This summer, professor Jamie Cassels took up his tenure as president of the University of Victoria. Cassels previously served as our vice-president academic and provost from 2001 to 2010 after joining the UVic Faculty of Law in 1981. The university community is very excited to have Cassels—an accomplished scholar, teacher and administrator—at the helm. Business Class sat down with Cassels this summer and asked him about his new position, his vision for the Gustavson School and what he’s looking forward to in his new post.

BC: What attracted you to the position of president?
JC: What wouldn’t attract you to this role? The University of Victoria has received international distinction as one of Canada’s best universities. It’s recognized for the high quality of the education that we provide, the research impact that we have, our engagement with our communities and our international activities. It’s just a great university at which to be a teacher, a scholar, or even an administrator! I see the presidency essentially as an opportunity to serve. Education is an important undertaking and this is a time when there are some significant challenges and some significant opportunities, so it’s a wonderful chance to try to make a difference.

BC: What do you see as the biggest challenge facing UVic and post-secondary institutions in the next five years?
JC: The world continues to shrink and become more competitive, while at the same time becoming more complex. The world economy and the national economy are still stumbling towards recovery; governments are dealing with scarce revenue and rising costs and new technologies are emerging that challenge the way everybody does things. These trends affect universities directly and immediately. My sense is that the public—whether that’s students, parents, taxpayers or legislators—have appropriately increasing expectations for what we can do and for how we can serve our social role. I think the challenge—and it’s a welcome challenge—is to continue to strive to meet those ever-increasing expectations.

BC: What do you see as the role of the business school at UVic?
JC: I think that the Gustavson School of Business is an absolutely critical part of the university. What makes a great
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university? Strong faculty members who are dedicated to both research and teaching, and an excellent broad-based undergraduate liberal arts and science program, with real strength in key graduate and professional areas. Gustavson has established itself as one of our key professional and graduate schools and absolutely fits within that model of what makes for a great university. The faculty members are fine scholars and teachers. The undergraduate program offers pathways for students from many different disciplines and the programs in the Gill Graduate School are innovative and very high quality.

BC: How does the business school support UVic’s values?
JC: The business school has done a fantastic job of not only defining its own identity and areas of strength, but doing it in a way that aligns with the university’s strategic vision. The emphasis on experiential education (mandatory co-op) is something that the university signals as a distinctive strength. Gustavson also has incredible strength in international partnerships and education—something that the university also wants to feature. This is true in the Gill Graduate School, especially with the new Master of Global Business. The school takes a broad and integrated approach to business education and focuses on social, environmental and ethical implications of business practice. This also aligns perfectly with where the university is going. It’s always a challenge for a faculty to define and maintain its identity, but the business school has done this very effectively, and that’s nicely embedded in the broader vision we have for this university.

BC: There is a societal trend that places more value on professional education. We believe arts and humanities trained grads are critical to business success. How can we help promote that balance?
JC: First of all, the business school actively encourages students to take a fairly broad approach to their education and is well integrated with our arts and science programs. The 2+2 program is flexible, it’s encouraging, it lets students sample a fairly wide variety of things and the school also partners with other parts of the university to deliver its programs. I resist the dichotomies of “liberal arts versus professions” or “universities versus skilled trades.” I think it’s [business author] Jim Collins, who talks about the tyranny of the “or.” For me it’s not arts and science or business. As a country we need it all. We need the skilled trades, we need the fine arts, we need the professions, we need hard sciences and we need engineering. We need entrepreneurs and business managers and we need different people to pursue different pathways depending on their skills and passions.

BC: Do you find employers agree?
JC: I talk to business leaders all the time who tell me they wouldn’t for a minute have given up their undergraduate bachelor of science or their undergraduate philosophy degree because they provide a great basis for whatever you’re going to do in life. The business school encourages that kind of thinking. My undergraduate degree is in philosophy; it helped me to learn how to think systematically. My professional and graduate work is in law and that took me into a profession. I learned diesel mechanics at Camosun College in Victoria, which has helped me to repair the engine on my boat in situations where I needed that knowledge. We need it all. BC