

Convocation Address  
David W. Atkinson  
October 3, 2008

Mr. Chancellor, Minister Polak, Chief Gabriel, Mayor Watt, Mr. Heibert, Madame Chair, Distinguished guests and friends, colleagues, students, ladies and gentlemen:

Today is and will remain a memorable day for Kwantlen, as we gather at this Convocation to celebrate the beginning of a new university. This is not an everyday event, and all of us here should tuck the memory of today away as something that at once promises an amazing future, and that connects Kwantlen to a rich history of universities that goes back a thousand years. The regalia and ritual of Convocation connects us with the historic continuity of the past, and reaffirms that Kwantlen, while an institution that looks to the future, understands that whatever it becomes is the consequence of a history that goes well beyond a single institution, and that signifies the rich tradition of western intellectual culture. I thank everyone who has made the effort to be here today to be part of this important historic occasion.

That I can be part of this history is an enormous privilege, and I thank Kwantlen Polytechnic University, its Board of Governors, its Senate, its faculty and staff, and its students for allowing me to serve as the first University President of Kwantlen. At the same time, I wish to acknowledge Kwantlen's twenty-seven year history, first as Douglas College, and then as Kwantlen College and Kwantlen University College, and to recognize all those who have worked to build the foundation for the next exciting chapter of Kwantlen's history.

And finally, I extend my personal congratulations to Chancellor Bubber. We are honoured and grateful that you have agreed to serve as Kwantlen's first Chancellor. I, along with all my colleagues, look forward to working with you over the next few years, as together we take those first important steps as a university.

We know, too, that we are part of another important continuity. Our name, given so generously by the Kwantlen First Nation, is the single most important statement of our ambitions, which in large measure come to realization today. We have been "tireless runners" in getting to today. But we must remember that the most important thing about being a "tireless

runner” is that we are “tireless.” While today is a moment to stop, to celebrate, to feel good about ourselves, and perhaps even to take a deep breath, it is only a place on the way to another place. Tomorrow is another day of possibility, and we must grasp it. In keeping with its First Nations name, Kwantlen recognizes the richness of First Nations' learning and wisdom, the distinctiveness and dignity of its culture, and its resonance with the land of the Pacific coast, informing as it does our belief that we must remain committed to the celebration of all forms of cultural expression.

Madame Minister, I thank the government of British Columbia, which demonstrated the vision to create Kwantlen in the first place, and then ultimately to allow for its transformation into a University. We are very aware of the trust you have placed in us. We have every intention of fulfilling your expectations. But we must recognize that no university is created a university. Rather a university is something that occurs over time, as each institution takes on a character and a purpose, develops traditions and establishes roots. We look forward to the continuing support of the British Columbia government to ensure that Kwantlen flourishes in its own unique way as an institution in which everyone in the province is proud.

Madame Mayor, I thank you for your greetings from the City of Surrey. Kwantlen has been Surrey's institution for over twenty-seven years, and has always enjoyed a close relationship with its community. We have throughout this time been responsive to community need, and understood our responsibility to community. Today on this special day we reconfirm this commitment to working with you, with members of City Council, and with city officials in finding ways to enhance the quality of life in Surrey, as we make the same commitment to all the communities we serve in the South Fraser region.

Mr. Hiebert, on this occasion we recognize the federal government's historic commitment to higher education in Canada. While we know there are many pressing issues facing our country—health care, the environment, the economy—education remains the single necessary ingredient for a prosperous future.

We also recognize and encourage your government's continuing support of research and innovation. At Kwantlen, for example, we look forward to the opening of a new state-of-the-art research facility for sustainable agriculture on our Langley campus. Funded by the federal government through the

Canada Foundation for Innovation, this project confirms Kwantlen's commitment to applied research critical to the region we serve.

This is an extraordinary time at Kwantlen, as we work to transform the institution into a university. Our ambitions here are clear: we are not about to replicate what exists elsewhere. British Columbia, and indeed Canada, is blessed with a range of fine universities and colleges. Our goal is to find our particular place, so that our contribution is real and distinctive.

Our future depends on our ability to provide students with the learning and training necessary to ensure a future personal prosperity, and to provide our country and province with graduates that can contribute to their communities. While it is not all about jobs, Kwantlen remains committed to responding to labour market needs, even as we aim to provide education that prepares our students as much for life as it does for a career.

We must recognize that our student population has changed. Yes, the typical cohort of 18 to 23 year olds still exists, but increasingly students are older and more focused in their educational ambitions. A university education can still be an experience of self growth. But increasingly our students do not have four or five years. They are older, and carry a whole range of responsibilities unknown to students of even ten years ago. We must be aware of their needs and respond accordingly.

Even our younger students are looking for a different kind of education, one that goes beyond books and that incorporates a whole range of experiences. University education is an enormous investment of money, time, and energy, both by our students and by the public at large. In a world where we lack for security, there is, understandably, a concern about the future—what am I going to do when I finish university, how am I going to pay off my student loans, will I find a position or a job? We must be able to help our students find answers to these questions.

Education is a process of growth which is different for different people, and Kwantlen must provide opportunity for people with all manner of interests, ambitions, and abilities. It must remain true to the principle that education should be available to all those who wish to work hard and apply themselves. Kwantlen's commitment to open access must remain a cornerstone of its future as a university, as it works to provide an environment that encourages and supports all its students.

Our success as a university rests, ultimately, on those who work here—on our faculty and staff. It is their dedication and commitment that will be required for Kwantlen to flourish as a university in the coming years. We need to understand and appreciate that much change is in store for Kwantlen, and we must accept that this will engender insecurity about what lies ahead. But we need, too, to accept that insecurity is itself a powerful agent of change. Our responsibility is to provide an environment in which those who make up the Kwantlen community will have opportunity to grow and change indeed as the institution itself grows and changes.

On a day like today, one inevitably seems to fall back on clichés, oft used and singularly ineffective. But while they sometimes might seem empty, it is not that they do not, or did not initially at least, contain some element of truth. This is an important day for Kwantlen—it does signify achievement, it does suggest an important moment from which should come the awareness of what has been achieved and of what is yet to come. We have reached a milestone, an important plateau from which we can climb to additional achievements.

That one has the privilege of serving as President of a University is good fortune enough; to be the President of Kwantlen right now is good fortune quite unimaginable. To be with colleagues passionate about their work, to enjoy and celebrate in the success of our students, to know that what one does matters—these are priceless things. More than this, to be at Kwantlen, the University, at the very beginning, to know that one is contributing to creating something, and that what we do in these early years as a university, in a way not unlike the experiences of a young child, will be monumental in shaping the institution, to know that there will be, if we get it right, a true legacy.

Today is, of course, a very special day for me personally. I think of myself as a not very special person who has been enormously fortunate to live a very special life. I am one of those lucky people whose job has become a way of life. I have lived a life that has brought challenge and satisfaction. In this, I had parents who got me started in the right direction, my wife Terry who was always there with her support, and two sons who, like all kids, remind you constantly of what is important.

While there have certainly been good times and some dark times, too, and times of not knowing of whether I had made a good decision, I have always felt that my life was a good one because I felt fully engaged in what I did. This has truly been a blessing, and something I wish for every one I know and every student I teach. It is this sense of engagement that is, I believe, unique to universities, and is the true privilege of working at a university. It is to participate in something that has meaning and significance, it is to be at a place where one can stand on principle, where every opinion is allowed voice, and where personal commitment is not only allowed but encouraged.

Canada is a country of place. Indeed my own career has been a career of place as much as institution: from the rolling coulees of southern Alberta during my early years at the University of Lethbridge, to the subtle beauty of the prairies of Saskatchewan, from Brock University and the vineyards of the Niagara escarpment, to Carleton and our nation's capital. And so it is that I come here, to an institution that carries the name of those to whom this place belongs: the traditional territory of the Kwantlen. We exist in this place rooted in thousands of years of history.

But we also sit on the Pacific coast of Canada, a part of Canada which signals the tremendous transformation we can expect in the twenty-first century, as we look across a horizon that stretches westward. We experience daily the increasing influence of other parts of the world, and we look across the Pacific to Asia, a very old place with a deep and profound culture, but still a new place for many of us. And we know that change is only beginning, as the billions of people from elsewhere in this world look to find their place in the global economy, and who wish to enjoy what we have often taken for granted.

As a country, we must be prepared for these changes; as a university we must prepare our students for them. Now is not the time for small thinking. While we must not be foolhardy, now is the time to take a chance, to look at doing things differently. Kwantlen the university must be prepared to walk its own walk, to create its own distinctive future, to not be afraid of doing things differently.

And so, in a century which will look across the Pacific ocean, and at a celebration that honours our new Chancellor, himself an eminent member of the Indo-Canadian community, perhaps a good way for me to end is with the oft-quoted but eminently appropriate words of the Indian poet Rabindranath

Tagore, whose closest friend was another great Indian, Mahatma Gandhi, born 139 years ago yesterday. It was Tagore who recognized Gandhi as “Mahatma,” and so we would be well served to remember his words. Our future must be one

Where the mind is without fear  
And the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up  
Into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms  
towards perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason  
has not lost its way  
into the dreary desert sands of dead habit . . .

This is our future: one in which we come full circle, from the “tireless runner” of our Kwantlen heritage to the “tireless striving” of a poet from another land and another tradition. Both speak to us today. We come together at this university as agents of a new day. We embark on a great adventure. We could not ask for more.