



University
of Victoria

REPORT TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY ON CAMPUS CONVERSATIONS

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Introduction

Throughout the fall, I conducted a series of “campus conversations” designed to introduce myself to campus in my new role, learn more about the strengths and issues of concern in the various areas, and develop focus and priorities for the next five years. The process included 50+ meetings with faculty, staff and students across the university, and with alumni and members of the broader community. Many individuals also took the opportunity to contribute by email and through the website established for that purpose.

All-in-all, it was a tremendous experience for me as a new president to hear about the perspectives, aspirations and concerns of the university and broader community. In all my conversations, I was met with great thoughtfulness and collegiality and received well-considered input. This confirmed my view that our university’s core strength truly rests on the special combination of talented and dedicated people working in a collaborative and collegial environment.

I heard about strengths and accomplishments in all areas of the university, and the sense of pride and dedication that individuals have in the institution and their role within it. I learned much about those elements of our strategic plan that resonate well across campus and heard many excellent ideas regarding possible enhancements to our programs and practices. I also heard about the many challenges experienced in different areas of the university—concerns about the impact of budget cuts; the density of university processes; and as the university has grown in size and complexity, the challenge of communications across campus.

Conversations also frequently touched on other issues including the rapidly changing policy environment for research and education (including heightened public expectations regarding the outcomes for both education and research); demographic and global changes, including the decline in youth population, the expansion of university capacity locally and around the world, and increasing student mobility; a perception that we need to respond proactively to technological change (especially the effective use of educational technologies); and the increasingly competitive nature of research funding and other forms of support.

What I took away from my conversations across campus is that we have a strong foundation of excellence and a shared aspiration to further build a research-inspired learning community that is second to none. What emerged is that in order to achieve this we need to do three things:

- further focus and build on our strengths
- develop more robust and transparent planning processes and better align resources with priorities
- communicate and engage more effectively both internally and externally.

When launching the campus conversations series, I had expressed the desire to develop some further focus for our efforts. The strategic plan is, of course, the most important source for that focus and I heard a substantial degree of alignment with its overall direction—though with divergent emphasis in different areas, as would be expected. The strategic plan has 37 goals and 145 strategies, most of which are worth pursuing over time. However, we also need to *focus and prioritize* our efforts and take a sequenced approach to the many laudable initiatives in play.

I want to acknowledge right up front that in reading what follows many will be looking for their area or their preferred initiative—and may not find what they are looking for. This is not because those things are unimportant. Indeed, it might be because they are so important that they simply do not figure into a discussion about priorities and strategic choices. While much of what we do day-to-day is not usually referred to as a “strategic priority”, it is still mission-critical. Student records must be kept. Buildings must be kept safe and functional for work and education. Bills must be paid. All these things contribute importantly to our students’ experience and our social contribution; and for me a top priority is simply to do the many things we do on a day-to-day basis as best we can. The fact that these things are not mentioned below should not be taken as a sign that they are not fundamentally important. My purpose in what follows is to identify issues in need of special attention, and particularly attractive opportunities for quality improvement. The following are my reflections on those issues and opportunities.

Starting Assumption: Our Social Role and Fundamental Mission

My starting assumption, which I think is widely shared, is that the University of Victoria should always focus its planning around its obligations to its students and society and allocate its resources so as to produce the best outcomes for the students and communities we serve. Today’s students are looking to us to help them fulfill their learning, career and life ambitions in a more globalized and rapidly changing world. Society is also looking to us for talent, new ideas and solutions to help address today’s and tomorrow’s economic, social, cultural, technological and environmental questions, opportunities and challenges. We can meet those expectations and should always test our choices and actions against them, and against our aspiration to make the world a better place through our mission of education and research.

The public has appropriately high expectations of its universities and there are correspondingly high levels of scrutiny and accountability. Universities have had and continue to enjoy high levels of regard and support. But we have not always fully communicated our commitment to serve our students and society, or our openness to hearing about how we can do those things better. I believe the scrutiny universities currently face gives the University of Victoria an opportunity to show ourselves to be leaders in serving our students, our community and society.

Looking for Focus and Building on Strengths

1. “A University of Choice”

The strategic plan expresses the University of Victoria’s vision to be:

“...a university of choice for outstanding students, faculty and staff from British Columbia, Canada and the world. We aspire to be the Canadian university that best integrates outstanding scholarship, inspired teaching and real life involvement. As members of a diverse and dynamic learning community we challenge one another to become thoughtful, engaged citizens and leaders, prepared to contribute to the betterment of a rapidly changing global society.”

It was gratifying to find that this does in fact resonate well across campus. The aspiration to be a “university of choice” characterized by the integration of scholarship, teaching (and learning) and real-life involvement—all with the goal of contributing to individual and social betterment—is widely shared.

Being a “university of choice” is both a mark of quality and a strategic imperative given UVic’s size, location and ambition. By this I mean that we need to attract faculty, students and staff proportionate to our ambitions as a comprehensive, research-intensive university—and therefore reaching well beyond our geographic location and regional demographic trends.

As a mid-sized research-intensive university aiming for national and international impact across many disciplines, UVic’s reach for students must match its ambitions. Demographic, global and technological trends—including a shrinking youth population, increased regional and global university capacity, and online education—make it imperative that we focus on the goal of being a university of choice. We must ask ourselves why faculty, staff and students choose UVic over the many other fine universities in Canada (and the world for that matter) and how we can build on those factors to add to our stature as a university of choice.

2. Building on Excellence in Education for Undergraduate and Graduate Students

Students rightly expect that their education will help them fulfill their learning, career and life ambitions in a rapidly changing world. UVic excels in educating students in a high quality research-inspired learning environment, enriched by experiential learning and community involvement. Our first priority must be to build on our strength in undergraduate and graduate education by continuing to promote excellence in teaching and learning overall, and emphasizing areas of strength that may further differentiate us when students are making their “choice.”

Every faculty and staff member will contribute in different ways, but each one of us shares the goal of providing our students with a superb education. Our energies as teachers, support staff and administrators should always be directed towards the goal of creating the best educational environment possible—in the classroom and beyond. Additionally, there are several differentiating strengths identified in the strategic plan and affirmed widely across campus that present key opportunities to offer a superior student experience. These include:

Our size and character as a learning community: UVic is big enough to have a national and international reach and impact, yet small enough to offer a more collegial, welcoming and personalized learning and working environment—and one that is further distinguished by a commitment to mutual respect, equity and diversity, campus collaboration, and engagement with the community. It was striking to me how our character as a “right-sized learning community” resonated in my discussions. We are able to aim for internationally benchmarked excellence in *both* education and research, in an *integrated* way, and on a *human scale*, allowing for the development of community and connections. In other words, we are large enough to matter and small enough to care. Building on this strength requires a renewed focus on services and strategies aimed at creating engagement, effective support, connections and community both on and off campus. It implies that we will not pursue further aggregate growth in student population, though allowing for growth in targeted areas and a desired recalibration of graduate and undergraduate targets more in keeping with our focus on research-intensity.

Integrating research and education: The promise made by research-intensive universities is that the research environment and culture enrich the educational experience for students by creating an intellectual vibrancy, and learning opportunities, that would not otherwise be available. UVic is already known as a leader in this regard. Building on this strength will require a sustained and overarching plan to align our programs of research and instruction as closely as possible. Every student should be exposed to the intellectual stimulation of our research culture, should have the opportunity to engage in research, and learn research-related habits and aptitudes including curiosity, systematic problem solving, information acquisition and organization, analysis, communication and continuous learning [SP 13(b) and (c), 14(a)]. These are the skills that we aim to develop in students to serve them for a lifetime, no matter what their pathway or ultimate destination. Additionally, areas where the university has invested substantially in research programs and infrastructure should be optimized for the educational opportunities they can also provide.

Experiential learning: UVic is recognized as a leader in experiential learning, giving students a substantial opportunity to apply or experience their learning in a hands-on way. This is achieved in a number of ways, including work-integrated learning through co-op, clinics, practica, internships, community-engaged learning, study abroad, field schools and research experiences. The opportunity for a student to experience the meaning, application and relevance of their learning in a hands-on fashion helps to cement that learning, motivates further learning and leads them to discover relevant pathways for their future. It also builds bridges with the community and mobilizes education for the benefit of society. Building on this strength requires exploring how we can offer all UVic students some form of substantial experiential learning [SP 18, 19].

The student experience: In addition to building on our programmatic strength as outlined above, it is important to move on several key initiatives in the strategic plan aimed at building support for student success and the overall student experience. The rapid growth in graduate enrolments over the past five years indicates the need to shape these in a way that will be of maximum benefit to the students. Attention must be given to supervisory capacity, and to the alignment of programs with areas of research excellence and/or positive post-graduate outcomes. This will ensure that graduate students have the best experience possible and conversely that they are able to contribute to research and the undergraduate program as much as possible. Challenges exist at the undergraduate level as well. Especially in light of the reduction of upper-year transfer students (due to increased university capacity elsewhere in the province) and a measurable need for improved student recruitment and retention in the earlier years, priority should be assigned to

those elements of the plan focusing on student success initiatives, including the quality of the first and second-year student experience [SP 13(a); 16].

At both the graduate and undergraduate levels, other key elements of the strategic plan emerge as requiring focus:

- Given that roughly 75 per cent of our students come from away, it is critical to move ahead on the plan to expand **student housing** [SP 2(d)];
- To maintain accessibility and to attract a diverse group of talented students, student **financial support** will remain a key priority at both the graduate and undergraduate level and a focus of our philanthropic work and government advocacy [SP 2(b); 4(a) and (b)];
- With some notable exceptions, we may be “behind the curve” in relation to the use of **educational technology**, and we need to move ahead to develop an institutional plan to better harness technology in support of education [SP 12(f); 27(a); 15];
- We are nationally renowned for our efforts to create greater access and support for **Indigenous students** and must continue to build on that [SP 3]; and
- Given our success in attracting **international students**, we now have an obligation to ensure that they are welcomed, integrated into our community and properly supported to succeed [SP 16(d); 20(g)].

3. Building on Excellence in Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity

We must also build on UVic’s strength in the quality and impact of its research endeavours. Our faculty achieve excellent results in research, scholarship and creative activity, and this success builds our reputation worldwide, helps to attract excellent faculty, staff and students to our university, enriches our educational programs and makes important contributions to society. We can build on that success.

Supporting research: As a comprehensive research university, we have research-active faculty aligned with every educational program and we need to support researchers across our academic spectrum. However, the capacity of both our researchers and the support and service areas upon which they depend is stretched by our researchers’ very success. The rapid increase in research activity, including the development of major new research programs and platforms, has created challenges of sustainability. This is exacerbated by the increasingly complex regulatory environment and requirements relating to compliance and accountability, and by the national and international trend towards more complex and collaborative research programs. While continuing to search for new resources, we need to examine the way existing resources are allocated, and develop more transparent (and more strategic) understandings of how, when and where support and services are provided. We must review our processes and support systems to ensure that resources are put to their best use and processes streamlined as much as possible. We must also enhance communications so that “support” is felt as such, and not perceived as an obstacle [SP 21].

Focus, collaboration, knowledge mobilization and community engagement: Society expects us to contribute talent, ideas and solutions to economic, social, cultural, technological and environmental challenges. Whether our research is aimed directly at specific results, or motivated by pure curiosity; whether it is experimental science or artistic performance, disciplinary or interdisciplinary, we focus on issues and questions that matter and we seek to make a difference.

Affirming the responsibility to do research that matters does not preordain a preference for any particular method, discipline or question; and as I have said, we must support researchers across

the full range of our academic programs. However, we also need to better identify clusters of strength, and articulate areas of focus and direction. Doing so is not exclusive, and does not foreclose the development of emergent areas, but it is necessary to help us achieve maximum impact, deliver more effectively on our mission, and plan for the future. For example, we excel in socially responsive research, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, notably in research on problems related to environmental and social wellbeing. These areas of excellence align very well with our students' obvious passion for engagement with environmental and social issues, and our institutional commitments to sustainability and community engagement. In addition, our willingness to collaborate, focus, and engage in this fashion will demonstrate our responsiveness to the social appetite for knowledge mobilization and our own goals of community engagement. It will also position us to take advantage of the international trend to concentrate research investment to achieve greater impact and encourage partnerships.

An institutional research plan: The needs expressed above point to the importance of making it a priority to develop a research plan that addresses both strategic and operational issues [SP 22]. This plan will articulate goals, measures and areas of research focus as discussed above. It will be coordinated with academic plans to ensure that academic hiring builds both research and educational capacity in an integrated way in order to further align our programs of research, education and community engagement. It will attend to the need to provide research support in the most effective ways and assist with planning the further development of research services and infrastructure. It will address the ways to best position our researchers for success in obtaining the support they need and will facilitate funding support, collaboration and partnerships and the mobilization of our research for social benefit.

4. Building on Strengths in People: Faculty and Staff Issues

The strategic plan acknowledges that *people* are the university's greatest strength and the key to achieving quality. The goal is to attract and support the best faculty and staff so as to best advance the university's mission and promise.

UVic's collegial and supportive working environment is one of its greatest strengths. However, the substantial growth of our university, recent budget cuts and external pressures, salary restraint and imperfect communications have created pressures that need to be addressed.

Faculty employment relations issues rarely came up explicitly during my consultations, but since they are matters of concern across campus, they were a notable subtext in many of my conversations. UVic faculty salaries are indeed low relative to other Canadian universities. Although this problem is largely the result of historical circumstances and of externally imposed constraints, it has resulted in some feeling undervalued. This must be addressed, albeit recognizing governmental and budget constraints. With a measure of regulatory flexibility, careful longer-range academic and budget planning, and with an eye always on what is best for our students and society, we will aim for improvement [SP 6(b) and (e)].

Sessional faculty and administrative and support staff also have legitimate concerns. They have borne the brunt of fiscal restraint in terms of reduced positions. Sessional faculty, who provide a substantial portion of our undergraduate teaching, also have concerns about compensation, inclusion, support and career advancement. Staff members in some support and service areas feel somewhat isolated and not fully integrated into the mission of the enterprise. I heard many express a strong desire for better communication across the units, greater involvement, and for more professional development opportunities. Again, it will be important to attend to these issues for all

employees, recognizing the fundamental roles staff play in supporting and contributing to the student experience, our research endeavours and our social contribution, while also recognizing that resources are constrained and that needs across the university have to be balanced [SP 7, 8, 11(c)].

Internal communications and relations are also in need of attention. For example, I heard often about misunderstandings and communications problems between faculty and staff in different areas. Changes in processes and policies in one area sometimes have unintended effects in other areas and are often accompanied by adaptive challenges. This again points to the importance of improved communications between different areas of the university, and close attention to managing change.

More generally on the issue of internal communications: budget cuts, salary and employment relations issues and the growth of the university in size and complexity can lead to misunderstandings and the imperfect resolution of differences and divergent interests. This has resulted in antagonism in some quarters towards the university's "administration", which has grown with the university's expansion in size and complexity and whose members are seen by some as having interests that are at odds with those of faculty. This is unfortunate since in my experience those in administration share the same values, care deeply about students and the social contribution that universities make, and recognize the fundamental importance of the work that faculty do. Those responsible for balancing all the competing needs and interests across the university will inevitably make decisions which require compromises and trade-offs. From the point of view of specific interests, those decisions may on occasion seem like a lack of support. And admittedly, the decisions will not always be perfect, and their underlying reasons can always be better communicated. But my experience is that they are made in good faith.

UVic's culture of respect, inclusion and collaboration is one of its greatest strengths and I believe that we must work together to sustain and build on that. It is important for everyone who works at the university to know that they are a valued part of a shared enterprise. The alignment of our efforts is the formula for success; working against one another is corrosive. Internal communication involving mutual exchange across and between different areas must be improved, and attention given to the ways in which legitimate but divergent interests and viewpoints can be respected, if not harmonized. Enhancing UVic's culture of respect, inclusion and collaboration requires the effort of everyone. The issue is existential—are we going to work together, and what kind of institution do we want to be?

Aligning and Optimizing Resources: Planning Tools and Transparency

Building on strengths requires that resources be aligned with priorities. This should be the case in good times and bad—but is probably most urgent in times of fiscal restraint. Like most universities across Canada, UVic finds its economic model is under stress. The government grant is flat or declining. Tuition increases are capped at 2 per cent. The result is that inflation (including salary increases) erodes the purchasing power of our operating budget. We must address the challenge of financial sustainability.

In addition to sustainability problems, it is apparent that many find the current planning and budgeting process somewhat opaque and desire greater transparency. Transparency—which allows everyone clearly to understand the rules of the game—will assist with local planning, and

also allow more effective participation in contributing to the general directions of the university. Additionally, there is a concern that we need more nuanced and strategically appropriate planning criteria. For example, an over-emphasis on enrolments as a determinant of resources may have unintended consequences such as discouraging collaboration or eroding academic standards.

Two possible answers to the sustainability challenge are to seek new resources through fundraising or to bring in new resources through continued enrolment growth. Fundraising is indeed an important part of every university's strategy and will be pursued vigorously. However, philanthropy does not eliminate the need to examine more closely how we resource core operations and to optimize the use of existing resources. Growth in student numbers (and associated revenue) helps (and kudos to those areas contributing to the achievement of our current goals); but growth beyond our existing plan is not the preferred strategy in light of demographic and competitive trends and the strategic sense that we are "right-sized." The strategic plan focuses on quality rather than quantity, and the reality therefore is that we need to continue to pursue quality even while per-student funding is likely to decline.

So in addition to pursuing new resources, we need to do better with the resources we have. I do not believe in the mantra that we can always "do more with less" or that there is no relation between resources and quality. However, as I frequently said in these conversations, we need to play the hand we've been dealt as best as we can. We cannot let resource constraints paralyze us—our students and society deserve better. And whether in a time of growth or restraint, it is critical to be clear about priorities and to align resources with those priorities, and also to ensure that we are always making the best use of existing resources.

Additionally, there is a strongly felt need across campus to understand how and why decisions are made and to have reliable, longer-term planning tools. Greater clarity around planning and around roles and responsibilities will also help to address frequently expressed concerns regarding slow and complex procedures.

In an earlier message to campus, I indicated that we will be reviewing our planning and budget practices with a view to developing a more transparent, data-driven process which will in turn provide academic and service areas with the tools to facilitate planning and better align resources with university priorities. This process will not be a "ranking" exercise such as those undertaken at a number of other Canadian universities, but will build upon existing program review and planning processes to make them more robust and transparent. It will aim at the development of a set of criteria and associated data that will assist academic and service planning and decision-making. These criteria will relate to the institutional values and priorities set out in the strategic plan and the goals I have outlined above—all as further developed through consultations.

In addition, I will also work with the vice-presidents and university leadership to look at our budget model to determine whether changes can and should be made to enhance transparency, to ensure that the right incentives are in place, and to minimize unintended negative consequences.

Internal and External Communications and Engagement

The University of Victoria is known and admired for offering a collegial and collaborative environment where individuals work well together across units and feel involved and valued in the enterprise. However, as the university has grown, especially in an era of rapid change externally and internally, we face challenges in maintaining our high levels of collaboration, engagement and collegiality. I have discussed some of these challenges above.

To address these challenges we must improve our internal communications and engagement processes. This is essential to overcome the sense that information is not shared and that university processes are slow and opaque. Effective communications also involves listening and must be two-way. Effective communications are essential to meet emerging challenges, to support change, and to maintain the sense of shared enterprise that is critical to organizational success and personal satisfaction.

External communications and engagement also need to be enhanced. As a destination university, and research-intensive university, UVic has a strategic imperative to reach broadly across the country and around the world. Reputational advancement is central to our success in attracting talented people to the university, connecting with our communities, obtaining the support we need and achieving our public mandate. Under the leadership of the Vice-President External Relations, we will update the university's approach to positioning and communications. Such an approach will focus on the quality of our programs of education and research, our differential strengths and our social contribution. Again, our external communications must be genuine and highly interactive: projecting our authentic strengths and contributions, being receptive to ideas and suggestions and conveying a strong commitment to our social responsibility and our obligations to our students and communities [SP 31(a) and (b); 32(a)].

Conclusion

In summary, we have an excellent foundation upon which to continue building. We can do that by continuing to focus on our tradition of excellence in undergraduate and graduate teaching and learning, taking advantage of UVic's size and character as a learning community and building on our particular strengths in experiential and research-enriched learning.

We will build on our strengths in research, scholarship and creative activity across the spectrum of our academic programs, and also in areas and clusters of particular strength. To do this effectively we must develop a research plan that addresses both the most pressing operational needs for research support, and the strategic needs relating to areas of focus, partnerships, knowledge mobilization and community engagement.

We must continue to build on UVic's greatest strength—its talented people and collegial environment. Faculty and staff concerns regarding support and inclusion must be addressed, along with compensation issues, albeit within the limits of governmental and budget constraints, and always with an eye to what is best for our students and the communities we serve. And we must all work together to maintain and enhance UVic's culture of inclusion, respect and collaboration.

Finally, we need to improve planning and communications. To do this requires that we develop more robust and transparent processes for academic, operational and budget planning, aim for a

more rigorous alignment of resources and priorities, and improve our mechanisms for two-way communication and engagement, both internally and externally. I will ask all academic and professional leaders across campus to work to enhance communications, and I will personally lead the way by making every effort to stay open and available and to continue the conversation.

Again, my deepest appreciation to everyone who was able to participate in these conversations, to help me to better understand our university and to develop further focus for the future. I hope this report will promote even greater alignment of our mutual efforts to make a substantial difference in the lives of our students, our communities and society. I look forward to continuing to work with you in the years ahead as we add to UVic's growing stature as one of Canada's finest universities.