected honorary

position. So I speak to you as someone who is passionate about Universities, but also as someone who is in many ways an outsider. I hope that my perspective from somewhat outside the institutional practices of universities may contribute to your thinking.

My pleasure in being here and my pride in the institution of SFU, and other universities that have identified with the metropolitan universities movement, is tempered by the perception that universities are now only beginning to come to terms with the challenges and changes facing them. Through my work as chairperson of both provincial and federal task forces on the status of Lifelong Learning, I have come to believe that Universities face a very significant transition, a transition driven by many forces, including philosophical, technological, economic, and cultural changes. How universities respond to these challenges will determine whether they continue to command the respect and attention of many of the brightest and most committed individuals in society. My argument here has three main premises: *One* is that the modern university is a product of the Age of Reason, and in some ways has yet to move beyond that way of thinking. *Second*, the Authority of Reason, which was a central feature of the Enlightenment paradigm, has crumbled under a host of pressures, including internal philosophical critiques but also social forces such as pluralism and the changing role of technology in our lives. *Third*, the forces involved in the collapse of the Authority of Reason have undermined the University's claim to unique authority. Universities are now in a position of competing, along with many other groups, institutions, and businesses, for resources and respect. To succeed in this competitive field, we must earn respect by demonstrating leadership, not simply claiming it as if by divine right.

## **The Authority of Reason**

The guiding principles of universities have come down from the philosophical tendency of the Age of Reason—an age that defined man's role in the world as a rational being and therefore different in kind from other beings on this planet. John Ralston Saul's book *Voltaire's Bastards* explores this in some detail. It was an age that seemed to think that if a single man was smart enough and careful enough, he could deduce the fundamental truths about knowledge and justice from his position in an armchair. And these truths were thought to hold for everyone regardless of position, class, gender, culture, and so on. Reason in this sense was disembodied, universal, and authoritative.

The ramifications of these beliefs have had practical consequences in the form of unsustainable attitudes towards non-human inhabitants of the earth, in terms of colonialism, in perpetuating the myth of perpetual growth through consumption and in terms of privileging certain kinds of education and knowledge over others. In some ways, universities have benefited from these beliefs in their role as guardians of Knowledge and Reason.

## **The Fall of Reason**

But many of these beliefs have been undermined. We are now in a much better position to see that human life is much more like other animal life on earth, right down to the level of genetic structure. And whether or not we believe that it makes sense to talk about the fundamental nature of the world apart from our perceptions of it, it now seems quite obvious that our best understandings are deeply shaped by our genetic structure, our specific histories, our culture, and other contingencies. Reason no longer stands as the supreme attribute, ordering all other aspects of experience and knowledge. And with the fall of Reason, the place of the University is changed as well.

Changes in technology mean that Universities' relatively unchallenged place as the source for the most authoritative knowledge has been displaced. There are more competing sources of knowledge, claims to knowledge, and ways of distributing it. There are now many producers as well as purveyors of knowledge, including corporations, corporate universities, policy think tanks, and independent research institutes.

A more pluralistic culture and social value system means that the kind of coherence and order sought by the Age of Reason is no longer plausible. Authoritative histories, and even the way we do science, are being rethought from a multiplicity of perspectives. Along with this displacement of unitary authorities comes what Charles Taylor has spoken so eloquently of, the need for recognition. Individuals and groups develop a need to be recognized not simply as holders of universal rights, but as having cultural identities that need to be respected.

Increasingly, there is no single value system that can keep organizations or organizational forms such as churches or universities protected from competing claims and interests. As a result, the University becomes one type of institution among many, each competing for the space and support it needs to carry out its mandate.

## **Universities as Leaders**

Some might see this as a defeat or a loss of some kind. Instead, we should celebrate this new role for the University. Because for every loss on the side of having a secure and unquestioned space as the Fount of Reason and the Source of Knowledge, there is a gain in opportunities to engage with others, to become involved pragmatically in the social, economic, and cultural challenges our world faces, and to prove the value of our ideas, our capacities, and our knowledge. Instead of being handed a position of authority, universities must now demonstrate that they can provide leadership.

In a world that is confronted every day with political and corporate corruption and abuses of our churches, universities continue to hold the public's trust and, for this reason alone, we have an opportunity to give proactive leadership of change in the community.

In my view, metropolitan universities have started down this path. Universities such as Simon Fraser have engaged with their communities, have formed partnerships with businesses and other groups to meet educational challenges wherever they are found. This kind of work is contagious, too. Moving downtown has opened the University up to the need to respond to the variety of interests in a complex urban society. One of the results has been that contacts and approaches used to link the University to its neighbours here in urban Vancouver have led to a number of partnerships with companies and communities in remote areas of the province. These include MBA programs tailored to meet the needs of mining engineers in large remote operations and partnerships to help First Nations build their capacities to manage their affairs better and to establish an economic base from which to build. In doing this work, we try to *recognize*, in Charles Taylor's sense of the word, the specific character of our partners and meet them on their own ground, rather than insisting that they fit within our predetermined expectations.

This very Centre, and its focus on Dialogue, is another manifestation of our belief that universities need to assume a role of leadership, not just in research and science, but also in the practical problem of bringing people together to talk constructively about difficult and contentious issues. The very point of this room is that it creates a shared space in which every person's contribution can be *recognized* (that word again) as opposed to a conventional lecture theatre where the professor or other expert can dispense knowledge to the audience.

Just as individual leaders in the corporate and public world have learned to go beyond command and control if they want to be effective, metropolitan universities are learning that they must engage others' imaginations. They must create environments in which others feel safe and can be productive. They must help to create a compelling vision and help provide the tools and support required to turn that vision into reality.

This kind of leadership is not simply granted—it is earned. It must be active, open, and accountable. Active in the sense of participating fully in the challenges of identifying issues, framing problems, and creating solutions. Open in the sense of being responsive to changing circumstances and quick to adjust when a plan is not working or an assumption fails to hold. Accountable in the sense of taking responsibility for its role in contributing to whatever goals have been the basis of the implicit or explicit basis for joint action.

By placing your universities in cities, you have opened your institutions up to all kinds of sources of vitality, all kinds of opportunities, and to new ways of thinking. But my contention is that universities have much to learn yet about their potential in this new environment. In particular, universities are still operated with decision-making procedures that assume each educational program must embody some eternal truth that must be rigorously perfected and reviewed before being launched into the world. Experimentation and innovation may characterize your laboratories but are not typically the hallmark of the services for which you receive most of your funding: your educational programs. You need to free up the creativity and talent that exists in

small groups in your organizations in the way that some firms have fostered the development of skunkworks and disruptive technologies, even when they challenge core aspects of the business.

And while universities are learning to reach out to their communities and to other partners, they are a long way from doing what some businesses have learned to do, which is to bring critics and other outsiders into their own organizations and work with them to renew themselves. One large locally-based mining company regularly invites environmental leaders and non-governmental organizations from communities in which they have mines to take part in discussions about environmental and social policies of their organization. But universities, for the most part, have been reluctant to allow outsiders more than token involvement in shaping the nature of their relations with other organizations, their programs, or their strategic direction.

Universities must also be careful that they do stand for something. There has been much criticism of universities for trying to use “excellence” as a substantial goal when it is in fact an empty term. Just as we expect leaders to stand for something and to take responsibility for their actions, universities cannot allow their openness to all ideas and their neutrality among competing ones to mean that they do not stand for anything at all. My own experience in conferences like the recent Globe 2002, and simply living here on the Pacific Northwest coast, have made me acutely aware of our pressing environmental challenges. It would seem to me that this is precisely the kind of situation where a university should roll up its sleeves and get involved. This is the kind of issue in which there are public as well as private interests and we have need of the best and most imaginative minds to make progress. So when I speak of leadership by universities, it is in this sense: that universities would engage seriously in major issues that affect society, and that they would do it openly in partnership with communities and other organizations. Their leadership will then be earned and recognized on the basis of what they can deliver.

For reasons I outlined earlier in this talk, universities cannot afford to be complacent or to count on holding onto their current, rather privileged, position of respect and a boundless appetite for their much-needed services. Every day, there are more contenders willing to offer competitive services, often in niche markets that Universities are coming to depend on.

Universities promise a great deal, both explicitly and implicitly, to students, to their families, to funders, and to society at large. Now is a time that we have to make sure that we make good on those promises, that we are creating economic impacts, that we are creating a more open and tolerant society, and that we are contributing to the sustainability of life on this planet. These values, lived out in action, are needed to replace the now hollow-sounding appeals to an abstract sense of reason.

Universities do have a great deal to offer. As a chancellor who has just taken part in three days of graduation, I am fully aware of how important the university’s role is, and what it means to the wide variety of people who pass through its doors. Because

of this, I would urge you to keep opening those doors, even when it is uncomfortable. I would urge you to foster creativity and innovation in making good on our promises. And I would urge you to think of how universities can become better at taking on a leadership role by being more active, more open, and more accountable to students, to other organizations, to communities, and to the public.

### **Author Information**

Milton K. Wong was elected Chancellor of Simon Fraser University by its Board of Governors in 1999. He is chair of HSBC Asset Management Canada Ltd. and is known for his extensive community involvement and philanthropy. He has received many awards, including the Order of Canada. Mr. Wong is also founder and past chair of the Laurier Institution, a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing knowledge of the economic and social implications of cultural diversity.

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