THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

Dancing to the Music of Now: University-Community Partnering

Address by
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> **Climate change will bring water scarcity to between 1.1 and 3.2 billion people as temperatures rise by 2 to 3 degrees Celsius.**
>
> *- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007*

> **Consumption by humans has exceeded the Earth's carrying capacity since the 1980s. We are spending the natural capital accumulated over millennia at an accelerating rate. Oil demand, to take one example, will outstrip production causing a supply crunch starting in 2010.**
>
> *- US National Petroleum Council, 2007*

> **The price of a ton of rice, a staple food for more than half the world's people, has doubled over the past two years, from US$460 to almost US$1000.**
>
> *- New York Times, 28 March 2008*

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> **The CIA estimates the number of failing states at 20 or so.**
>
> *- Lester Brown, Plan B 3.0: Mobilizing to Save*

These are reports taken at random from recent newspapers. My point is simple: we are facing some serious problems, problems that some knowledgeable observers say puts our very future in doubt.

More than ever – and I am not just saying this for dramatic effect – we need to call on all our resources, all our knowledge, all our wisdom, to solve environmental and social problems. This, in a nutshell, is why this gathering of people drawn from universities and community organizations is so timely and so urgent.

Universities have the task of uncovering new knowledge through research. Some research is driven by our need to understand things, how we got where we are – the origin of the universe, the nature of matter, and some is driven by the need to change things – to solve problems, to right injustices, to create a sustainable future. Janice Stein, who directs the Munk Centre at the University of Toronto, distinguishes between different kinds of knowledge – the what and why questions to which academics seek answers, and the how questions which are more contextual and experiential.

Universities can easily be caricatured as ivory towers, but even caricatures contain some truth, or we wouldn't recognize them. The reality is that universities are complex and varied. The cliché about their detachment from society is only partly true. Land-grant colleges in the US never conformed to this stereotype (the University of Wisconsin is said to have referred to the walls of the university being "the borders of the state"). In Canada too, there are many examples of engaged faculty, of community-university interaction, of universities actively fulfilling a mission of civic responsibility. UVic's LE,NONET project to encourage aboriginal students to pursue higher education, and Nigel Livingston's CanAssist program that works with people with disabilities are just two of many examples on this campus, while in the community there is complementary work being done by groups like CCEDNet, the Storytellers' Foundation and others.

But I think we would all agree that this is not the prevailing situation, particularly for research-intensive universities. The more "pure" the research is, the more prestige it appears to have. For most universities, research is the first priority, teaching an afterthought (though this is changing), and the application of knowledge is of only indirect interest – unless it has revenue-generating potential (patents and the like). What are the criteria of excellence in higher education? First, the volume of grants for basic research; then the numbers of doctoral programs, the level of qualifications required for admission, the size of the endowment, etc. We don't find in this list an institution's track record in meeting societal needs, or its ability to collaborate or the ways it enhances democratic engagement among students and staff.

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Challenges to constructive collaboration

- **Getting key stakeholders to the table, including "strangers"**
- **Defining the research issue or problem in an <u>inclusive</u> way**
- **Overcoming professional blind spots, not allowing "specialists" to dominate**
- **Knowledge hierarchy favours quantitative and deductive disciplines over qualitative and inductive disciplines**
- **In academe, theory trumps practice; in the community, practice trumps theory**
- **Time, costs, and culture may be incompatible**
- **Trusting relationships are key**

Academics are rewarded for specialized language and conceptual rigour, which is fine except that it results in a conscious or unconscious devaluing of local knowledge and an intense professional identification with expert status. This may not be a problem in the closed world of scholarly pursuits whose reference point is "advancing the discipline" but it is not a productive response to complex problems which require holistic approaches and multiple knowledge sets.

But I don't have to tell you this. The fact that you are at this conference testifies that you understand the value of combining scholarly research with community needs and capacity.

Karl Marx famously said that philosophers have only studied the world, the point is to change it. Community-based research, the theme of our meeting here, is motivated, I believe, by the passion to understand in order to change. You only have to peruse the abstracts of the papers and presentations for this conference to appreciate the range of issues and concerns being addressed and the enduring nature of the many partnerships you have established.

Ten years ago I participated as a Council member of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) when the concept of the Community-University Research Alliance or CURA was introduced. I can tell you that there was fierce resistance at first both from university representatives on the Council and even from the staff of SSHRC. The view was that serious research was only done in universities, that community organizations had neither the skills nor resources for it, and that the

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appropriate form for a CURA therefore should be more in the nature of university-based research carried out IN the community than a genuine partnership. We were advised that there would be little demand for CURAs. When it turned out that there was huge demand, and that CURAs were being repeatedly cited as demonstrating universities' commitment to addressing real problems, there was still an annual struggle to find money from the SSHRC budget. The default always was to put individual, curiosity-driven research first.

Many of you have probably encountered similar attitudes in your own institutions. On the other hand, there are examples of universities adopting enquiry-driven curricula, creating inter-disciplinary centres and institutes, knowledge-transfer offices such as the Knowledge Mobilization Unit Linking (York University, UVic and Memorial), and there are many examples of what have been called "servant-academics" who put their knowledge to community use with transformative effect (perhaps the most famous contemporary example is Nobel Prize winner Mohammed Yunus).

A month ago representatives of some of Canada's largest private foundations met in Fredericton with the presidents and provosts of a dozen universities. The message from the foundations was not particularly welcome: in essence, they said we are out of the business of providing general grants for research or capital needs and where we are supporting research, there is a desire to link it more closely to a foundation's own goals and priorities.

This is not to deny the need for basic research, but most foundations' mandate is to improve the lives of Canadians in fairly immediate and tangible ways. By and large we don't see the drivers for achieving that aim in academia. We are looking for fresh ideas and new approaches, and whether we are talking about higher education or industry the evidence is that innovation tends to occur on the ground, where theory and practice collide, not in the boardroom or the faculty lounge or the executive suite.

At the Fredericton meeting, Dr Meric Gertler of the University of Toronto talked about how our understanding of innovation has been dominated by linear models, or the science "push" model: ideas are transferred from the lab to the marketplace, mediated by the university's tech transfer office. Interaction with communities doesn't work this way; it is more iterative, recursive and dependent upon a two-way exchange. When it works, both sides benefit: new understandings and approaches are more relevant and practical, and more able to solve real problems. The difference in cultures of the two parties contributes to the usefulness of the knowledge that is created precisely because the insider/outsider dynamic, the tension between researcher and practitioner perspectives, yields new insights.

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What you find when there is real collaboration

- **Collaboration not competition**
- **Listening not talking**
- **Sharing not hoarding**
- **Facilitating not directing**
- **Allowing not judging**
- **Making mistakes not being perfect**
- **Being uncertain rather than being the expert**
- **Doing not just thinking**

Three years ago the McConnell Foundation decided to focus its funding for higher education on community-based service learning (CBSL), that is, experiential learning based on the curriculum that is designed to have students apply classroom knowledge in the outside world and at the same time benefit community organizations and groups. At its best, it is collaborative, community-based, action-oriented, reflective, real world problem-solving. After a competitive application process, we made grants to ten universities across Canada, and recently we have begun to receive feedback. We have not been surprised to hear that students participating in CBSL loved the experience, loved the opportunity to apply what they were learning while they were learning it; we have not been surprised either to be told that faculty members using this approach enjoyed the enthusiasm and passion to learn that it generated among their students; we have not been surprised to discover that typically only a small minority of departments or professors were willing to adopt CBSL as a pedagogy.

What has surprised us is the response of some administrations, which have discovered that, in an increasingly competitive environment for attracting students, CBSL is proving to be a magnet for highly motivated, very smart, and academically desirable recruits; ergo, in institutions where a few dozens or hundreds of students were participating in CBSL opportunities there was suddenly pressure from the top to ramp up the program – make it available for hundreds, even thousands. It would seem we had success.

However, the feedback from many of the community organizations and groups participating in CBSL programs was notably different. They were less persuaded of the value, swamped by the supervisory demands on small and sometimes volunteer staffs, unable to adjust their ways of working to the rigid requirements of university timetables and working methods. Ramping up the numbers of students will of course accentuate the burden; because properly-designed CBSL takes faculty time to organize and requires time for students to reflect on what they are learning, it costs more than being in a classroom and therefore there is a danger that the experience will be diluted to little more than transitory volunteering.

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What have we learned for our support for CBSL so far? First, that there is a tremendous appetite for such programs, for all the right reasons; second, we have been reminded that in university/community relationships, it is almost always the university that is the dominant partner, unless great care is taken at both the institutional and individual faculty member level to be sensitive to community needs and culture. Third, we have learned that however much universities say they value these programs, cash-strapped administrations will not invest to make them transformational learning experiences. Finally, we have realized that it was perhaps a mistake to adopt the terminology of community service learning (very much in use in the US), and specifically the word service.

Service connotes, to me at least, rendering help, meeting someone else's needs, which in the case of CBSL carries a tinge of noblesse oblige. We don't talk about the "service" society renders to universities by the transfer of tens or hundreds of millions of tax dollars to pay professors' salaries or subsidize tuitions. A better term, we see in retrospect, would be community-university engagement, which suggests that instead of bringing knowledge out from academe it is actually being co-created, theory tested in practice, practice generating new theory, a process involving the different but vital skills of people in the community, of student "learners" and of faculty.

The newspaper clips I presented at the beginning of this talk emphasized why I think all of us need to be engaged in this "co-creation" of knowledge to address pressing global challenges. The Earth has always been fragile – vulnerable to being hit by an errant meteor, or to being destroyed by nuclear war, for example. But an increasingly insistent message now, one we have all heard, comes from scientists and researchers: it says we may have passed thresholds of irreversible change. Of course, our ingenuity is far from exhausted and we can hope for salvation from nanotechnology, biogenetics, quantum computing, geo-engineering and breakthroughs in material science. We, in North America at least, have an abiding faith in the "technological fix" to open new vistas and to get us out of jams.

But our problems now are not primarily technical. They are human, deriving from our behaviour, our beliefs and our values, and from the institutions we have created. The challenge is not just to come up with new breakthroughs in knowledge, but to apply what we already know!

We know that washing hands is the cheapest, most effective way to prevent the deadly spread of C. difficile and MRSA in our hospitals, infections that currently cause more deaths than road accidents; yet that doesn't alter the fact that only 42% of medical professionals in hospitals now routinely wash their hands. We know that we have to reduce our energy consumption, yet that doesn't prevent auto manufacturers and union and urban planners and developers from continuing to operate as though gas were still thirty-five cents a litre. We know that water shortages are already being experienced – not just in the countries of the South but also in the US, and probably soon in Canada - but that doesn't dissuade homebuilders in Arizona and New Mexico from putting up

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luxury houses alongside golf courses! in the baking desert. We know that our food system is vulnerable to increased energy costs, supply disruptions and so on, but that has not prevented our towns and cities from sprawling out across thousands of acres of prime farmland every year.

The old knowledge paradigm

- **Intellectual property rights (IPR)**
- **Encyclopedia Britannica**
- **Linear "push" model of transmission**
- **Specialization**
- **Teaching as transmitting knowledge**
- **Mechanistic view – researcher as observer**

The new knowledge paradigm

- **Open source**
- **Wikipedia**
- **Iterative, "co-creation"**
- **Contextual, integrative**
- **Learning in and through research**
- **Quantum view – researcher as participant**

No doubt there are many reasons for this disconnect, not excluding human greed and myopia. But one of them is a skepticism or distrust of expertise, of knowledge, of so-called "academic learning" (specifically in the social sciences), a distrust born of the experience of many in the broader community. When we think of the existential challenges that I prefaced this talk with, we take comfort in our view of ourselves as rational beings, uniquely able to consider the future consequences of our actions or inaction. But examples abound of civilizations which drove themselves to extinction by irrational behaviour. In his book Collapse, Jared Diamond gives several examples of self-destructive behaviour and bad choices, often leading to environmental collapse; on Easter Island, for example, the felling of trees intensified even after it had created severe soil erosion and drought, as the islanders endeavoured to propitiate the gods by erecting yet more gigantic statues.

What might be a contemporary version of such self-destructive behaviour? How about the fact that according to Lester Brown the cost of additional funding to restore the Earth (planting trees to reduce flooding and sequester carbon, restoring fisheries, protecting biodiversity, stabilizing water tables, and so on) is some US$113 billion. A large sum, to be sure, but it pales in comparison beside the scale of the world's military budgets, which totaled US$1.2 trillion in 2006 (half of that for the US alone).

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Additional Funding Needed to Restore the Earth

Activity	Funding (Billions $)
Planting trees to reduce flooding and conserve oil	6
Planting trees to sequester carbon	20
Protecting topsoil on cropland	24
Restoring rangelands	9
Restoring fisheries	13
Protecting biodiversity	31
Stabilizing water tables	10
Total	**113**

World Military Budgets 2006

Country	Budget (Billions $)
US	560
UK	59
China	50
Russia	35
All other	397
World Military Expenditure	**1, 235**

Lester Brown, Plan B. 3.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization, Earth Policy Institute, 2008

Even adding the estimated US$50 billion needed to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals to establish basic dignity for all, we are barely nibbling at what is currently devoted to building our destructive capacity. The total appropriated by the US Congress for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan alone, up to 2008 comes to US$800 billion!
So - what can we do to encourage universities and communities to dance to the same beat?

First, we need to recognize that institutions matter: rules, expectations and incentives have a major impact on how interactions occur. Currently academic culture is very influenced by an industry model, driven by business values and predominantly economic goals, i.e. competitiveness, R.o.I., responsiveness to the market and so on. Respected voices ranging from Derek Bok, former President of Harvard, Clark Kerr, Chancellor of UCLA, and the Kellogg Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good have called for a re-emphasis on the university's public role in society.

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One small step in this direction that some Canadian universities are already studying would be to revamp criteria for tenure. Tenure, as you know, is based on an individual's research, teaching and outreach, with by far the greatest weight being given to research (as measured by the ranking of the journal publishing it, and the number of citations). Simply adding social impact to these three, with some formula for measuring it through feedback from those benefiting, would encourage those faculty who wish for greater social engagement to do so without risking their academic standing.

Second, there needs to be change outside the university too. Many community organizations also work in silos, find it difficult to collaborate, or do not understand the need for research to improve their understanding of the issues they are addressing in order to enhance their effectiveness. They too are increasingly being pushed out of their comfort zones of service delivery or advocacy to address more fundamental system change. There have been some notable successes recently, for example welfare agencies have moved from palliative programs to proposing ways for government to help low income individuals transition to self-reliance, and organizations working for people with physical or mental health problems have shifted the debate from service provision to removing barriers to participation.

Finally, funders also have a responsibility. Foundations in particular can move from one-off support for university campaigns and "naming" opportunities to encourage long-term relationship building between universities and communities (itself predicated on multi-year financial commitments), with financial support that recognizes the added cost – both to the university and to the community – of doing this well.

I want to conclude by going back to those gloomy indicators that I opened with. Recently I read a story by the American Pulitzer Prize-winning author Michael Chabon. He tells of a number of people including the former Whole Earth Catalogue editor Stewart Brand, British composer Brian Eno, and others, who have set out to create a giant clock. It will cost tens of millions of dollars, be stored in a cave in Nevada, and it is designed to keep running for ten thousand years. That's right: ten thousand years, twice as old as the pyramids. The point of the clock, says Chabon, is to revive the idea of the Future, a story we tell of hope, dread and wonder – but which many people are beginning to lose faith in. We say the clock will last for ten thousand years, but do we believe it? Do we really think there will still be humans when it finally runs down, or even that the planet will still be here? Think about it. In the West, in my lifetime, the Future has gone from the marvels of science fiction and "Beam me up, Scotty", the visions of World Fair pavilions, of "Better Living through Chemistry" and the promise of plastics as preached to the young Dustin Hoffman in The Graduate to the dystopias of the current cinema, the banishment of household goods that were in everyday use until yesterday and dire warnings of the disastrous effects of climate change, or pandemics or – again – the threat of nuclear war. In his book The World Without Us, Alan Weisman explores what would happen to the earth if the human race were to be extinguished, or extinguish itself. Now we can read about our own extinction, and then go back to our daily routines.

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I am not at the point where I believe our problems are insoluble or the future irretrievably in question. Humans are uniquely able to think about the future, and to plan and to act to create the world they want for themselves and their children. But that world is very different, to my mind, from the one we presently have – more peaceful, more just, more sustainable. To get to that world from here requires that we move out of our comfort zones, that we collaborate with those who differ from us, that we build bridges across languages, specializations and ideologies.

Since I was invited to speak to you by Budd Hall I think the only permissible way to conclude my remarks is with a poem. What follows is by the poet Jon Anderson, and is titled You Must.

You Must

You must have a hope
that will let you stomp and sing
at any cold dawn…
You must read the story again
and again to the child
who receives you with a bovine stare.
You must get up
every day to punch in
not dreaming on transcendence,
not desiring new heroes or gods,
not looking the other way
but looking for the other way
and ready to talk to everyone on the line.
You must not wait for official approval
nor general consensus
to rage. You must
come again to kneel
in shiny, rock-strewn soil
not to pray, but to plant.
Yes, even now
as ice caps melt and black top
goes soft in the sun
you must prepare for the harvest.