

Saskatoon Chamber of Commerce
State of the University Address
Peter MacKinnon, President, University of Saskatchewan
May 1, 2007

I wish to thank the Greater Saskatoon Chamber of Commerce for inviting me back year after year to make a state of the University presentation. I appreciate the opportunity very much, and I am honoured to appear in front of so many of Saskatoon's business leaders.

I am particularly pleased to offer this report in our Centennial year. When the first University Act was passed in 1907, the U of S did not have any faculty, staff or students. It did not have a campus. It did not even have a home town. It was a dream of people led by our first premier – Walter Scott – who understood that a new province and a new University went hand in hand, and that the destinies of both would be inextricably linked. One year later Walter Murray became the first president, and he arrived in Saskatchewan by train in August, 1908, where upon he met Premier Scott on route from the railway station. “This is a great country,” said Scott to Murray, and it required people “with large ideas to do it justice.”

Scott, Murray and their fellow citizens had large ideas, and the University of Saskatchewan was one of them. Their legacy is our inheritance and we are at once its stewards and new generation builders. As our inheritance becomes in turn our legacy in the years following our 100th birthday, it is appropriate that we reflect upon the progress of the ‘large idea’ that is the University of Saskatchewan.

Imagine a conversation across the ages of the generations between Murray's years and ours, between 1937 when his presidency ended, and today, 70 years later. What would we say to Walter Murray? And what would he say to us?

In this conversation as I imagine it, there would be five things that I would say to Walter Murray. I would say, first, congratulations and thanks, because you, Premier Scott, your colleagues and your fellow citizens had the right vision and you acted on it. You said that the

University of Saskatchewan “should have an honoured place among the best” Universities; and you reminded us that, as a public University, we must “serve the many sided life of the community.” These were great sign posts for early pathfinders. And you were serious. You strived mightily to ensure that our University had an “honoured place among the best.” And the establishment of the first Agriculture faculty within a University in Canada revealed your determination to ensure that the University served the province and its most important early industry of Agriculture.

My second message to Murray would be to describe to him the changes in size and scale of the University over the past 70 years. When he retired as President in 1937, there were 1,818 students; today there are 19,406. In his last year of service there were 369 graduates; this year, in our spring convocation alone, there are more than 3,000. Library holdings in 1937 were 61,665 items. Today there are 4,495, 220. There were 97 faculty members then; there are 1,007 today, among a total faculty, and staff complement of more than 6,000. There were 9 colleges then, 13 now. There were 27 university buildings in 1937; there are 179 now. I don't think I would even begin to explain computers to him!

My third message to Walter Murray would be that we have honoured the views that he and his contemporaries had about the responsibility of public Universities. In addition to our early and continuing service to the Agricultural industry in the Saskatchewan, we continue to play a leading role in advanced education in the province. Most of the province's professional people were and are educated at the University of Saskatchewan. We continue to be, by far, the leading centre of research in the province. Our contributions to culture, whether it be the symphony orchestra; theatre groups or the art camp at Emma Lake, continue to enrich the province. We are the site of Innovation Place, the most successful research park in the country. We have 1,800 Indian, Metis and Inuit students on our campus – the largest number on any university campus in the country. Our Husky athletics are the pride of Saskatoon and Saskatchewan and we bring more visitors to the province than any other single institution as illustrated by the presence of 6,000 guests over these past ten days at the Congress of Humanities

and Social Sciences. These are but a few examples of our service to the many sided life of the community. These contributions enrich our city and province enormously. And we are very proud of them.

My fourth message to Walter Murray would acknowledge that whether we are speaking of countries, cultures or institutions, history is rarely – if ever – a story of relentless progress. It is fair to say, I believe, that we have sometimes viewed our challenges as limitations. When confronted by the reality of competition, (and the world of post secondary education is highly competitive), we have sometimes questioned our willingness or capacity to compete successfully. When confronted by the inevitability of change, we have sometimes questioned our ability to manage it successfully. But we have transcended our limitations; we are competing successfully and we are managing change. And I would hasten to add, and this is my fifth message for Walter Murray, that there is not a University in Canada that has greater opportunities than ours; and there is not a University in Canada that is better positioned to take advantage of our opportunities. We have balanced budgets, and we have had careful planning under the leadership of our distinguished Provost Michael Atkinson. We have strong governance in our Board, Senate and Council. And we have a clear direction that rests on a foundation of international standards; pre-eminence in selected areas; and in a sense of place that recognizes our deep roots in this rich prairie soil.

Let me pause here to note that Provost Atkinson leaves his current office on June 30 after ten years of magnificent academic leadership at the U of S. No person deserves more credit than does he for our progress. On your behalf, and in my own name, I wish to thank him most warmly.

So what would Walter Murray say to us? I think he would say ‘Wow.’ I think he would also say that great visions stand the test of time. The vision of our predecessors of a large idea and a large reality for our first century remains current and appropriate for our second. We should continue to serve the many sided life of our community, while acknowledging that our community is both larger and smaller than once it was – larger because our community is global, smaller because the

globe has shrunk. And we should continue to strive and to achieve “an honoured place among the best.” That is the University of Saskatchewan of Walter Murray’s century. That is the University of Saskatchewan of your century and mine.

Thank you very much.