WHOM DO WE SERVE?

LOCATING THE PUBLIC INTEREST IN THE UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

FINAL – 27 February 2009

Presented to the University of Saskatchewan community, Convocation Hall

Thank you for that kind introduction, President MacKinnon. Good afternoon.

I want to speak to you today about the expansive purposes of the University of Saskatchewan, the reasons an institution like ours exists, and what those reasons mean for all of us as members of the university community. We participate in the university by working here, by studying here, and by volunteering our time. There are personal benefits we receive from those activities. But is the university simply a machine for printing paycheques and diplomas and producing other quantifiable, individual benefits? Many in this university have long felt there is something more to it than that, that a university – and this one in particular – stands for something more than individual gain. But I don’t think we often spend our time talking about what this “something more” may be.
I want to dedicate my first academic address to speaking about our shared purposes. I want to reflect on the subject in public, and to invite thought and debate both in the limited time we have here today and outside this storied hall.

**Who Owns the University?**

I want to begin by posing a deceptively simple question:

Have you ever asked yourself, who owns the University of Saskatchewan?

That may sound like an odd question. But it’s a reasonable question to ask in a society where we categorize a great many things according to ownership. As you drive down the streets of Saskatoon most things you see have owners: houses, businesses, government offices. But as you go down College Drive and look onto the university campus, you might ask, who owns that? If the university were a small business, you might expect to walk in and shake hands with the proprietor. And if it were a large business, there might be an annual general meeting where all the shareholders would attend to cast votes on the university’s future. But where are the university’s owners?

To answer that question, we might start with the related question of what universities are for. Understanding their function might shed light on who owns them.
What are universities for?

Universities are not just organizations like any other organization. When we refer to them as institutions, we are for the most part using the word institution in its correct way. There is something special about universities, and I believe it derives from their purposes as well as their history.

Now, I love to think about universities. I love to read about universities – and there are a lot of books on the subject. In what follows, I do not aim to be comprehensive. I do aim to share a little about how I think about universities, because I think on almost a daily basis about what a university is and does. Thinking about these issues is part of what it means to be provost or to be a senior leader in a university.

When I think of universities, I think of six traditions.

First, there is the idea of the community of scholars, of wise and learned people coming together to reflect in common on important questions, and to take apprentices and reproduce their community of knowledge. President MacKinnon has spoken recently and eloquently about the contemporary meaning of the idea of a community of scholars. By my reading, this idea has ancient roots, perhaps as far back as 2,000 B.C. or earlier. There were more or less formally named and constituted academies or schools in ancient China, India, and Persia. Communities of scholars in Greece were not the first, but did provide an important model for later developments.
Second, given our geographic location in Saskatchewan, I think of **First Nations** systems of knowledge. While it is difficult to generalize about such diverse peoples, most commonly we relate the idea of learning in traditional First Nations communities to the important roles of elders, to the embedding of knowledge in story and ritual, and to the connection between knowledge and place or environment. We also think of how learning is linked to the development of the whole person, such that knowledge is gained when the individual is ready for it. When we think of these as living traditions, we can both respect them and learn from them.

Third, we have the **classic medieval universities of Europe**. By my reading, it might be appropriate to characterize these as universities that were constituted particularly for professional education. Usually the education of students for the clergy, law, and medicine took priority. Insofar as medieval universities of Europe are the most direct ancestors of the universities we have today, we might say that professional education is the foundation of the university as a Western institution. These were corporate bodies that had a self-regulating, guild-like character acknowledged by medieval authorities. These bodies were the first被称为 universities.

I believe a fourth kind of tradition was also present in the mix, and came to the fore wherever universities became associated with general development of the intellect and character of individuals. Often this was done by study of classic texts and by cultivation of capacities for reasoning and expression. While we can see this tradition articulated in various times and places, it is most meaningfully
expressed for me in the tradition of the “liberal arts,” and particularly in the mid- to late 19th century ideas of John Henry Newman.

A fifth tradition emerged in early 19th-century Germany. This tradition notably emphasized creation of new knowledge and academic freedom as defining features of universities. The unity of teaching and research, and the freedoms of teaching and of learning, are important concepts imparted by the German tradition.

Sixth and finally, in my own understanding of these matters, the American system of graduate education that developed in the late 19th century and spread in the 20th represents another idea of what university is for. This system was expressed in PhD programs and in the rigorous and systematic training of people to become scholars.

I have said that, the way I see it, all of these traditions are alive and vibrant in universities like ours. Each is a different way of understanding our contribution to the public interest. We are communities of scholars. We embed learning in story and ritual. We train professionals. We develop persons. We live the unity and the tension of teaching and research and academic freedom. We are a medical-doctoral university.

My point is that these six traditions – and there may be others – co-exist. In any modern university, and ours is no exception, there are at least six different, broad purposes that our university serves, each of which comes out more at one time or one place or in one part of the university than another. This multiplicity of
purposes is part of what makes a contemporary university seem like a complicated place.

A complicated place

I have mentioned that contemporary universities appear complicated. I would, in fact, draw distinctions among three terms. There is complexity in the sense the word is used in some branches of knowledge to denote a kind of decentralized, evolved interdependence of parts. We have that in our university, and probably need more of a sense of it. We need a sense of common purpose, of how all our different traditions and activities fit together in a coherent whole. Then there is complication in the sense that literary theorists sometimes use it, namely that any simple proposition should be rebutted by some opposing view, in order to advance our understanding and to go beyond the binary thinking to which we are otherwise prone. We do that in this university. We need to stretch our minds and think about differences. Finally, there is what for lack of a better term I would call complicatedness: just having a lot of things, a lot of stuff going on, disconnected, to the point that there may be a tendency to lose sight of what holds it all together.

If I may say so, complexity and complication are good things for universities. Complicatedness, probably not.
Now, what does all this have to say about the question I posed concerning ownership? First and foremost, if universities are complex and multifaceted, we might expect that ownership and control are not clear and simple. Second, we certainly can see that learners and teachers are fundamental to all traditions of what makes a university. So perhaps we should focus on these two groups first.

**Are the students the owners of the university?** They certainly were in some of the medieval and Renaissance universities. Some of the famous Italian universities were run by the students, notably by the law and medicine students, who hired the professors to teach for them. It was a model that worked well enough at the time, but has not been common since. Students are represented in our governance, and their voice is important, but they do not directly make university decisions.

**Are the faculty the owners?** Again, there are examples where this was clearly the case, where universities were run in every respect by faculty with little funding from or responsibility to any other group. It remains the case that faculty have unique influence within the university and control many matters. But imagine the public reaction today if we said the university was run by the faculty for the benefit of the faculty. There is something missing in the idea that faculty alone are owners of the university.
Serving the Public Interest

One way to think about ownership is to ask, who benefits? Whom does the university exist to serve? And one answer, which contains an important measure of truth, is to say that the university belongs to the public because it serves the public.

To say that we serve the public may not be a simple or an obvious thing to everyone. After all, we serve clients, don’t we? – students and research partners in particular. We run programs. We maintain buildings. We serve food and sell leisure apparel. We care for books and art and scientific apparatus. It is easy to see the individual things we do and forget that behind them is a concept that we all serve the public interest.

The fact that our university serves the public was clear to our founding president one hundred years ago. When Walter Murray led the establishment of our institution, he based it on the University of Wisconsin model and on the concept of “service” by the university to society. “What is the sphere of the university?” President Murray famously asked. “Its watchword is service – service of the state in the things that make for happiness and virtue as well as the things that make for wealth.”

Our current president has regularly quoted from Walter Murray. President MacKinnon cited, in his 1999 installation address, Murray’s vision for the university.
Murray, in fact, had a particular model in mind: that provided by the University of Wisconsin. I was recently reading Shirley Spafford’s book, *No Ordinary Academics*, a history of economics and political science at the University of Saskatchewan. In it she wrote about how Murray’s vision for our university was inspired by a U.S. example:

Of all the universities he visited during his tour of American campuses, Murray held none in greater regard than the University of Wisconsin, where the notion of university experts working together with political leaders and others in the community had become known as the Wisconsin Idea. ‘If we can follow in your footsteps,’ he wrote to [the] president of the University of Wisconsin, after his visit there in 1908, ‘the Province will ultimately have a University equal to the best in Canada. We were greatly impressed with the way you have conserved the best of the old Universities and have at the same time adapted yourselves to the changing needs of the state.’

Spafford goes on to relate that the “Wisconsin Idea” consisted of two elements: first, that “that university experts should devote themselves to furthering the prosperity of the state and general well-being of the community through assistance to legislators and other public officials, and [second,] that the university should extend its services to every resident” through the forms of training and extension appropriate at that time. “Culture and Utility receive equal emphasis,” Murray said of the University of Wisconsin. “Both inspire Research and are in turn strengthened by it.”
So our university was founded on a specific model of public service, bringing together culture and practical sciences and research. Our founding vision was to contribute to the “prosperity of the state and general well-being of the community” and we were to do this by working both with public officials and with many others.

The benefits of the university’s activities, in other words, were meant to be widely spread.

Let me fast forward one century. I also have been reading the recently published memoirs of one of Saskatchewan’s premiers, who devotes a chapter to university issues. Allan Blakeney recognizes the “special part” that the University of Saskatchewan played in the history of the province. He also observes that this special role at times led some at the university to feel entitled to make key decisions on our own without outside input, a conclusion he calls “remarkable.”

In my experience, former premier Blakeney is a reasonable man. I am inclined to take notice when he writes that, because the university serves the public, we are under an obligation to receive input from others. He describes the university’s bargain with the public as follows:

The university is an institution created by society, and by which society provides a livelihood for scholars. In exchange, scholars pass on accumulated knowledge, add to the body of knowledge, and, one would hope, wrestle with the intellectual, ethical, and moral issues of the age.
It is an important idea that universities exist in a kind of social compact. The public, the government, support us because what we do is good for society. They support us in exchange for our creating and passing on knowledge, but also in exchange for our wrestling with intellectual, ethical, and moral issues. We serve in part by questioning as well as by listening to others.

Knowledgeable people from our founding president to a premier of the province agree that our university is here to serve society, not just ourselves. This requires us to think about impacts beyond our boundaries, and to be open to input from our external communities.

**Who Owns the University? – Three Possibilities**

We can say the public is intended to benefit from our activities. Does that mean the public owns us?

Ownership is classically defined as the power to allocate something, to dispose of it, and to enjoy the benefits of it. So who has the power to allocate and to dispose, in the case of the university? Is this also the public? Who speaks for the public?
Does Government Own the University?

Usually we regard the government, in our case particularly the Government of Saskatchewan, as the collective representative of the public. It is the Government of Saskatchewan that has chartered us and made numerous stipulations about how we do our job. So: does the government own the university?

In Saskatchewan, a public interest in the university is reflected among other places in our legislation. For example, any substantial sale of our land or buildings requires approval by government. The state’s supervision of our use of our assets reflects the fact that we are obliged to use our resources for public benefit, not for the benefit of ourselves, our organization, or any private outside interest.

Section 4 of our legislation sets out the purpose of the university as defined by the government. According to that section:

4(1) The primary role of the university is to provide post-secondary instruction and research in the humanities, sciences, social sciences and other areas of human intellectual, cultural, social and physical development.

(2) The board, senate and council are responsible for determining the manner in which the university shall fulfil its primary role having regard to:

(a) this Act; and

(b) the recognized principles of academic freedom.\(^4\)
So the government has acknowledged broad purposes for the university, and empowered our governing bodies to pursue those purposes not only subject to the Act, but also subject to “recognized principles” that are defined by wider discourse and not by government itself.

Of the three governing bodies identified in our act, only one has any government appointees, and in that case, the government appoints fewer than half. Nor are any of the members of our governing bodies specifically accountable to the government for following its directions with regard to the university. Our legislation has set us up to be autonomous of government while empowered by it.

There are some public leaders in Canada who would go further than the relationship described in our act. Somewhat more than a year ago, Alberta’s minister of advanced education and technology expressed an opinion along these lines in relation to Alberta’s post-secondary institutions. “We need to have clarity about who is supposed to be doing what when,” Doug Horner was quoted in The Globe and Mail. Horner went on to say, “The Province of Alberta owns all these institutions and that has to be forefront. We determine where the resources are going to be allocated. We want them to concentrate on excellence.”

There, at least, is a clear answer. It might be one shared by Danny Williams, Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, who this past year became directly involved in the appointment of the president of Memorial University. One of the candidates, Memorial’s acting president, withdrew from the search “out of
concern that the school’s independence needed to be protected from political interference.”

It is informative, as well, to look further afield. One development I have been following with interest and some concern is the unfolding of the university reform process in Europe in the wake of the Bologna Accord on higher education. While the Bologna system has many aspects, in some respects it has the character of a state-led process of institutional change. Bologna is a reminder that governments become more interventionist when they believe universities are slow to respond to public needs.

In Canada, I believe there remain principles supportive of university autonomy that are shared by a wide cross-section of Canadian society and notably by opinion leaders. Here there are deeply held traditions that universities serve the public, but do so differently and separately from how the state serves the public. **It should go without saying that universities serve the public best when we serve it freely and autonomously.** We serve the public best when we provide a forum for many diverse ideas, including ideas with which others are not yet ready, and may never be ready, to be associated. These things should go without saying. And yet, perhaps they do not. It may be that respect for university autonomy will continue only if universities continue to earn respect for our autonomy.

And if we agree that university autonomy is important, we should think about what we need to do to re-articulate it in present-day circumstances. At a minimum, we need to demonstrate that we are serious about serving public
interests; that we listen to the advice of others, including government, about what those public interests might be; and that we are accountable for our actions.

In this connection our university’s new *Framework for Assessment*, adopted last fall, defines accountability as follows:

a set of mechanisms or procedures that ensure regular communication about outcomes, desired outcomes, successes and failures. It represents our commitment to openness and transparency because it provides information about what we are doing, how well we are doing it, and what else we need to do to achieve our goals. It obliges us to assume responsibility for our plans, our actions, and our use of public resources. And it obliges us to consider how our activities are perceived by external sources.

We listen to advice from government, among others. We are accountable to governments, not only the Government of Saskatchewan but also the federal government, municipal governments, and others. We are not controlled by them. Indeed, to the extent we engage with governments and demonstrate accountability, we reduce the possibility that they might wish to control us.

*Does No One Own the University?*

While there are two patterns of ownership commonly perceived in society – ownership by individuals or ownership by the state – universities like ours conform to neither ideal type. This conundrum led management scholar Henry Mintzberg of McGill University some years ago to characterize universities as “non-owned” organizations. As he put it on one occasion, “Nobody owns them
...I think that’s a healthy way to be.” Mintzberg attributes the excellence of universities to the fact that no one owns them. “When you’re a commercial organization,” Mintzberg has argued, “you’re working for somebody else. You’re an employee. You’re just there to bring profit to somebody else’s pockets. When you’re working for government, you’re usually in a very rigorously controlled organization where there’s a very clear hierarchy and very clear … rules, whereas the university in general … is a sort of bottom-up organization.”

There is something compelling about the idea of a university as a non-owned space within a society that is largely seen as divided up between individual and state ownership.

A society less obsessed than our own with possession and exclusivity might have a quicker time understanding universities in this way. It occurs to me that First Nations people and cultures might have interesting insights into how a non-owned form of organization relates to and protects a public interest. Blair Stonechild has written about education as the “new buffalo.” If we see things that way, we might not ask about ownership just as we needn’t have asked who owned the herds of bison, the prairies on which they walked, or the spirit and genius that pursued them.

The caution I feel relates to the fact that we know what happened to the bison and the Prairies when they encountered the structures of modern society. The bison and the prairies both ended up enclosed in people’s fences.
To say, as Mintzberg does, that we are non-owned positions us, in a way, negatively and vulnerably. To be a non-owned organization sounds to me a bit like a vacuum that human nature will abhor, or like a commons waiting for its tragedy.

The tragedy of the university commons could result, it seems to me, in one of two ways. One danger is fairly frequently remarked upon. This is the possibility that an outside organization – whether business or government – might assert dominance in a way that hinders our ability to serve the rest of our publics.

But there is, I think, another danger, of what I might call privatization from within. This is the possibility that each of those inside the organization might claim our own piece of the university and control it for the purpose primarily of our own satisfaction. It is possible that people can dispose or allocate the university’s resources on small scales in ways that benefit them personally, or arrange things such that their personal convenience outranks the public interest. Instinctively we all know this would be wrong.

So what Mintzberg’s concept of non-ownership is missing is a sense of accountability and of common purpose.

Non-ownership, as a concept, is interesting but insufficient. We also need the public interest, and a way to know what it is.
Is the University Part of the Not-for-Profit Sector?

There are other organizations in society besides governments and for-profit enterprises. Jack Quarter of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has stressed the character of universities as autonomous organizations directed by volunteer boards. On this basis, he has included universities in his definition of the “social economy” along with other voluntary organizations such as the YWCA, the Canadian Automobile Association, trade unions, professional associations, and so on. In Quarter’s view, a university is a “public-sector nonprofit” defined by the fact that it combines public funding with charitable donations, and is directed by a volunteer board in the name of wider public interests.10

The idea of the university as a public-sector nonprofit directs our attention to the common approaches and issues we share with other nonprofit organizations. Like them, we meet community needs and mobilize volunteers and donations. We might regard ourselves as part of that community and cultivate our connections with it more systematically.

But though it is interesting to think about the university’s connections with the voluntary sector and other nonprofits, there are important differences as well. Our scale and complexity differentiate us; so, too, does our degree of formalization of structure, salaried personnel, and resources. The biggest difference, however, may be the multiplicity of co-existing purposes and traditions I mentioned earlier. Universities are permanently and inherently diverse in a way few other organizations can match.
Locating the Public Interest

So we belong to the public, but not to the state. We could be called non-owned, yet somehow we are still accountable. We resemble nonprofit enterprises, but we are not quite like other types.

There is one idea that I would single out, and that is the concept of trusteeship. Trustee relationships are prominent in governance, particularly of nonprofits. They exist where one group of people act on behalf of a wider interest that they have a responsibility to interpret. There is something in this idea that fits the university’s situation. We are responsible for public interests. We have to strive to interpret what those interests are. We exist in a kind of trustee relationship, responsible for serving the interests of wider publics.

What is interesting is that there is no one person or group in a university who has the exclusive responsibility to interpret the public interest. It is more like it is all of our jobs, together, to do so. Interpreting society’s interests is, in small ways or large ones, part of the job of everyone associated with a university. I wonder, in fact, whether we can’t regard a university as something that has evolved the way it has in order to be the kind of mechanism you have to have to understand the public interest: a mechanism that is diverse, multifaceted, complex, and evolving.

I have said it is a responsibility to interpret the public interest. We do that as individuals when we reflect on the larger purposes of our work. But most of all,
we do it together when we engage in conversations about the purposes and priorities of our university.

So where are the sites where we do this most visibly in our university? As I’ve mentioned, they are everywhere. I certainly think of our collegial relations, our departments and colleges, our processes for academic freedom and for professional and ethical standards: these are places where faculty, in particular, articulate goals and devise programs and initiatives that meet wider needs. I think of the senior leadership positions of the university as well. If I didn’t think it was a significant part of my job to think about these issues, I wouldn’t be discussing them with you.

But while there are many places and processes in the university where we discuss our wider purposes, there are four things that especially spring to my mind today.

First, I think of our three governing bodies. Board, council, and senate are places where people come together to think about the interests of the whole institution and beyond. For people from different parts of the university and from outside to deliberate together in these bodies creates a stronger sense, just by itself, of the larger purposes we serve. The policies made by these bodies are intended to be and are places where the public interest is made plain.

Second, I think of our students. When we engage with our students and their needs, we are engaging with and shaping society. The university’s dedication to the public interest is nowhere plainer than in our dedication to students. Almost
every job in the university contributes directly or indirectly to students. We know that the quality of students’ experience of the university depends critically not only on faculty but on all staff, from those who advise students and respond to their concerns, to those who serve students in food outlets and residences, to those who work on the buildings and administrative processes that make it possible for students to be here. If we find the public interest in no other way, we find it in how we serve students.

Third, I think of interdisciplinary research and learning. The public interest is not the province of any one discipline, and likely cannot be adequately understood or served well by any discipline alone. Society is interdisciplinary. Real life is interdisciplinary. The public interest is interdisciplinary.

This is why some of our most important initiatives, which are designed directly to address questions of the public interest, are interdisciplinary in character, and are intended to lead our institution’s way in interdisciplinarity. I am referring to our three brand-new schools. Public health, environment and sustainability, and public policy are three key areas in which our university has chosen to debate and identify and further and serve the public interest. All represent key challenges of our times. All are places where we must contribute.

There are of course many places in the university where people can and should think about the common good. An engaged university will connect virtually everywhere, in some way, with the public interest. But at any point in time, there will always be places that stand out. When I think of where we at the University of Saskatchewan directly address the public interest, I think of areas
like the ones I have mentioned: conversations in our governing bodies, conversations with and about our students, and problem-based interdisciplinary research. All of these are ways in which we identify our responsibilities toward society.

Finally – and this is not unrelated – I think of our planning processes. Planning is how we talk about and shape our priorities and directions. Planning is a conversation we have about our purposes and what we will do about them. Through integrated planning we have identified the student experience as our highest priority for the coming years. This is because, in the current context, improving the student experience is one of the biggest public contributions we can make. We have also identified issues-based interdisciplinary scholarship as one of our commitments. And we have numerous other commitments in our plan that address public interests: innovative programs that include community experiences for students; engagement with Aboriginal communities; contributions to innovation and to culture; mutually beneficial partnerships with external communities; and so on. Our dedication to serve public interests runs through our university plan as a recurring theme.

The idea of a university that serves the public interest has a special significance in uncertain times like the ones in which we now live. There is economic turmoil in the world. There are signs of political and social stresses accompanying that turmoil. Society needs answers and directions. Society needs knowledge, innovations, and technologies that will provide for improvement and sustainability. Our publics will need to understand and cope with the effects on people of what is going on in the world today. We will need community
economic development and social development. We will need intercultural engagement, global awareness, and, above all, well-educated and highly skilled people throughout society. A university, our university, is called as never before to serve the public interest.

The theme of my talk today has been that we are all, singly and together, responsible for and accountable to the public interest. Every single job connected to this institution, every volunteer and every student, makes a difference and has a role to play. We appropriately think of students and faculty first, but every job in this university contributes to our shared public purposes. Our work may sometimes be separate, but the difference we make is all together.

A number of years ago, I heard Michael Atkinson give one of his annual academic addresses, and I was struck by what a good idea it was. The first promise I made as your provost-elect was to continue this tradition. These occasions embody what we are about as an institution. I feel a responsibility to share something about how I think and what I think about; you should know some of the concerns and ideas that guide me in my work. We should reflect openly on important matters and with the opportunity for comment and diverse opinions. In doing this, we celebrate the discussion and discourse, the rules and norms, that make us the university we are.

For this first academic address, I chose to tackle the idea of what a university is for and how it serves the public interest. I have to say that if you care about universities – as you must if you are a provost – then these are the kinds of questions that intrigue and excite and sometimes keep you awake at night.
There are many other questions. I think I already have a short-list of five topics for next year’s address.

But for today, thank you – and please know that I will welcome your thoughts and responses, both now and in the days to come.

2 Spafford, Shirley. No Ordinary Academics: Economics and Political Science at the University of Saskatchewan, 1910-1960 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 28 and ff for the following.
4 The University of Saskatchewan Act 1995, c.U-6.1, s.4.