

President Fairbairn's Installation Address  
Spring Convocation, June 5, 2019

While I have been president since December, it is today, in front of Convocation, that I formally and publicly declare my service to TRU. That makes this a special day, for the university and for me.

I have spent the last six months getting to know TRU and listening to people. I have been getting to know students, faculty, and staff, and giving them a chance to get to know me.

A couple of weeks ago I got some evidence that my efforts have been working. I was walking past the Arts and Education building when a social work student saw me and called out impulsively, "Hey—are you that new president guy?"

So, yes, for those of you I have not yet met: I am that new president guy. And I look forward to serving TRU.

I find myself overwhelmed by many emotions, beginning with gratitude. I want to acknowledge many people, beginning with my wife Norma and my family who have come on this journey with me. I couldn't do it without your support.

Coming as I have from Saskatchewan and from the territory of Treaty Six, I want to acknowledge the people of this place, the people of Secwepemcúlucw. We are assembled today on the territory of Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc. They have stewarded this place, these lands and waters, since time immemorial.

I am grateful to the students, faculty, and staff of Thompson Rivers University for the warm and gracious welcomes I have received. This is a community that gives a new president guy the benefit of the doubt. I am thankful for that. I aim to live up to TRU's best hopes and aspirations.

I am thankful to the presidential search committee, the Board of Governors, and the executive team of TRU for the particular confidence they have shown in me.

I have special thanks for Alan Shaver for his support and friendship.

And I am overwhelmed by the show of support from colleagues, friends, and all those who are here today to wish me well. I am thankful to each

and every one of you, and to those not here who have sent their thoughts and best wishes.

More than a year ago, one of my friends, who was unaware I had applied for a job here, sent me a plaque with the quote from naturalist John Muir, "The mountains are calling and I must go." My friend knows me well. The mountains have always called me and my family. The call of the mountains led us to many hiking trips over the years, and a lovely log cabin we developed in the foothills of Alberta. Well, now the mountains truly have called me.

And they haven't just called me to *be* here. There's more to it than that. The full sentence from John Muir is, "The mountains are calling and I must go and I will work on while I can, studying incessantly."<sup>1</sup> The mountains are not just a place to be, but a place to work and to learn. As our graduating students will discover, in today's world no one is ever done studying and learning. More than three decades after my own graduation, I am still learning from the people around me.

We are here, all of us, today, because education changes lives.

When I think of the transformative power of education, I think of my mother.

My mother was born on the land, a few miles outside of Star City, Saskatchewan, in a rough-hewn house that was little more than a wooden shack. There, my mother and her seven younger sisters and brothers grew up. Somewhere along the way, she imagined a different life for herself. She left the farm and tried to sign up, underage, in the Canadian army. She worked for a while as secretary for the Dean of Law in Saskatoon, to my knowledge the first involvement anyone in the family had with a university. When she turned 18, she enlisted. She worked hard, becoming a paymaster and a sergeant.

All along the way, my mother continued to pursue education. She upgraded her qualifications by taking correspondence classes. Every night after curfew, she went, with the captain's indulgence, to the one spot on the army base that had a light on: the telephone booth. Under a light bulb in a phone booth, she completed what she needed for university. After the war, she became the first in the family to access university education. She and my father went to Carleton College in Ottawa.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.adventure-journal.com/2018/08/what-muir-really-meant-by-the-mountains-are-calling/> as accessed 29 May 2019.

They used their English and history degrees to embark on professional careers, my father as a farm journalist, my mother as a part-time construction journalist and a paralegal secretary. All their lives, they loved language and history and politics and ideas. Education changed everything for them.

And education still changes lives today.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in my grandparents' time, only eight percent of the population had post-secondary education.

A few years ago, a Government of British Columbia report estimated that, in the coming decade, 77 percent of new jobs will require post-secondary training.

From eight percent when my mother was young, to nearly 80 percent in the workforce my children will be in. That's how much higher education has grown in importance in our society. There are still good jobs people will get without college or university training. But unless we are educating 80 percent of people at the post-secondary level, there will not be enough people for jobs, or jobs for people.

The role of a university is to prepare people for the future. As society has grown more complex, this has meant an enormous expansion of access.

Universities like TRU have a special mission in access and societal change.

Every university is special. Every university has a character, a history, a trajectory into the future, a story or many stories about itself. What is TRU's story?

I heard someone call this the little university that could. There's something in that; except TRU is not little any more.

With trades and other programs from its days as Cariboo College, TRU added to its academic programming during its time as University College of the Cariboo. Through merger with the BC Open University, TRU took on a unique mandate for distributed education. Through all these incarnations, TRU has pursued an open-access philosophy serving the needs of its region. At TRU we strive to keep our doors open to anyone seeking higher education, because we believe anyone has a right to reach their potential if they are willing to work for it.

This philosophy has led TRU faculty and staff to develop access, transition, and bridging programs. To be at the leading edge in

recognition of prior learning. To provide an array of student supports and practical experiences, including students teaching and serving other students to help each other succeed.

The inclusive philosophy has led TRU faculty and staff to develop respectful relations with Indigenous peoples and to design programs and initiatives that meet the needs of Indigenous communities.

Today TRU also attracts students from around the world. The nearly one-third of on-campus undergraduates who come from other countries help TRU offer a wider array of programs, with better facilities and services, and a global, intercultural experience for all students.

TRU students also learn differently. Our graduates are known for having hands-on, practical experience in community settings, including through student involvement in TRU research projects. TRU's distinctive research mandate has grown to embrace global themes of significance in our region, including sustainability, Indigenous health and education, and more. Research is now an important part of TRU, and helps us to remain focused on the changing needs of the communities we serve.

So TRU is certainly unique in its program mix, but perhaps more importantly in its spirit as an institution and its philosophy of educational inclusion and community engagement.

This is a new kind of Canadian university, and that was something that called to me. Every bit as much as the mountains did.

Universities grow and change, and TRU will continue to grow and change.

You are graduating in an era that will be defined by how your generation achieves important goals. I will single out three, the first of which is environmental sustainability.

Increasingly we know and see the problems of climate change and loss of biodiversity. Every graduate, regardless of field of study, has something to contribute to making our society sustainable.

Reconciliation is another critical task. Colonization was fundamentally disrespectful to the peoples who lived here from the beginning. We single out residential schools because of the harm they did to children and families. We single out missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. We single these things out, but in fact almost every aspect of colonialism was damaging. It falls to all people of our times to decolonize and to establish respectful relations.

Third, you are graduating into what appears to be an era of increased divisiveness. Tensions within and between societies have grown. Some of those tensions are national and global, while others are divisions you may see within your workplaces and communities. Your experiences as students in a diverse university equip you for that future.

It is clear you are graduating into a world full of opportunity and uncertainty.

The best preparation is the education you have received.

Education has changed and will continue to change your lives. But not only *your* lives. You will be employees and business owners, professionals and service providers, technicians and artists, parents and citizens. The lives you lead and the work you do will improve the communities in which you live. Education makes individual people better off, but it is ultimately about making all people better off.

I want to congratulate all of you, and your families and your supporters, for taking the steps you have taken to advance yourselves *and* your communities.

Answer your call, work on while you can, study incessantly. Wherever you go, carry with you some of the spirit of TRU.