



AN EXTRAORDINARY
WAY OF LEARNING

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Notes for an Address
by
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Chair of the Presidents' Group
at the launch
of the
Maple League of Universities

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UNE ALLIANCE DES UNIVERSITÉS
DE PREMIER CYCLE

Thank you Peter Mansbridge.

Thank you for your service as Chancellor of Mt. Allison.

And thank you for making the effort to be here tonight.

The three other Presidents have charged me with providing an overview of why we came together, what we have accomplished and what we aspire to do.

Je vous souhaite la bienvenue à cette soirée de célébration d'une alliance entre quatre universités en trois provinces canadienne.

Je devrais commencer en reconnaissant le fait que beaucoup d'entre vous vont, peut-être, vous sentir un peu mal à l'aise ce soir.

I know that many of you may be feeling slightly uncomfortable here tonight.

Our four universities are accustomed to competing with each other for students and faculty.

Our sports teams and their fans are impassioned rivals.

And each of us regularly claims to offer the best undergraduate experience in Canada, which, of course, in Bishop's case is true.

We created the U4 League three years ago because we believed that by working together we could enhance the experiences of our students.

We believed that together we could be more effective at explaining our model of undergraduate education to prospective university students throughout Canada.

Nous nous sommes rapidement rendu compte qu'en dépit de nos rivalités amicales, il y a beaucoup plus que nous partageons en commun que nous divise.

We quickly realized that despite our friendly rivalries, there is much more that we share in common than divides us.

We all have fewer than 4,500 students so that we are able to provide intimate learning environments in which students have significant and regular interactions with their professors and each other.

We are residential universities. The vast majority (more than 75%) of our students live on - or within walking distance of - campus.

We are committed to undergraduate education. Over 90% of our students are undergraduates.

We are national universities.

More than 40% of our students are from out of province, with students from every province and territory.

The world meets on our campuses; our students come from more than sixty countries.

We are located in small towns in which our students become part of the local communities and are able to contribute to them.

We also created the U4 as a response to growing concerns—expressed by students, parents, educators and media commentators—about the deterioration of undergraduate education in Canada.

The funding models for Canada's universities provide enormous incentives to grow undergraduate enrolment and to dedicate resources to graduate studies.

Facing financial challenges, most Canadian universities have been increasing their undergraduate enrolments, while focusing their resources primarily on building graduate programs and research capacity.

Consequently the common experience for most first year university students is to frequently find themselves in classes with 200, 300, 400 even 500 or more students.

In April a student may run into a professor whose course she has been taking since September and the professor will not know who she is.

And much of the undergraduate teaching in other universities is done by grad students and contract faculty.

When their students apply for grad school they are often hard pressed to find professors who can write a reference letters which say much more than the fact that the student took their course and the grade they received.

That is never a problem for the students of the Maple League Universities.

Our small classes enable our students to have direct and substantial contact with professors who in most cases are tenured faculty.

Our professors know their students by name. They serve not only as their teachers but as their mentors.

There are two aspects about the Maple League universities that at first blush may seem counter-intuitive.

You might think that the opportunity to develop significant friendships would be greater in the large universities.

More classmates should mean more friends.

In fact, the opposite is true.

The experiences of multiple generations of students at our universities confirm that the number of close friendships that students develop at university is inverse proportion to the size of the enrollment.

The students at the Maple League universities develop intense friendships which last a lifetime.

They share many classes together.

They live in the same residences or apartment buildings.

They participate in the same extra-curricular activities.

They are present on our campuses not just to attend their classes but throughout the day and on evenings and weekends as well.

They learn to navigate the challenges and responsibilities of being independent adults who are members of a diverse community.

Because of the depth of those friendships and the diversity of our student bodies, our students develop a social intelligence and cultural awareness that prepares them well for the globalized world they will be inheriting.

The second counter-intuitive point is that our students generally have more experience working with professors on research projects than undergraduates at the large research-intensive universities.

When professors at the Maple League Universities need help with their research, they do not have an army of Masters and PhD students to call upon. So they turn to their undergraduate students.

This explains why so many of our alumni tell us that they were better prepared for graduate school than many of their colleagues from the large research-intensive universities.

For those of you

- who have been in a classroom with a dozen dynamic peers,
- who have had dinner in your professor's home,
- who have stood shoulder to shoulder with an award-winning researcher at a lab table; or
- who have connected with alumni who graduated 40 years before you,

you know the model.

And you know why it works.

You won't be surprised to learn that all four of our universities rank in the top ten in Maclean's recent survey of student satisfaction at Canada's primarily undergraduate universities.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a study conducted by researchers at the University of Indiana.

The researchers believe that there is a direct correlation between the degree of students' engagement in the academic, extra-curricular and social aspects of their universities and the quality of the education they receive.

At our universities our students can

- be on a sports team,
- sing in a choir,
- work backstage in a play,
- be in a club,
- write for the campus newspaper,
- while taking a major and a minor.

Again it won't surprise you to learn that our four universities are consistently ranked amongst the best in Canada by the NSSE study.

Despite the success we have in these national surveys, we continue to feel that our model of undergraduate education is not sufficiently well known.

And we are facing a challenge because the understanding of the value for young people to go away from home for university is declining in Canada.

Two-thirds of Canadian university students live within 20 kilometers of their university and only one in ten of them go to university out-of-province.

So we have work to do to help Canadians understand that we have a different and highly-regarded model of undergraduate education.

We believe that we can be most effective in raising awareness amongst prospective students and their families if we work together.

We know that four voices speaking in unison are better than one.

And we believe that by working together we can expand the breadth and depth of the educational experiences we can offer to our students.

As Robert Campbell noted, we recently used technology to stream to the three other campuses a talk at Mount Allison by Joseph Boyden, one of Canada's most celebrated authors.

We shared a talk at StFX by Nobel Prize-winner in Physics, Art McDonald, with all four communities.

And two weeks ago Maureen Dowd, the Pulitzer Prize winning columnist for the New York Times, delivered a talk at Bishop's about the U.S. election which was accessible to all four campuses.

Next week, we will join together for the first time under the Maple League banner for student recruitment events in Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver.

And we recently submitted a joint paper to the Federal Panel on Fundamental Science Review, arguing for more equitable funding for research at undergraduate universities.

Those are only a sample of the initiatives that we have taken or are considering implementing.

In the Maple League we don't believe that bigger is necessarily better.

We don't believe that MOOCs - Massive Online Open Courses - are the future of higher education.

But we do believe that we can use technology to bridge the distances between our campuses.

We intend to use technology to sustain our intimate learning environments - not to destroy them.

We are building and equipping classrooms with cutting-edge video technology to bring our students and faculty together for unique learning experiences.

Our small, identical, custom-built classrooms will allow our students to take courses at other Maple League university without ever leaving their campus.

This fall, students at Bishop's are learning Greek with a professor in a classroom at Mount Allison.

In the winter, Maple League students will be able to enroll in a Mi'kmaq language course being taught at StFX, and a Genocide and Justice course with a professor at Acadia.

In the summer, we will expand our offerings by making it possible for students from any Maple League school to take experiential courses:

They will be able to study Shakespeare at Bishop's before traveling to Stratford to see the plays performed and go behind the scenes to meet the directors, actors and artisans;

They will be able to enroll in a course to learn about sustainable foodways at Acadia's farm;

They will be able to study the ecology of the Bay of Fundy and northeastern Nova Scotia through a biology field course given jointly by Acadia and St FX; and

They will be able travel to a Buddhist monastery in Cape Breton to experience reflective practices.

These initiatives will build on the foundation of collaboration we have already put in place.

Students from the four universities have participated in a variety of Maple League events:

- StFX hosted a Student Leadership Forum.
- Acadia hosted a conference on undergraduates' involvement with research.
- Mt A hosted a conference on upper-year students contributions to undergraduate teaching; and
- Bishop's has hosted debating and business case competitions

This is just the beginning.

Our first collaborations have galvanized our communities in myriad and unexpected ways.

Faculty members in the same discipline are connecting with each other.

Student services are sharing best practices on issues such as mental health, sexual assault and alcohol and drug abuse.

Our student associations are exploring how they can work together

Our administrations are discussing how we can learn from each other.

Our faculty, staff, and students continue to propose ideas that are bold in their ambition and thrilling to imagine.

Just before I conclude, I would like to say a few words about our new name.

When we formed our alliance three years ago, we considered calling ourselves the Maple League.

But we feared that it was a bit pretentious; that we might be seen as being overly ambitious.

So we adopted the less-than inspiring generic name “the U4 League.”

Three years later we are much more confident in ourselves and more comfortable with adopting a name which reflects our ambitions.

We don’t pretend to be the equivalent of the Ivy League.

But we do share the same values and determination to be the very best.

The model of the small, residential, undergraduate university is rare in Canada but is prevalent in the United States.

Amherst, Bowdoin, Middlebury, Swarthmore, Williams and Wellesley are amongst the highest regarded universities in the United States.

We believe that Canada needs this type of university.

In fact we would like to see more universities like ours across Canada.

But the American schools I just mentioned are all private universities.

The Maple League universities are public institutions.

We are elite undergraduate institutions.

But we are not institutions for the elite.

We are public universities committed to providing the best possible education for undergraduates from across Canada and around the world.

Our graduates have contributed to virtually every aspect of Canadian society.

The four Maple League universities have each been providing our model of education for more than 160 years.

We are older than Canada itself.

We believe that we offer the best undergraduate experiences in Canada and we are determined to get even better.

We are confident that this alliance will continue to grow to the benefit of our students and to the benefit of higher education in Canada.

With your support and the support of our faculty, staff, students and alumni, we can say with confidence that Acadia, Bishop's, Mount Allison, and StFX – the universities of the Maple League – will continue to light the way for undergraduate education in Canada.