

2011 Academic Address:

What Difference Does Planning Make?

Many of you know that I grew up in the Canadian Prairies, and that I have worked for twenty-five years as a faculty member, doing research and teaching at this university. Through all this time I have remained compelled by the idea of community. What fascinates me is community conceived not as a state of being, but community as a mode of action: Community, in other words, as a way of getting things done.

Given this perspective, you may understand why I was drawn to the planning process of this university – even why I was interested in applying to be provost. Planning, in the participatory way that we do it here at the University of Saskatchewan, is community in action.

Planning is how we bring about change, in order to make a difference.

So we can ask: *What* difference does planning make?

Is planning, as some have said to me, a drag on institutional performance? Does it detract from the time and attention available to do work that matters more? Do we plan just because administrators like planning?

I believe that if an institution does not change as a result of planning, we should conclude that planning has failed. Or, if the changes are not beneficial (compared to what would have occurred without planning), then planning has failed. There must be change. There must be at least relative improvement.

What, then, is the record at the University of Saskatchewan? Are we different than we would have been? Are the differences for the better?

Let me propose to you that for answers we need to consider where we were about a decade ago. We need to consider what we intended. We need to consider what has happened. And, finally, we should take stock of where we are today.

Part One: Where Were We A Decade Ago?

Our planning process took shape in the early 2000s, and was formalized in two landmark documents. The first was President MacKinnon's *Strategic Directions* statement, developed in 2001 based on broad consultation, published in 2002, and recently updated in 2010. The second document was Provost Atkinson's *Provost's White Paper on Integrated Planning*, also in 2002.

Few here likely remember what was going on in the University of Saskatchewan around the beginning of the current century. Only a minority of our current faculty and staff, and very few of our current students, were here a decade ago.

There were problems on many fronts. We were still hurting from a painful strike a decade earlier. Our medical school was on probation, its continued existence in doubt: problems there included budgets, recruiting and retaining key individuals, libraries, and relationships with our important partners. As a university we were coming out of a decade of painful and debilitating budget cuts and restraint. We were unable to offer competitive salaries. We were cutting across the board, and had few funds to support anything new. No one knew how budgeting was done. We were staring in the face of a looming structural deficit. Our reputation had declined. People from other universities warned us that we were in danger of falling off the radar of Canadian higher education.

Perhaps you think I exaggerate for dramatic effect. I invite you to go back and read the kinds of articles that were in the *StarPhoenix* at that time. To look at the statistics and at the stark facts in university documents.

For today's purpose, I thought I might look back at what one of my predecessors, Michael Atkinson, said in an address similar to this one, in 1999. "Our situation is ... one of incredible stress," Michael noted then.¹ The university's budget had been stagnant for four years and was effectively almost a fifth lower than at the start of the 1990s. The university had lost 123 faculty members even while student numbers had grown.

We began the journey of integrated planning in an environment where decisions were experienced as "a series of one-offs, responsive to opportunities or threats, but in no way actually asserting a coherent agenda. The community was full of suspicions.... Cutbacks had lowered trust in one another and raised anxieties that no priorities would emerge and that everyone would be diminished. The planning horizon was one year at best."² The university had no statements on matters of fundamental academic and strategic importance such as enrolment, Aboriginal initiatives, or research.

Part Two: What Did We Intend?

So in this context, what did we have in mind, when we undertook planning? In a general way, I would answer with a single word. As a university, we intended change.

¹ *The Academic Agenda: Progress and Prospects*. 3 March 1999. Like other provost's academic addresses cited in this speech, this one may be found on the provost's office/institutional planning and analysis website at: <http://www.usask.ca/vpacademic/office/speeches.php> (as accessed 22 February 2011).

² *The Academic Agenda Address: A "Report Card" on Integrated Planning*. 27 February 2006.

Change is at the heart of planning, and is the most human and social part of planning. Change is personal. It is shared. Change creates excitement and anxiety all at the same time and often in the same person. I have felt these emotions with every major change in my life. Change in what we do or in what surrounds us alters our identity as individuals, at least in superficial ways and sometimes more than that. Change makes us vulnerable. That's why it's human and instinctive to come up with reasons why change is bad, or why it's only others who need to change, or that change is only legitimate if it comes about under certain rare conditions.

But *we* meant to change, and planning was the mechanism to do so.

The stated intention in 2001 was "to draw our various planning activities together in an integrated plan. Key to the success of that effort will be to establish academic priorities at the centre of the process." So that's the first point: academic priorities at the centre of change.

The provost went on to enumerate key issues that would have to be addressed: declining numbers of PhD students; excessively small graduate student numbers; incorporating graduate teaching and supervision into assigned duties; creating equitable workloads through differential teaching, research and administrative assignments; signing memoranda of understanding with all faculty that clearly outline expectations; cutting back on the number of courses at the undergraduate level; systematic program review; tuition-revenue sharing; increased support for graduate students; improving the teaching abilities of graduate students; student evaluation of all courses; redefinition of unclassified studies; a common first year; development of student residences to fit academic priorities.

That's an interesting list of issues. It bears a close resemblance to the things we have worked on, as a university, over the last ten years.

As integrated planning developed, it became clearer to all that it wasn't only about solving individual issues or problems. It was about creating a different kind of university.

The provost's 2004 academic address explicitly addressed the question, What Can We Expect From Integrated Planning?³ The provost's answer at that time was as follows:

- **“We can expect new ideas.** Integrated Planning is the excuse many have been waiting for to make some changes and take some bold decisions.” Integrated Planning was to be about innovation and was to include cross-cutting areas like Aboriginal programming, teaching and learning, and internationalization. “Out of Integrated Planning will come new ideas for new structures and new programs. The current rigid and confining organizational structure of the University is being challenged. Integrated Planning will amplify that challenge.”
- **“We can expect to understand one another much better.”** Planning together was to break down ignorance and barriers to mutual understanding within the university.
- **“We can expect more openness and collegiality.”** This was about setting priorities and making decisions together within shared systems of responsibility. It meant being less guarded and less destructively competitive with one another. As described in 2004, openness and collegiality were modeled by how the vice-presidents of the university worked together, and were also exemplified by University Council.
- **“We can expect a better sense of priorities.** Integrated Planning gives us a work plan.”
- **“We can expect more evidence-based decision making.”** “As Integrated Planning develops, and the culture of assessment develops

³ *The Academic Agenda 2004: What can we expect from Integrated Planning?*

with it, we will make greater use of data to guide decisions and evaluate progress.”

- **“We can expect some tough decisions.”** “Decisions will ... involve reductions in support for certain parts of the institution, reorganization of others, and key investments. Some will feel left out; others will feel uncomfortably included.”
- **“We can expect more professionalism.”** “One of the things we can expect from Integrated Planning is further emphasis on culture and system in the central administration.” This was intended to mean better management of positions by deans, better management of assessment activities including surveys and reviews, and better management of capital and other projects. We committed to holding ourselves to international standards in our administrative and planning processes as we do in all other areas of institutional life.

That’s a pretty clear list. New ideas and innovation. Better understanding of each other. More openness about priorities. Evidence-based decision-making. Tough decisions. Professionalism.

Part Three: What Has Happened?

And what happened?

I have said the heart of planning lies in **identifying our academic priorities**. Before integrated planning, the university had many priorities, which is another way of saying that as a whole university we had none at all. Planning should make clear the institution’s mind on the subject of what matters to us and what we aim to do. Have our priorities been clear?

- We began with President MacKinnon's strategic directions. Our university will be defined by international standards in all that we do, by areas of academic pre-eminence, and by our sense of place in Saskatchewan, the Great Plains, and the North. Our strategic directions are to recruit and retain outstanding faculty, to enhance our profile in research, to establish ourselves as a major presence in graduate study, and to recruit and retain a diverse and well-prepared body of undergraduate students. Those are the long-term goals.
- Within these are nested the four-year priorities and commitments of our integrated plans. Currently the priority areas are to enhance the student experience inside and outside the classroom; to enhance our profile in research, scholarly, and artistic work; and to work together more effectively across unit and institutional boundaries. We made twenty commitments under those three headings.
- For the third planning cycle we will prioritize research, Aboriginal engagement, program and service innovation, and our local and global sense of community.

No one need be in any doubt about what the University of Saskatchewan aims to do. First-time visitors to our campus know immediately what we're about as a university, when they see our plan – and I can report to you that our integrated plan is an important and influential recruiting tool.

Those of us who work here already also have a reference point in the plan. Personally, I find myself presented with a myriad of possibilities in the course of a day. Do I agree with a proposed hiring? How urgent is an item for a committee agenda? Is there something not happening in the university that I need to jumpstart? Which funding proposal has priority? The first criterion I think about in my job is whether the item at hand supports our strategic directions, and advances our current integrated plan. I can tell you that the integrated plan gives me *my* work plan. I can see the same is true for my colleagues in the senior administration.

At the university level, I would like to highlight three particular examples:

- **Because of our plan**, we knew a strategic goal was to attract and retain outstanding faculty members, and we invested resources in faculty compensation.
- **Because of our plan**, we knew in our capital planning to prioritize the student experience, and our signature research areas. We knew to focus on student residences and on renovations for student services. We knew we had to create and take advantage of the opportunities for health sciences and InterVac.
- **Because of our plan**, we knew we needed to put millions of dollars of new funding into student awards, tripling over the last number of years the proportion of our students who receive awards.⁴ We committed funds from our operating budget, and from university land revenues. Donors funded new awards. Faculty added to these totals through research grants that provided for more student funding. Most recently the university put a million more dollars from our operating budget into graduate student fellowships and scholarships.

These are some examples of very large commitments that our institution made clearly and decisively because of the broad consensus about our plan goals. This is what openness, collegiality, and participatory planning look like in practice. Our priorities guide decisions, large and small, at all levels.

This leads me to **tough decisions**. Our institution has made them. We have made them in ways consistent with widely discussed university priorities. We have made

⁴ From the 2011 *Survey Synthesis* produced by Institutional Planning and Assessment. The percentage of first-year students who received a *university scholarship/financial award/bursary* increased from 21% in 2004 to 69% in 2010, which is 19% higher than our peers (see Appendix B).

them through processes that are rigorous and equitable, and which have been open to contrary views:

- A number of years ago, when our university was facing a structural deficit resulting from low rates of grant increase, we took a million or a half-million dollars each out of several colleges. One college was converted to a completely different, tuition-driven budget model. Another was offered a pact to earn back resources through increases in teaching activity. One complete college-equivalent unit was eliminated permanently from our university, narrowing and focusing our academic scope by that amount.
- A few years later, the issue was the sudden decline in our investments, which support the operating budget as well as trusts, endowments, and pensions. Following town halls on the financial situation, the university carried out adjustments in operating-budget allocations ranging from 0 per cent to 50 per cent, and totaling about \$10 million across the institution. Expenditures were cut or were transferred to new or different revenue sources. Units guided their adjustments with academic priorities and strategies for change in mind. Many reduced in one area while adding in another. The university made tough decisions. Units made tough decisions.
- Most recently, Vice-President Florizone and I have launched the Service and Process Enhancement Project, which involves practical looks at improving or economizing our administrative services. It will result in further adjustments to budgets in months and years ahead.

Meanwhile, our university has also had new resources, including increased government support in recent years. Some of our gains are no doubt due to the comparatively advantageous economic circumstances of Saskatchewan. But our gains are also partly due to the result of the credibility and consistency we gain from our planning and budgeting processes. When we have had extra resources, including generous government support, we have used those extra resources wisely. We have put those resources into the Academic Priorities Fund, to be used

judiciously to support new initiatives. We have used them to support faculty salaries. A couple of years ago we put extra resources into University Advancement to bolster the long-term financing and independence of the university. We provide for our financial future through carefully chosen and decisive investments.

With priorities and a budget, we have the means to fund **new ideas**. In the last decade, because of integrated planning, we have turned a number of good ideas into reality:

- First and foremost, I would mention the **three new interdisciplinary graduate schools**, the flagship projects of the first two planning cycles. The Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, the School of Public Health, and the School of Environment and Sustainability are drawing in growing numbers of students. Growth has been rapid, and the students we are pulling in are largely students from far away who would not otherwise have come to our university. Already these schools have enhanced and changed our university's profile, as they were meant to do. The benefits spread well beyond the schools themselves.
- More generally, we have had the idea of **investing in the student experience**. I have already mentioned investments so far in capital projects and scholarships. Inside the classroom we have also seen the development of learning communities, the expansion of distributive and interprofessional education, and the beginnings of a remaking of the first-year curriculum in Arts and Science. These new ideas are supported by initiatives in recognition and promotion of teaching, faculty development, and instructional and program design. PCIP is anticipating a further large investment in experiential learning.
- And what is more about new ideas than **research**? In the last decade, researchers in many units have contributed to the university's goals. At the same time, a few big new ideas are leaders in transforming our university

and our reputation. The biggest of these include the Canadian Light Source, the InterVac vaccine laboratory, the University of Saskatchewan Health Sciences Project, the Global Institute of Water Security, and other developments still to come. No group of administrators decides which research projects will succeed; that depends on faculty ingenuity and external partnerships. Through planning, we set priorities that guide our response to opportunity; and we steer our own resources or other resources we can influence towards promising ideas.

Over our first two planning cycles, we have seen steady improvement in our degree of **professionalism** in institutional practices. We aim for international standards in all that we do, whether this is search practices for faculty members and deans, student advising, reporting to funding agencies, or research protocols. Planning is also one of the practices in which we aim for professionalism, and here good practice relies on the work of the Office of Institutional Planning and Assessment, developed over two planning cycles. The assessment part of the IPA's mandate has taken shape since the 2008 *Framework for Assessment* was adopted by council and the board. Assessment now includes systematic graduate program review, selective unit reviews, comprehensive use of student survey data, and a University Achievement Record that dovetails with diverse college and unit achievement records. All of this is supported as well by an office of Information Strategy and Analytics, ISA, new in the last two years, that ensures increasingly reliable **evidence** on which to base decision-making at all levels.

Measuring what we do lets us know whether we have achieved our plans, closing the cycle of planning, implementation, and assessment.

So, overall, have we delivered on the expectations of Integrated Planning?

We have identified our priorities through open processes. Together, we have made tough decisions. Our budgets and our relationships that support them are stronger. We have funded new ideas and put them into practice. We have better evidence, and more professional ways of using it in decision-making.

There are clear outcomes and impacts:

- We made it a priority to recruit and retain outstanding faculty. We have now turned over the majority of our faculty positions, and based on my meetings every year with our new faculty, they are an extraordinarily promising, talented, and dedicated group.
- We made it a priority to increase the number of graduate students, and we have met and exceeded our target.
- Our research revenue has increased dramatically.
- Student satisfaction with the quality of education, already high a decade ago, has increased further by certain measures, and rates consistently higher than for most of our peers.
- Our reputation, which affects the credibility of all our degrees and research proposals, has measurably improved.

These are very, very important changes for our students, for our faculty, for our province, and for all the communities we serve in the wider world.

I would mention one other difference that integrated planning has made: the university is now more visible. I don't mean just or even primarily externally visible: our profile has increased nationally, to be sure, but I am thinking of the visibility of "the university" inside the university. A decade or more ago, the University of Saskatchewan was a collection of separate units. It was no more than the sum of its parts, and perhaps was less than the sum of its parts. If the term community denotes tight bonds of social capital – high levels of trust, shared values, and normative expectations – then we were not as much of a community then as we are now. We trust more. We share more. We expect more of each other. There is

more university in our university today, more character and more identity. But perhaps not enough. That brings me to where we are today.

Part Four: Where Are We Now?

In taking stock, it seems to me that the last ten years have been a remarkable journey for our institution. There has been change, quite a bit of change, and also the stresses that go with change. We are, I believe, on the verge of a breakthrough as an institution.

A breakthrough involves more changes, and more stresses, before we reach the place we want to be. The coming years are going to be important ones for the University of Saskatchewan.

So where are the pressure points?

In terms of academic functions of the university, we are, to go by the evidence, closest in **teaching** to where we want to be. It would of course be foolish to be complacent, since the students and the field are changing: we will no doubt have to change to remain as good as we are.

Again to go by the evidence, we are furthest from where we want to be in **research**. While we are among the top medical-doctoral universities in teaching, we are among the bottom in tricouncil research. We have work to do in this area, as we do in engagement with Aboriginal students and communities, another area where our progress is encouraging but less than what is needed.

There is a reason these areas, research and engagement with Aboriginal people, are the first two focal areas for our new plan.

Of the president's four strategic directions from a decade ago, our thinking also needs to become clearer about what is needed to recruit and retain a diverse and

academically promising body of undergraduate students. Our challenge in this context is to think strategically about enrolment management. Colleges and program leaders need to be thinking about what kind and mix of students should be at the University of Saskatchewan. They need to be working closely with Student Enrolment Services Division (SESD) and others to get those students here and support them to succeed. Our fledgling initiatives in Aboriginal student recruitment, in international and out-of-province recruitment, in innovative programming, and in supporting student success need to develop into robust institution-wide emphases.

Those tasks are priorities. We have, by and large, identified the right priorities in our planning processes. We haven't yet made sufficient progress on all of them. To do so, we will need to be more effective in how we work together to get things done. I would highlight five processes or aspects in which further change would help us see monumental gains:

- **Implementation.** We remain better at making proposals than at working together effectively to achieve the intended outcomes promptly. Somehow we need to get things roughly right the first time, be content with that as a stage of development, and find fewer reasons for delays or questions.
- **Communication.** Communication cannot be an add-on to decisions already made. Not for the university – not for colleges and units. Communication has to be built into the planning and decision-making processes throughout, and at all levels in our organization.
- **Innovation.** We continue, on the whole, to innovate at the edges of our programs and services, by adding on, rather than innovating from within to transform what we have. The kind of innovation we need generally will involve interdisciplinary or cross-unit collaboration.
- **Simplicity.** We have made some gains in making some of our programs and processes both simpler and more effective at the same time. There is quite a bit more to do. The hardest decisions to make in planning are ones about what to do less of; what to stop doing; which existing or proposed activities

not to pursue. We need focus. We need simplicity in our plans, in our activities, in our programs, and in our processes.

- **Common purpose.** I mentioned that we have gained more of a sense of common understanding, of shared identity, and of collective purpose than we had a decade ago. We don't yet have enough. While we have made progress, I will be among the first to say that divides remain. There is still thinking in silos. There is still thinking in camps.

I have heard from some faculty members that they believe the university is hiring too many non-academic staff. I also hear, perhaps from different faculty, that faculty lack support for the administrative work they are called on to do. Meanwhile a number of staff members have contacted me to indicate they feel undervalued in the conversations our institution has about itself. We have data to show that students do not always feel they are treated adequately as people. I have heard faculty members question whether students are qualified to have influential opinions about their own education. Faculty versus staff versus students ... and I won't even mention what people say about administrators.

Please understand, I am not complaining about differences in opinions. Those are expected and welcome in a university. But overall we need a little more sense of a university as a collective enterprise, as a community of shared fate in which we make our future together.

An insufficient sense of common purpose holds us back. I think, at root, this is why it still takes too long to implement what we have decided. Fundamental questions arise at every stage, not only at the beginning. We try to go back on institutional decisions made years ago. We wonder whether the university is serious about what its governing bodies have concluded following open conversation. After committing in principle to changes, we have difficulty tolerating the ambiguity and vulnerability that result.

We will need a sense of common purpose in years ahead. We will have tough decisions still to make. Our university operating budget is 70 per cent funded by the Government of Saskatchewan, and we depend on research and capital and other funds from different levels and agencies of government in addition to that amount. No one who surveys public finances in Canada can feel confident about the years ahead. Pressures created by health-care needs are putting growing strain on government budgets. Even if education remains the number two priority of all governments, number two could still mean a flat budget or a reduction in a bad year. We will continue to need both tough decisions and bold actions. Our experience in adjusting, reorganizing, and investing in the current planning cycle is sure to be called upon again at some point in coming years.

There are many positive signs. There is a sense of common purpose in our governing bodies, including notably in University Council, which – as a whole and through its committees – participates in setting the institutional agenda. There is common purpose in the leadership of the university: the vice-presidents work together as a cohesive group, and the deans and AVPs increasingly find common projects to a degree we would not have seen a decade ago.

When I think about my experience of planning at the U of S – what has been most inspiring to me personally – I think of the meetings I have had with the commitment leaders for the *Second Integrated Plan*. Planning and implementation are social activities; and they need to be animated for people and by people. Commitment leaders have voluntarily stepped outside their usual roles to exercise creative influence cutting across our institution. They model working together across boundaries. They support change within colleges and units. They have developed important cross-unit and university-wide ideas for practical change. Our commitment leaders are the nucleus of an emerging culture of engagement, a collaborative way of getting done the work of our university. I am impressed by the difference they have made. I am profoundly grateful for them and for their contributions.

I would also highlight the development of the Council of Health Sciences Deans as a new way of doing things. The health sciences are subject to extraordinary external pressures and demands; they also have huge opportunities associated with the health sciences project. To deal with both challenges and opportunities, the deans in this part of our university began collaborating in new and more extensive ways a couple of years ago. Wider and wider circles of college leaders, faculty, staff, and students are becoming involved in integrated and interprofessional initiatives in education, research, administration, and planning. The Council of Health Sciences Deans is an emerging success story of our university.

I expect there will be a future academic address, perhaps about ten years from now, that will review these and other successes. In reviewing them, that future academic address will document how today's successes were part of a decisive few years in the University of Saskatchewan's history, when we earned and were recognized for an honoured place among our peers. The next few years could be the most exciting in the history of our institution.

Close to thirty years ago, George Keller wrote a book on *Academic Strategy* which was in many ways the beginning of the kind of planning we now engage in in higher education.⁵ I find particularly meaningful a number of things that Keller wrote in 1983:

- **Strategic planning looks outward and is focused on keeping the institution in step with the changing environment.** Keller quoted F. Scott Fitzgerald to the effect that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time.” We must simultaneously keep in mind our internal aspirations and the actual external conditions in which we work.

⁵ George Keller, *Academic Strategy: The Management Revolution in American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1983). The following references are from pp. 143-151.

- Strategic planning **concentrates on decisions and it is action-oriented**. It makes use of plans, analyses, forecasts, and goals, but it is really about decisions. It especially emphasizes the allocation of resources. “Strategic planning is people acting decisively and roughly in concert to carry out a strategy that they have helped devise.”
- **Strategic planning concentrates on the fate of the institution above all else**. We come together every four years to ask what is the best thing that the University of Saskatchewan can do to advance our goals, our values, and our strategic directions. Integrated planning is about the common good, about our shared and mutual interests, and not about the individual issue or problem.

While all of those observations ring true to me, one other point Keller makes stands out above all others in my thinking: “Academic strategic decision making [he writes] means that a ... university and its leaders are active rather than passive about their position in history.” We cannot completely control the factors that affect us. We are not free to make history exactly as we please. But we nevertheless make it. We shape our future as we can, and planning is how we do it. In planning we bring together aspiration and realism to take action as a community.

It is true that our university is doing better in measurable ways than a decade ago. But that’s not the most fundamental benefit of planning. To me, the most far-reaching impact of planning is this: it makes us active agents in our own story. Planning makes us a university that acts rather than a university that simply exists.

I understand planning as institutional consciousness, action, and change. That understanding is what attracted me, personally, to the job that I have. Planning is worth my time, energy, and commitment in a big way. I think it is worth the time, energy, and creativity of every one of you and of every member of our community.

Thank you for your time.