

**The University and Community Learning
Keynote Address to the Canadian Club
Fort Garry Hotel
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Speaking notes for Dr. Lloyd Axworthy

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Thank you for the invitation. The Canadian Club has long been the premier forum where we have gathered for serious dialogue about our community and I'm honoured to be asked to be a part of the ongoing conversation. I've been here before in the dim past when I was following a different kind of vocation -- usually talking about things international. But this afternoon I want to spend time talking about what is close to home -- to talk about our city. I'm not here to discuss pot holes or property taxes, as important as they may be. I'm here as a university president to talk about an idea for our city and province that I hope will be a signal for action.

It's a responsibility that we in the University have from time to time to present an idea that sets out a pathway that carries us forward to look not where we've been, but where we are going to go. In a speech to the Royal Society in 1947 Harold Innis, Canada's great economist cautioned that we not fall prey to what the philosophers call the law of Minerva's owl: that the owl flies at dusk... that we recognize important signs of issues still to come too late to respond. As a result we fall back on old answers or react out of haste and lack of forethought and inattention. Or simply get caught flat-footed.

A modern version of that is, not surprisingly, called risk assessment -- an attempt to get ahead of the curve and raise sights to a further horizon. Those who don't pay attention to their changing environment and recognize the portents will run aground.

So what is this idea and why should you spend any time thinking about it? It is called community learning and it's a way of helping us to see our future and its possibilities and make decisions on how to shape that future. The Greeks had a saying that first we shape our cities then they shape us.

In many ways we are already doing pretty well. Winnipeg is coming into its own in defining a very active and forward looking place, especially in positioning us as distinctive player in an ever increasing global interdependent system of urban regions that are becoming the prime areas of action in the 21st century. Upwards of 80 percent of the growth in this new century will be in urban areas and this will be where we in large part determine our security, our well being and our quality of life.

I think we are experiencing here, through a series of public and private decisions, the globalizing of our community -- and by that I just don't mean those areas confined by the boundaries of the city, but all the related, connected towns and regions that are part of the extended network of growth and development that reaches into our southern and western

farmlands and our northern communities. All of us are touched by the globalizing process, as we are reminded every day when we read the economic news, take a flue shot, or care about the welfare of our troops in far off Afghanistan.

And there are some very well thought out and exciting developments that give us new definition and make us real players. We are at the center of the global public health system, we are building a museum that will make us a global human rights center, through Center Port we are claiming a stake in global trade, and we are increasingly recognized as a hub of creative arts and culture.

We are also at the center of one of the most powerful and far reaching forces of globalization – the vast movement of people which in many ways is the driver in changing who we are and what we do. Demographics, the human dimension of change in our city, is a strong and powerful current that is carrying significant consequences and many questions.

Witness, for example, the arrival of new Canadians – more than 10,000 per year – to our city and province. This increase in immigration is having a transformational effect on the life our city, as is the dramatic growth in the number of Indigenous peoples. Winnipeg is home to more Aboriginal people than in any major city in Canada – approximately 70,000 according to the latest census numbers. Visible minorities now make up close to 20% of our city population. Winnipeg’s African and Caribbean populations are growing at nine times the rate of the city’s population as a whole.

These demographic changes are having big social, cultural, economic and political impacts on our city, bringing a pool of diverse, talented, young and creative people that have the potential of transforming our place in the world. This is where a judgment has to be made about how we will move forward. Will we react proactively to ensure that the transitions occasioned by these population movements are successful ones? Or will we forget the law of Minerva’s Owl and be caught flat-footed?

There are some very positive signs. In a recent Environics poll, a majority of Canadians identified ways in which ethnic diversity has been positive for their city, citing its contribution to culture and the arts and the way diverse ethnic communities make the city more interesting and dynamic.¹

In a study on Winnipeg, our University’s Parvin Ghorayshi points out that at one level of analysis, for Aboriginal peoples and recent immigrant groups, the inner city of Winnipeg is not a place of despair, as is too often depicted, but “a space of politics, grassroots activism and empowerment”, witnessed by “the emergence of a growing number of community-based organizations created and run by Aboriginal peoples and various ethnic groups.” She writes that there are over seventy Aboriginal organizations in Winnipeg, creating transformative spaces for the Aboriginal population.²

¹ Urban Canadians and Quality of Life in the City: Environics Survey, Commissioned by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation in collaboration with The Global Cities Program and the Cities Centre at the University of Toronto

² Parvin Ghorayshi, *Globalization and Globalizing Cities, Implications for Social Justice and Democratic Governance*, May 2009

But there is another side. Let me give one example. Aboriginal peoples are twice as likely to drop out of high school than their non-Aboriginal counterparts and more than three times less likely to have a university degree. And a recent report from the Millennium Scholarship Foundation points out that, despite efforts from schools, governments and community groups, this educational gap continues to widen rather than to narrow.³

At the same time, there is a great appetite for education among the Aboriginal community. In our many conversations with residents of our inner-city neighbourhood, one of the most important findings has been that Aboriginal peoples strongly believe in the importance of education and its transformational effect as one of the biggest drivers for empowerment, for securing a job and financial stability. Yet they report financial obstacles, curriculum that is not reflective of their history and culture, and a lack of moral and emotional support for those pursuing a post secondary degree.

This is undermining both the future of the University – by reducing the pool of potential students – as well as the future of the economic and social health of the broader community by denying the potential of a highly talented young workforce to replace those who are retiring.

According to the Centre for the Study of Living Standards: “if in 2017 the educational attainment of Aboriginal Canadians reaches the same level non-Aboriginal Canadians had attained in 2001, the potential contribution of Aboriginal Canadians is up to an additional cumulative \$160 billion over the 2001-2017 period (2001 dollars).” This represents an increase of 21.5 billion (2001 dollars) in 2017 alone.⁴

There is another reason for concern, and that is the increasing distance and separation of the overall population from these new developments and the fragmentation of the city into separate enclaves both geographically and perceptually. We are becoming less of an interdependent community that understands one another and communicates – indeed dialogues – but one that is dividing into more and more isolated islands that do not understand one another.

As Parvin Ghorayshi relates in her study “there is evidence that a multiethnic city with few connections across ethnic boundaries is very vulnerable to disorder”. In fact she points out based on a series of interviews here in the city that “isolation of people in separate spaces can lead not just to a lack of sympathy, but to misinformation and misunderstanding.”⁵

My reason for relating this overview of changes and challenges is to focus on the issue of how we can meet the needs of this challenging but dynamic landscape. How are we are

³ *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada*, Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation

⁴ Andrew Sharp, Jean-Francois Arsenault and Simon Lapointe, ‘The Potential Contribution of Aboriginal Canadians to Labour Force, Employment, Productivity and Output Growth in Canada, 2001-2017, *Centre for the Study of Living Standards*, CSLS Research Report No. 2007-04, p. 6

⁵ Ghorayshi

re-inventing ourselves to meet the challenge? This takes me back directly to the idea of community learning. It is not only a way of developing the human talent of the community to meet the economic and labour challenges of the future in new and exciting ways, but also a way of beginning to transcend and bridge the separations that divide and to learn about each other in terms of culture, identity and common destiny so we have a city that works on an inclusive, shared agenda.

That is what we as a university in a downtown urban setting are now developing: a capacity to extend our hand to community and, through a variety of partnerships, to have an impact on the learning experience of a significant number of people beyond the conventional orbit of University programming.

To begin, it is crucial to understand why the notion of community learning is so important to The University of Winnipeg. Our history as an institution set up to bring learning to the early settlements endows a basic commitment to community. We also recognize deeply the responsibilities that bear on all institutions occupying the lands of Treaty One to advance educational opportunities for First Nations people.

What has been a particular lesson for me coming into the University from an outside career is the immense potential that exists within the infrastructure, and among students, staff and faculty to be an anchor or hub of innovative community related learning activities. In a very real way we are extending our mandate as a public institution. And in the process we are substantially adding to the learning experience of our students. There is a reciprocal, mutually reinforcing, benefit.

Community learning describes the active integration of the university into the social, cultural and educational life of the community. It employs a holistic approach that recognizes the responsibility of the university to function in an accessible manner and to open itself up to the wide diversity of knowledge and experience represented within society.

Broadly, community learning at the University of Winnipeg includes:

- 1) the provision of innovative learning opportunities for various populations currently underrepresented in the University population;
- 2) the use of the resources of the University to analyze and address social, economic, cultural and environmental issues in partnership with community organizations and other groups;
- 3) the cultivation of dynamic and reciprocal relationships between the campus and the surrounding community in which University resources are used to facilitate community-university learning development in ways that are sustainable in social, economic, cultural and environmental terms and;
- 4) the understanding that these initiatives serve as learning opportunities for our students and others from within a broad range of local and global communities.

As part of this work, we are in the midst of a major effort to refurbish campus facilities and consolidate programs currently scattered around the city into a more coherent University Learning Commons with a distinctive physical identity and centralized services. This was a major thrust of our campus development plan of four years ago. Now nearing completion, this renewal is helping to reinforce broader efforts to strengthen the downtown and nurture the economic and social fibre of Winnipeg's inner city.

[Move to slides]

- Bill Wedlake Fitness Centre
- SOMA Café
- CanWest Centre for Theatre and Film
- New green space and recreational areas
- Science Complex and Richardson College for the Environment
- McFeetors Hall: Great West Life Student Residence
- UWSA day care centre
- The ANX
- 460 Portage Avenue

So while we are actively engaged in refurbishing the physical space we occupy in the downtown and Spence Neighbourhood, we are also creating opportunities for community learning every step of the way.

We have been especially focused on addressing the barriers faced by individuals who have not been able to access resources or whose needs are not fully addressed within conventional school and educational structures. We endeavour to reach beyond the traditionally structured, classroom-oriented, lecture-based and timetabled concept of education into one that is much more inclusive.

We work to assist public schools in meeting academic standards and improving high school graduation rates, to reach out to adult learners using innovative career-based programming, to support newcomers in their transition to post-secondary education, and to create opportunities for retirees and seniors to engage in dynamic learning experiences.

The catalyst for the development of our Community Learning strategy was the adoption of a broad sustainability strategy that has as its ultimate goal the creation of a truly sustainable campus by our Board of Regents in 2006.

We were inspired in this work by the Office of Sustainability Programs (OSP) at the University of New Hampshire. At the centre of UNH's work is the concept of a *Sustainable Learning Community*, a term employed "to acknowledge the straightforward and educationally profound fact that the community teaches."⁶

Thus, if we think about *all* activity at the University as an educational opportunity, then a culture of cooperation and partnerships can be formed, providing unparalleled learning

⁶ Kelly, Tom, *Building a Sustainable Learning Community at the University of New Hampshire*, http://www.vink.helsinki.fi/files/Theoria_building.html,

opportunities and rallying everyone on campus and in the community around common goals, projects and learning experiences.

To give you a few examples of our work:

In recognition of the importance of early intervention, we have created an Innovative Learning Centre (ILC) that brings a host of young students from the inner-city and North End into the University to participate in a series of unique learning initiatives for inner-city, Aboriginal and new Canadian youth designed to close the graduation gap by helping students to develop their potential, increase academic achievement, and inspire a desire to learn.

During the regular school year, students from local elementary and high schools are engaged in our Eco-Kids and Enviro Techs programs which provide on-campus learning experiences in science, sustainability, human rights and community engagement.

Over the past three years, almost 2000 children have participated in the ILC's Eco-U Summer Camp initiative – one of the largest day camps in the city for inner-city and Aboriginal children and youth in Winnipeg. Campers are engaged in a full slate of activities from traditional dance, to participating in smudging ceremonies and traditional Aboriginal storytelling, to environmental science and sustainability experiments. These direct community learning activities have been augmented this past year with perhaps our most innovative and complex program: a Model School set up in cooperation with the University's Collegiate High School and based on successful models developed in Chicago and several other jurisdictions in the United States.

The idea was to involve students of potentially high achievement who were at high risk of dropping out of the regular school system, who had dropped out, or who were running into behavioural problems, addictions or criminal activity. The first intake of 20 students took place last fall and 26 students are registered this year. In April, we celebrated the first three graduates of the Model School. It was a powerful experience to see these students cross the stage to receive their diploma.

To deal with the fundamental issue of financial need we created an Opportunity Fund. The Opportunity Fund allows us to establish tuition credit accounts for participating students in which the University will register credit for specific academic or community achievement. Children earning these credits can apply them toward a post-secondary education when they graduate from high school.

The Opportunity Fund organizers also use community meetings to introduce families to the special low-income RESP offered by the federal government, and to facilitate their ability to register by helping them secure birth certificates, SIN numbers and bank accounts.

A secondary component of the Opportunity Fund is a fast-track bursary option that offers students financial support through a relatively quick and simple process when they are endorsed by a community group. The values of these bursaries vary for each student depending on need, but can be given to a maximum of \$5000. More than 150 students

are receiving funding this year, and our first three opportunity fund students graduated from the University in the spring.

To supplement these initiatives the University maintains, on an ongoing basis, the Wii Chiiwaakanak Learning Centre, a drop-in center for inner-city residents managed by our Aboriginal Student Services Centre. Wii Chiiwaakanak offers free computer access along with complementary academic programs, traditional language programs, Elders circles, and a homework club in the Helen Betty Osborne building on Ellice Avenue.

We have established a mirror program to help meet the needs of newcomers. The Global Welcome Centre, (GWC) which is directly supported by the Manitoba Department of Labour and Immigration, assists new Canadians in preparation for learning activities and other transitional issues. The GWC offers a university preparation course, mentorship and tutoring programs, computer skills classes and an Immigrant Access Advisor to provide academic advice and support tailored to the needs of newcomers and refugees.

These efforts at community learning have convinced us that impacts on both the community and the University are positive and that these initiatives have added a new dimension to our role as an urban University in our mandate to tackle the unique challenges of our times.

It has also taught us a great deal about how to make more effective use of the resources and infrastructures of the University, and about how to form community partnerships. It has suggested that partnerships involving a combination of various techniques of intervention can make a difference in outlook and achievement.

But the innovation does not stop there. This first tranche of projects has encouraged us to take additional steps that broaden the concept of community learning. One was the launch this summer of another level of initiatives that support, complement and enhance the first wave.

We have created Diversity Foods, a unique University food service that has hired and trained local inner-city residents who will ultimately be eligible to own 25 percent of the stock in the company and whose mandate is to supply locally grown, diverse menus that fit the contemporary needs of our multi-ethnic campus. Diversity Foods is owned by the UWCRC as a joint venture partner with SEED, a community-based economic development organization.

Our Global College and Criminal Justice department are setting up a community-based legal centre in partnership with the University of Manitoba Law School and Faculty of Social Work to provide inner-city residents with the knowledge and expertise to learn of the various rights they have before tribunals, regulatory bodies and the courts and to assist them in accessing those rights. A sitting judge from the Superior Court will take a sabbatical to act as mentor in this program.

Our Global College hosted an international human rights conference in 2007 attended by hundreds of Winnipeggers - from which a task force grew to formulate strategies for building Winnipeg into a human rights city. Our Global College also worked with young

leaders of African origin to organize Winnipeg's first conference of African youth. This has led to the creation of a community/academic steering committee that is developing a participatory action research proposal to address gang recruitment and other barriers to higher education experienced by Winnipeg's African youth.

There is no one model that fits all. Yet, I would assert that each university must take into its distinctive approaches to education an element of community learning in order to effectively tackle the access issue. One of the ways we earn our keep is by extending the immense capacity of the public institutions to participate in the major change underway and the increasing demand that there be an opportunity for learning in society.

I hope that these efforts at our University can help point the way and begin redefining the mission of universities and other organizations in their community.

As *the* downtown university we have a responsibility to address these important issues of the 21st century. We have worked on the basis of partnership and we have achieved some success. But we have to be more innovative. Our efforts combined have just not been good enough. We must take the lessons learned that community learning is a way to engage people from all walks of life, ages and interests and use our combination of resources to build seamless, connected learning systems that ensure everyone has a chance.

In doing so, we must enlist the schools, the community organizations, the universities and colleges in a comprehensive learning partnership in our downtown neighbourhood both to build skills and enhance talents but also to build bridges and integrate our efforts so that we become a community of learners – learning about each other and learning what our duties and responsibilities are as citizens.

This will take a much stronger leadership role from local government and authorities and become the basis of a locally driven strategy to bring together the individual efforts underway into a much more coherent neighbourhood initiative on community learning.

This in my mind is one of the ways to take on the gangs and the free riders, and corrupters. Will it cost money? Yes, but far less than we have to pay if the fragmentation of lives and communities continues to grow.

And it will take dialogue – the place we started this luncheon with to ensure that all voices are heard, that we listen to the new voices in our community and that we build a system where the full talent and rich heritage of our newcomers become part of the identity of all of us.

Karen Armstrong, the well known theologian, writing this last week in the Guardian, reminded us of the great wisdom of engaging in Socratic dialogue where we put ourselves in the place of others. She writes that people must face their own fundamental biases through interchange with their neighbour, reminding us that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Taking her view and applying it to the city, she calls for a Charter of Compassion. Compassion does not mean pity. It means to experience with others, treating all others as you would wish to be treated. It requires a principled, ethical, and imaginative effort to put self interest aside and stand in somebody else's shoes. This means engaging in a broad based effort to create the methods and the means of community learning in Winnipeg, demonstrating to the world that diversity and equity for all become the building blocks for a strong city, not the source of division and despair.

As a Winnipegger, I am like all of you. Deep down we love this community. We know we live in one of the privileged places on earth that we are now sharing with new people and new generations. This place has such great promise – let's not waste it. As citizens, we have a responsibility to use our talents to make this a better place when we leave it than it was when we began here. Thank you for listening to an idea of where we should set our sights for Minerva's owl and just not follow in her flight plan.