

“Universities Today: No More Myths, Just the Facts”

Remarks by the Honourable Frank Iacobucci
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Thank you Mike (MacMillan) for the generous introduction. And thank you also to my fellow head table guests for their company.

I am honoured to be here. I have been preceded at this podium by most, if not all, presidents of the University of Toronto and I am proud to be among such company -- although I think I am the shortest U of T president ever to be here -- both in tenure and height.

I am also pleased to have the opportunity to speak about Ontario universities and, most specifically, the University of Toronto. These are exciting and challenging times for universities in Ontario. Simply put, we are on a precipice. As former premier Bob Rae noted in his sweeping report to the provincial government on post secondary education, without a major reinvestment in the system, “we risk romancing mediocrity” and “from that embrace only decline will follow.”

Depending largely on decisions soon to be made by the provincial government, the decade-long under funding of Ontario's universities will either continue -- further eroding our ability to be competitive within Canada and globally -- or -- there will be a significant reinvestment that will help our universities begin to reestablish their competitiveness with their Canadian and global peers.

How, did we get here? How did Ontario's universities sink to tenth -- and last in Canada -- in provincial funding?

No doubt there is more than one reason. Certainly, increasing health care costs are one cause and perhaps we could have made our case more effectively. We might even have considered not taking new students, though that was not an option we would want to pursue. In any case, I think there are other explanations for our situation.

I believe that universities have been dogged by persistent myths, some of which have become firmly embedded in the public conscience.

Let's look at some of these myths.

The first myth: There is no problem. Universities, especially the University of Toronto, are wealthy. Students are being admitted, they are graduating and, for the most part, getting jobs. So, what's the problem?

Let's look at the first part of this myth – the wealthy part – and for this I will speak particularly about the University of Toronto.

Yes, U of T had an enormously successful fund raising campaign that has provided tangible benefits for the University. We are grateful and overjoyed with the generosity of our supporters and delighted to have taken Canadian university fundraising to new levels of expectation by raising over \$1 billion.

And, yes, by Canadian standards, we have a significant endowment.

The fact, however, is that virtually all of our endowment is restricted, mostly for student financial aid and endowed chairs. In other words, nice though it may be, we do not have pots of money sitting around to use at our discretion.

Some people point to the forest of cranes at the U of T as a sign of its affluence. Indeed, our University abounds with lovely historic buildings and dynamic new structures that are dramatically changing our landscape.

There are two facts about the current building boom on our three campuses that need to be made clear. One, it is driven by an attempt to catch up to the increasing demand for university education in the province.

And, two, it is not without cost. In order to find the funds necessary to match and supplement government and private funding for these projects, the University of Toronto carries a half billion dollar debt, and an estimated \$315 million in deferred maintenance.

What about the second part of the 'no problem' myth -- that all qualified students are finding a place in university, graduating and finding jobs. Indeed, that's true. And so, on the surface, one could say there is 'no problem'.

But there should be more – much more -- to going to university than simply getting in and getting out.

Ultimately, we must look at the quality of the education students receive. Indeed, we ought to look ourselves in the eye and ask if we are giving them the best education possible or if we are content to have Ontario's universities at the back of the pack in Canada and not even in the race globally.

I think not.

Ontario universities should not become degree mills. However, if under funding persists, that is what they will become and the value of an Ontario university degree will dramatically diminish.

The stakes are significant. Why? Because overwhelming evidence shows that high quality university education has a direct relationship to increased growth, prosperity, and harmony. In the past, Ontario universities have helped educate a province whose standing is the envy of the world. We owe this same level of expectation to our children and grandchildren.

Our province will face a number of major challenges in the next few years; challenges that will test the foundations of our successful social system. A generation of doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers—indeed, of professionals from every walk of life—is approaching retirement.

Fortunately, a new generation of students is pushing university enrolments to record levels. In the early 1960s, 8 percent of all students participated in post secondary education. That figure is now more than 40 percent. From these students will come tomorrow's leaders.

But the quality of the education these students are receiving is vastly different from the one their parents received. And, I believe, overall it is not as good.

So we must ask ourselves how confident we are that in the future, when we need surgery or when we need a lawyer or accountant, or our neighborhood schools need to hire new teachers, or indeed, when we need writers and musicians -- that they will not only be there -- but also be among the best at what they do.

When a business is considering a new investment in Ontario, will its executives be convinced that Ontario's workforce has received an education that is competitive with that provided in New York State, or in Michigan, or in Germany?

Competitor jurisdictions are not standing still. For example, China and Germany have embarked on major programs to strengthen their leading universities and U. S. states are continuing the overall pattern of increasing support for public universities.

Here in Canada, Alberta has just announced its intention to establish a \$3 billion dollar endowment fund to strengthen its post-secondary learning system.

In Ontario, at the University of Toronto, government is providing about one-third less in operating funding per university student than it did a decade ago.

We face enormous challenges at a university that currently enrolls some 67,000 students as compared to 54,000 just over ten years ago. We will need an additional \$180 million dollars just to bring us up to the national average and to get student to faculty ratios back to where they were in the mid-1990s.

Currently, there is very little chance for meaningful interaction between a student and his or her professor. Many students are studying in classes of 1,000 or more. A small, but telling example is that unlike the experience of my generation, this new generation of students cannot expect that their professors will either recognize them or know their names or know them well enough to write a reference letter.

These large enrolments greatly impact the quality of a student's education. True, students are getting into university and yes, they are leaving with a degree, but this alone will not meet the challenge posed by global competition.

The University of Toronto has many strengths that provide a firm base for an internationally competitive institution.

One sixth of the professors at Canada's Anglophone universities hold at least one University of Toronto degree and not a week goes by that the international media do not report on at least one research project, or provide expert commentary from a U of T professor. We must not abandon this role.

Our library, which is the fourth largest research library in North America, is a provincial and national treasure. But, how do we maintain this position, let alone improve on it?

U of T ranks first among Canadian universities in the number of healthcare professionals graduating each year from degree programs, and first among public universities in both Canada and the United States in the number of research publications by health scientists. Continued under funding puts us at risk of losing this leadership.

I believe that the University of Toronto, as Canada's leading research and graduate university, has a special role and obligation in making the case for increased provincial funding. The fact is that if the University of Toronto is weakened as a center of higher education, the entire system is weakened.

As you can see, contrary to myth number one, there is a very clear problem.

Let me turn to myth number two: Universities should spend more wisely and work harder to make ends meet. This myth should not

detain us long. Any fat in the system has long since been pared away.

In 2001, a provincial Task Force charged with reviewing the financial health and cost-effectiveness of the postsecondary education sector, informed by work from PricewaterhouseCoopers, concluded that individual universities had found essentially all the efficiencies they could to compensate for declining provincial funding. While noting that some efficiencies could be gained through system-wide cooperation in areas such as purchasing and information technology, the Task Force concluded that, and I quote, "any flexibility for individual institutions to continue compensating for declining revenues is minimal."

The critical need for increased funding is certainly at the heart of Mr. Rae's report. He and his Panel of advisors have been thorough and comprehensive in their findings and their recommendations are an essential first step to reinvestment in Ontario's universities. Funding is but one significant plank of the Report, which suggests a series of integrated reforms, each supporting the other. To maintain the coherence and the integrity of the recommended reforms, we strongly urge the Ontario government to implement them as a whole.

One further comment on funding. While many of the financial decisions regarding operating funds for Ontario's universities rest with the province, there is a crucial role for the Federal government to play in enabling these decisions.

As has been pointed out recently by a number of commentators and as expressed by the unanimous resolution passed in the Ontario Legislature, we agree that it is necessary in a principled way to address the gap between what the federal government collects from Ontarians and what it invests in this province.

It is time for both the federal and provincial governments to step up to the plate and re-engage in this very important partnership.

Myth number three has attracted considerable public and media attention. It suggests that higher tuition fees deter access to university and increase student debt.

In fact, a recent StatsCan study shows that while there is a gap in participation rates between students from higher income families and those with lower incomes, the gap did not change between 1993 and 2001 when tuition rates rose significantly. In other

words, students from lower income families continue to enroll in universities, despite rising tuition.

If you accept much of what is written and said in the media today, then you would believe that the average Ontario student emerges from university with a debt in the range of \$30,000.

And yet, in 2004 at the University of Toronto, 59 per cent of students leaving first-entry undergraduate programs had no OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) debt. Only 22 percent had debt over \$15,000 and less than 3 per cent had OSAP debt of over \$30,000.

The University of Toronto understands and embraces its role as a public institution and its absolute responsibility to be accessible to all qualified students, no matter what their financial situation. We guarantee that a lack of financial resources will not prevent students from either beginning or concluding their University of Toronto education. I am very proud that we were the first university in Canada to adopt this policy and make this commitment. And we have ensured that our financial aid structure places as small a financial burden as possible on our students both before and after graduation.

But just as the University shoulders its responsibility, so too should students, their families and the government. I say this because there are private and social benefits to attending university. Our graduates enjoy a private benefit. It enhances their lives and their earning power. The social benefit is felt across the broader community, the province and the nation. Like university funding, tuition is an investment in the future. Therefore, all must contribute a fair share.

Having said that, if universities receive increased provincial funding and are given the ultimate responsibility to set tuition levels as suggested by Mr. Rae, I do not anticipate a dramatic increase in tuition across all programs. Certainly, it is not what the University of Toronto intends. As I said earlier, we understand and are committed to our role as a public institution.

We carry this view into programs for which we feel a particular pride, an example of which is the University of Toronto's unique Transitional Year Program.

In its thirty-fifth year, TYP is a program that provides access to university for students with high academic potential and strong

motivation, but who may lack the formal educational background to qualify for university admission because of any number of circumstances beyond their control.

Natacha Nsabimana who graces our head table, is one such student.

Natacha arrived in Canada in 2001, as a refugee from Burundi. With minimal English at the time, her attempt to recertify for high school credits in this country was a culture shock and she left the system after one semester. She learned about TYP from a Rwandan friend already in the program, enrolled in 2003 and graduated as TYP class valedictorian the following year. Natacha, who speaks five languages and is currently enrolled at U of T's New College, is one of just six Bank of Montreal National Scholars for 2004.

The University supports TYP because we believe in the extraordinary commitment and dedication of its students.

And yet, government funding for TYP is well below what it is for first year Arts and Science programs because it is not considered a university degree program.

If anything, the government should provide more funding to develop more programs like TYP so that more students like Natacha have an opportunity for postsecondary education.

Finally, I want to talk about the most enduring of myths: universities are elitist, particularly the University of Toronto.

If elitism means seeking out the brightest students and top notch professors, if it means being competitive with the University of Michigan, Berkeley, or Oxford, would anyone seriously say: forget it, that's not the Canadian way.

As the son of immigrant parents and the first and only one in his family to attend university, I am certainly not going to say it. I know first-hand the impact of access to a great public university education and I believe that there is nothing shameful or wrong about intellectual elitism.

There is nothing wrong with this province and this country having at least one, if not several, academically elite universities. As long as qualified students from families across the income scale have clear access to those universities, unimpeded by financial

constraints, it is the best thing we can do for Ontario and Canada's competitiveness. It is the best thing that we can do for the diversity that Canada represents and it is the best thing that we can do for our children and grandchildren.

I am not talking about social elitism. I am not talking about establishing a strata of universities, some for the middle class and just a few for those who can afford something more expensive.

But all universities are not the same. There are different roles for different institutions and those who strive to be centres of excellence and leadership should be encouraged and supported in that pursuit.

The University of Toronto is Canada's largest research university. We can offer our undergraduates the chance to work with senior faculty on cutting-edge research. Would anyone deny a young student the opportunity to work with renowned scholars such as nanotechnologist Ted Sargent, Middle East expert Janice Gross Stein or Nobel-prize winning chemist John Polanyi, to name just a few?

As long as the necessary checks and balances are in place to ensure accessibility for all qualified students, a university that chooses to set its entrance bar higher, to seek out top students and to offer, in turn, first-rate professors and researchers, should be supported and encouraged to do so.

The young people of Ontario are just as bright and capable as those in the rest of Canada and in other countries. They do not deserve a higher education that is second or third best. Should it be the Canadian way to go for the bronze? If we saddle our universities with low expectations, then our society will reap what it sows, and our future success as a nation will be jeopardized.

To use a phrase made famous by U of T history graduate Malcolm Gladwell -- we are truly at a tipping point. With a thrust of substantial new investment, our universities will achieve a status worthy of a province and nation that should continue to be the envy of the world. I ask all of you for your support as together -- we go for the gold.

Thank you.