Thoughts about change in academic institutions

Since he took office as provost and vice-president academic, Brett Fairbairn has made it a point to deliver an annual address to the community, a lecture of sorts that allows him to explore the issues beyond the day-to-day activities of his office or the university as a whole. This year, as an alternative to a presentation in Convocation Hall, the provost sat down for an interview with On Campus News to explore one idea that has been on his mind – universities and the process of change. This is the full version of interview that appeared in abbreviated form in the May 24, 2013 issue of On Campus News.

OCN: This is a very unique way to deliver an academic address.

BF: I was intending to do the academic address but there were so many things going on from February through April that there was no good time to schedule it. And I thought, well, people in the institution are busy with big things – there are budget adjustments, there’s TransformUS. I don’t want to complicate things further but I still think about universities and like to get thoughts out there as best I can. A conversation with a newspaper isn’t interactive, it’s not live, but I wouldn’t want the year to go by without sharing some ideas and inviting people to respond.

OCN: Do you view universities as institutions that adapt well to change?

BF: Universities are pretty stable organizations. It’s one of our characteristics and it’s one of our strengths. We don’t aim to change everything from week to week although we do aim to be responsive to big trends in society. Right now, there’s a lot of change going on in universities, including our own. It really strikes me that, for universities today, there’s an increased amount of change in every area.

OCN: What’s driving that change?

BF: There’s change in the public-policy environment, in the expectations of government, in funding, in the expectations by parents, the public and the media. That’s pretty pervasive. I’ve recently been looking at universities in England for example, where they’re facing a completely different environment and a need to be responsive to student demands in ways they never have been before. And in ways we haven’t seen here.

OCN: Are we feeling those pressures here?

BF: The trends are similar throughout the developed world but the intensity and the exact combination of things are different in different places. I think the media, the public, parents, students and governments actually have similar interests everywhere and those interests get expressed in different policies, in different decisions, in different countries, so I can see similarities in what’s going on in Saskatchewan with what’s going on in the United States, in Europe and in other provinces in Canada.

OCN: Should we be concerned about the pace of change?

BF: It’s a little bit daunting to see how much change is going on in universities relative to what we are used to, and there are aspects that are also a little bit reassuring. In Saskatchewan, we have been a bit sheltered relative to other places but it is not great comfort when we’re dealing with more change than we ever have before in recent memory.

OCN: You say the U of S has been sheltered. Do you think that will always be the case?

BF: We don’t know the future but my hope is that we’ll continue to be exposed to moderate demands and expectations from the external public. What’s also nice about that is that when the pace of change is a little bit more moderate, we are in a position to be more deliberate and take our time to think about things. There are things we do under financial pressure but there are things we can also take the time to think about and do right.
OCN: You’re describing the pace of change as moderate but that might not be true for everyone.

BF: Some are more affected than others. I am mindful that people have been losing jobs. Generally, our sense of what’s comfortable is one the things that may have to adapt to new times. I think we do have to maintain academic principles and values but we will also have to get accustomed to a slightly quicker pace of deliberation. That said, I would hope that we would still have the consultation and the opportunity for a variety of opinions to be expressed, which I really think is a hallmark of universities.

OCN: What is it about universities as institutions that makes significant change so difficult?

BF: We take a long-term view of things because when we have a transaction with a client, that’s usually a four-year interaction with a student to get a degree. That’s different from health care or a business when a transaction may be a minute, or five minutes, or a few days. We also take a long-term view because we have alumni out there and the value of their degrees, even though they finished studying years ago, depends in part on what our university does today. So, we have long-term responsibilities to bodies of knowledge, to professions, to disciplines, to communities of people. That’s all inherent in being a university.

OCN: So how do universities balance that long-term view with the pressures you described?

BF: Within that long-term framework, we have to learn increasingly how to be nimble and responsive, and as part of that, to think ahead and prepare for change in general ways so that the specific changes, when they are called for, can be quicker. I take an example from decision making in the university. A period of change will lead us to think more in terms of policy, governance, strategy, framework documents rather than looking exhaustively at one individual decision at a time. We don’t have the luxury to take years or even months to debate an individual decision. Having solid debates about policy, while being nimble on individual decisions, is how we can be true to long-term goals and also responsive to short-term needs and opportunities.

OCN: Are there some things about universities that cannot or should not change?

BF: That goes back to the definition of what a university is. There are things about a university so fundamental that, if you changed them, everyone would agree that what you have left is no longer a university. That’s really important to think about and that is about the values of the institution and some of the structures that are really closely related to those values.

OCN: Are you saying that neither the values nor the structures that make a university what it is should change?

BF: Not exactly. I view the values and the commitments of a university as more permanent and the actual structures as being more changeable. I think what’s really permanent are the values, the mission, the relations with community – the ideas that are in the minds of the public and the participants. All the other stuff, in times like this, we realize is more ephemeral. You can change how the parts of a university are organized and fit together without changing what it means to be a university.

OCN: Can you describe what you mean by structures?

BF: When I think about structures, I think about how jobs are defined, to whom people report, how people are organized into units, with whom they work on a daily basis, how those units are funded, governance, decision making, the framework for all the personal and social things that people do. What I’m not thinking about is any unit in particular.

OCN: You used the phrase “what it means to be a university” earlier. Can you expand on that?

BF: I don’t think that you can imagine a university that doesn’t take a long-term view in the ways I was describing. One of the things I find interesting about the autonomy of the university, about the freedom of discussion and the status and reputation of faculty as drivers of our mission is that these are things that, while reflected in our mission statement, bylaws and legislation, are actually embedded in society. The university is a social institution. Our rules and structures don’t create autonomy and freedom; they express them.

OCN: You mentioned we’ve been somewhat sheltered from the forces of change and have the luxury of being able to prepare but we still have to deal with short-term realities like budget deficits.
BF: A couple of thoughts. I don’t think change is only about public policy and budgets. It’s also about things we choose to do based on our environment and our values and goals. For example, our commitment to research intensiveness, to being a member of the U15, is not because anyone told us, “you must do this.” That was generated from within as a way of charting our course in the 21st-century environment. Similarly, our commitment to First Nations, Métis and Indigenous education and research – again, we are choosing that commitment for very good reasons. We’re doing it with our eyes open but it’s us choosing to do it.

OCN: But today, budget pressure is driving change at the U of S.

BF: The budget piece is part of the reason change is going on but I think the things we’re doing in research intensiveness and Aboriginal engagement are every bit as far reaching, maybe in the long run more far reaching, than changes in resources and administrative structure and process. It all has to work together so when we carry out budget reductions, we do it in part because we are protecting and prioritizing resources for the kinds of purposes we’ve said are important.

OCN: Would you say then that change takes the form of revolution and evolution?

BF: All of that is change and none of it is simple. The only thing about the budget-driven changes is that we have four years, but we only have four years. There are other things where we can set 10- or 20-year goals so there is a bit more urgency around the budget-driven stuff.

OCN: Universities are, at their heart, communities of people. What does change mean for them?

BF: What it means for people in the university is similar to what it means for people in any organization. Every person in the university will have changes in their job, in their work environment, in their relations with their co-workers as a result of all these things that are going on. I certainly do in my job. One of the things that I think is really interesting is seeing the growing emphasis on collaboration in the university. It’s becoming more and more apparent to me how much we need it to deal with the budget adjustments and changes in the university.

OCN: Why is collaboration so important?

BF: It means that for me, and for every employee, there’s more possibility, there’s openness and there are other people to share work with. But it also makes the institutional environment more complicated in some ways.

OCN: How?

BF: The advantage of a silo organization is that to do my job, I only really need to know what’s inside my silo. In the new environment, to do my job I have to know more about what everyone else is doing so that’s actually a pretty significant change.

OCN: Can you talk a bit about the role of leadership during times of institutional change?

BF: The leadership piece is critical. Leadership is more demanding and is changing in this environment. The basic functions and roles aren’t changed from what they were before – deans are still accountable for what they were accountable for previously – but in a time of change, there’s a lot more weight on that role. Often I think people in leadership roles have to dig deeper and come up with more creativity, with more inspiration, with more persuasion in order to help keep everything working the way it needs to.

OCN: But there are people in leadership positions who have never managed significant change.

BF: That’s a really interesting point. The way I think about it is there are strengths and limitations to what an academic environment means for leadership, and the strengths are worth pointing to. We have 1,100 faculty in this university and every one of them is a leader in a whole variety of respects. And we have a highly participatory governance structure. That is actually remarkable, that everybody over the course of a career has that many leadership opportunities and that many opportunities to learn it while watching other people do it. That happened for me in the role I’m in. When I was a member of Planning and Priorities Committee of Council, I kind of watched how the provost did the provost’s job. That kind of leadership development happens naturally in a university and better than it would happen in almost any other organization I can think of.
OCN: Are we supporting our leaders through this period?

BF: What we don’t have much of automatically is the formal leadership development so that we have to work on. But as part of operating budget adjustments, we’re paying attention to doing more things to help leaders to do their jobs.

OCN: Does that leadership development include helping them do the really difficult jobs like laying off staff or restructuring?

BF: We’re doing the things we’re doing now imperfectly because we don’t have a lot of people who’ve done, in the past, the things they’re called on to do now. That’s a learning experience for the person and the organization. It’s similar to what it is for the faculty and staff; everybody is being called on to do their jobs differently.

OCN: Is there anyone untouched by the kinds of change we’re seeing at the U of S?

BF: One of the things that we hope for is that there will be as little change, or change only of the positive kind, for students, and as much as possible, everyone is working to ensure as much as possible that is the case.

OCN: Speaking generally, how do you see the process of change unfolding at a university?

BF: Innovation or change usually looks like a long, long, long build-up period when things change slowly. You can think of it as momentum. There’s a period of rapid change and a period of consolidation and preparation for what comes next. When I look at organizations other than universities, and also when I look at universities, I see this kind of pattern.

OCN: Where is the U of S at in that cycle?

BF: We’ve been, for at least a decade, in this long build-up period and I think we’re getting into a period of rapid change. It doesn’t go on forever and that’s important for people to think about. I believe there’s probably a period of at least five years of really rapid change and one of the things that can be exciting about that is it’s a time when people can make a big difference to the institution.

OCN: How?

BF: If you were going to put time into improving processes or programs, reorganizing, trying out new forms of teaching and learning or new approaches to research and you had a choice about whether to do it now or five years from now, my advice would be do it now. Because there’s so much in motion, that’s actually an opportunity for people to step forward and shape the institution for how it’s going to be in the future.

OCN: It all feels very dramatic.

BF: There are all kinds of change in the world. In an organization, my hope would be that change would be largely intentional or as deliberate as we can make it. And for change to be intentional does often require that you have a decisive discussion about where you’re going and where you want to end up. That part can seem dramatic; actually doing it might be slow and steady and take years to get there.

OCN: Can you give an example?

BF: One would be the College of Medicine where the development of a vision and the starting of a process of change were very dramatic. It’s hard to imagine it being more so. But in fact, 10 years from now, when you look back on what has happened, much of it will seem to be evolutionary because of how long it took and how steadily it was done.

OCN: Can universities do anything to mitigate the feeling that it’s revolution rather than evolution?

BF: When people avoid talking about problems or opportunities, it ultimately makes it more difficult for the university because when we finally have to devote attention to it, it’s more convulsive than it would have been otherwise. I think it’s actually great when people talk openly about what’s going on internally as well as what’s going on in the world around us. And we probably don’t spend enough time doing that in an organized way.
OCN: Why not?

BF: We don’t want to challenge our colleagues; we don’t want to provoke an unpleasant discussion. We’re Canadian. We’re polite. We often avoid things that would be better to talk about sooner.

OCN: Is learning to be less polite a requirement in a period of change?

BF: The ability to have civil and open and frank conversations is always something you have to cultivate. I think in academia, collegiality can be really good when people in groups grapple with real issues. What is awkward for an institution is if collegiality means we avoid talking about certain things, and that can happen.

OCN: What are the risks inherent in change for a university?

BF: There are always risks. Some people underestimate the risks and jump into fundamental change too lightly. Others overestimate the risks and are too cautious. By and large, it isn’t very common that we’ve jumped in too quickly. We think very carefully in universities because we usually have time to do so. Sometimes that means we study the risks to death instead of actually trying things.

OCN: With that in mind, what should we be particularly aware of?

BF: Usually the biggest risks the institution faces are the flip side of our biggest goals. We think about engaging with First Nations and Métis people as an opportunity. The risk that goes with it is the risk that if we fail to do so, the university won’t be performing its mission and outcomes for society will be less. The risk is often just failing to do what is important to us. Doing nothing has big risks too.

OCN: So there are risks and benefits to change. How do you think about it?

BF: I’m certainly focused on potential. When I think about change, it has mostly positive associations for me so that excites me. That’s partly because I have great faith in our community to protect the things that shouldn’t change. We have lots of people in whom the values of the university are really strong. If you trust the people and the values, I think you can be really positive about the opportunities that change brings.

OCN: Is there anything that would raise a red flag for you to indicate a process of change isn’t going well?

BF: Change does create pressures on the structures of an institution. It’s like when you put a bridge under stress – there are cracks that open up and there are places where it pinches especially hard, there are people who have more difficulty with it than others. Paying attention to those things is really important.

OCN: On a personal note, what keeps you awake at night?

BF: Not much. I sleep well.

OCN: There’s nothing you worry about?

BF: I try to do my job really well because it involves supporting so many other people. The part that I find really awkward is how many different threads there are to keep track of in this job so I worry about forgetting one of them. If there are 30 things that need doing at once and I only remember to do 29 of them, occasionally I will wake up at night and often I’ll make a note and just go back to sleep. That’s okay for the things that I can personally do or influence. I also have hopes and fears for the university as a whole and all its people. For the most part, if I’m going to worry, I only worry about the things I can change.