From Ivory Tower to Public Square: Democracy and the Engaged University

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I am honoured to have been asked to speak at this opening of the 2013 World Universities Forum. My only regret, having looked through the conference program, is that I can't be here for the entire Forum. From a university president's perspective, I see value in virtually every session.

This morning, I would like to start things off by offering you a combination of encouragement and challenge. As you work through the next couple of days – as you consider how our universities can better govern themselves; how we can improve learning; how we should educate our educators; how we can more effectively use technology; how we can better support the job market and bolster the economy; how we can break out of our disciplinary silos; and how we should interact with communities – I hope that you will also take time to consider an overarching question: to what end do we struggle to make these improvements?

Now, like most academics who start their presentation with a question, it won't surprise you to learn that I have an answer in mind that I hope will resonate with many of you.

In considering the need – and opportunity – for universities to improve themselves, I encourage you to give particular attention to the role of universities in supporting the health and strength of our democracies. Moreover, I urge you not to view this as simply another action item to be added to your list.

I say this for two reasons. First, democracy is central to the welfare and legitimacy of western societies. Second, the level of support I have in mind demands a fundamental rethinking of how we define ourselves and our role – a change I characterize as a move from the Ivory Tower to the Public Square.

My views in this regard have evolved over a long period of time. Having divided my career between periods in government and academia, I have given considerable thought over the years to how democracy functions and the contributions that universities make.

Traditionally, those contributions have been significant, falling into three major categories:

- First, and most fundamentally, universities have always played a critical role in creating an educated citizenry, one capable of evaluating public policy and making informed choices through electoral processes.

- Second, a quick scan of any legislature or government office will confirm the importance of universities in developing the political and bureaucratic elites equipped to be leaders and administrators in our governing institutions.

- Third, our researchers generate critiques, analyses, policy proposals and ideas, many of which inform political decision-making and are adopted for public benefit.

All of this is excellent – but ultimately inadequate if we hope to have robust and healthy societies in which our contribution to democracy is more than skin deep:

- Yes, we educate a fortunate subset of society that comprises our students – yet that subset remains a minority of voting-age citizens.

- Yes, political and bureaucratic elites are drawn overwhelmingly from that subset – though that would likely be the case in other forms of government. It is neither peculiar to, nor characteristic of, democracy.

- And yes, we inform public policy with our critiques, analyses, proposals and ideas – but much of that policy development has traditionally taken place, if not in a vacuum, then in an Ivory Tower.

We pride ourselves, perhaps too much, on being bastions of knowledge, fortresses built to protect and preserve information for the benefit of our students and our faculty members. We rigorously test, track and measure the quality of our academic performance, but we are generally less concerned about accounting for its societal impacts.

All that said, I stand before you not to criticize universities, but to celebrate your commitments, evidenced by your presence here today, to making universities better.

I am also here to celebrate democracy. Government by and for the people is something to be cherished. Yet democracy comes in many forms – some more effective than others.

Theorists such as Benjamin Barber have described democracies as being "thin" or "thick", "weak" or "strong." In "thin" democracies, representative institutions dominate and there is minimal call for public engagement. In such democracies, citizen participation is limited to the periodic election of representatives, who are then empowered for years to make decisions on behalf of the public.

For example, cabinet ministers in Canadian majority governments (elected more often than not by a minority of voters) wield huge powers, yet are largely unaccountable between elections even to their legislatures, let alone to the general public.

"Thick" or "strong" democracies, on the other hand, engage the public more consistently and fully in establishing and shaping public policies that govern their lives and those of future generations.

As Barber describes them, such democracies, while not necessarily direct, incorporate "strong participatory and deliberative elements:"

> [C]itizens are engaged at the local and national levels in a variety of political activities and regard discourse, debate and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences between people in a large multi-cultural society. In a strong democracy, citizens actually participate in governing themselves, if not in all matters, all of the time, at least in some matters at least some of the time.

An excellent example of this kind of deep citizen involvement took place in British Columbia in 2004. In an effort to generate an informed discussion about electoral reform – and to consider alternatives to BC's first-past-the-post system – the provincial government established a Citizen's Assembly. The Assembly consisted of one man and one woman chosen at random from volunteers in each of this province's 79 constituencies, plus two representatives from First Nations communities.

These 160 citizens then undertook an extensive examination of voting systems, a process that was facilitated by former SFU President Jack Blaney at our Wosk Centre for Dialogue here in downtown Vancouver. Based on its deliberations, the Assembly recommended a reformed proportional voting system – involving single transferable ballots – and this recommendation was then submitted to the public in a referendum during the following provincial election.

While the change failed to clear the 60% hurdle set for it, an extraordinary 57.7% of voters supported the recommendation, and an even larger majority cheered the Assembly's good work.

There is a compelling argument that a democracy that grows too thin – one that is seen as disconnected and superficial – is in danger of collapse. American political scientist Russell Dalton argues that the most serious challenge to democracy comes not from an external or internal enemy, but from citizens "who have grown distrustful of politicians, sceptical about democratic institutions and disillusioned about how the democratic process functions."

This scepticism and disillusion are evidenced in polls showing that citizens' confidence in political parties and governing institutions has plummeted in many Western democracies. They are also reflected in declining electoral participation rates. Voter turnout in national elections in North America and much of Europe has declined by as much as 25% over the past four decades, with participation rates dropping most precipitously amongst younger voters.

The Law Commission of Canada concluded 10 years ago that decreasing voter turnout and increasing citizen disengagement from traditional political institutions had produced a "democratic malaise" in this country.

So, I return to the question I raised earlier: While we are in the process of improving the quality of universities, how might we do so in a way that also serves to create healthier and stronger democracies?

The answer, I maintain, lies in the value of engagement and – as suggested by the title of my presentation – in shifting the university paradigm from Ivory Tower to Public Square. Rather than seeing ourselves as bastions of knowledge, separated and insulated from the hurly burly of civil society, we must embrace the challenge of becoming centres of knowledge exchange with mandates to share ideas and build capacity not just within our university cloisters, but throughout the broader communities we serve.

As importantly, such knowledge exchange must be reciprocal: enabling us to better understand the needs and wants of these communities – and learn from their experiences, knowledge and insights.

Some might find this shift away from traditional practices to be unnerving. They might fear that it would threaten our autonomy and neutrality. I suggest the opposite is true. Broadening public engagement is likely to make universities less, not more, partial in their perspectives. And the public support we derive from such engagement should strengthen our capacity to withstand external pressures placed upon us.

Thus, far from weakening our autonomy or compromising our neutrality, engaging beyond our traditional client groups should help us fortify these commitments.

This brings me to the issue of what effective engagement looks like – one with which my own university has been preoccupied for the last couple of years. As a result, we recently launched a new Strategic Vision that seeks to establish SFU as "the leading engaged university defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting-edge research, and far-reaching community engagement."

For anyone interested in the process that produced this Vision – and its content – I will be making a presentation at a workshop tomorrow.

For today, however, I would like to offer three examples of programs that an "engaged university" might undertake to strengthen democracy – examples that touch on our Vision's three goals of engaging students, engaging research, and engaging communities.

In the first category, one would expect an engaged university to provide educational experiences that have students grappling with socially significance issues, thereby acquiring the knowledge and capacities to address them. In addition to fulfilling our traditional role of passing on academic knowledge and developing critical thinking abilities, such programs would promote civic literacy, enabling students to gain the strategic, organizational and communication skills needed to work collaboratively and effectively as engaged citizens.

An example of such a program is SFU's Semester in Dialogue. This is a full-time, inter-disciplinary cohort program in which students help develop their theme or topic of study for an entire semester. Last semester's theme was issues and ethics in health. Students then work together – and with community thought leaders – not only to enhance their own understanding, but to promote discussion and policy advancement in the community. In the process, they learn

how to work within civil society to influence decision-making in both the public and private spheres.

I've heard from many students who have taken this program, and its impact is remarkable. One student recently told me that it had transformed his whole outlook on life. Prior to taking the program, this young man assumed that there was little he could do to influence social, economic or environmental issues. The Semester in Dialogue opened his eyes to a multitude of avenues and means by which he, as a citizen, could make important and positive differences in his community. The Semester in Dialogue, he told me, had enabled him to discover his voice.

In the second category, universities have a real opportunity to leverage their research in support of democracy by working directly with communities to help them develop the capacities, policies and structures they require to address the major issues they face.

A prime example is the Hakai Network for Coastal Peoples, Ecosystems and Management, an inter-disciplinary research initiative designed to support sustainability and conservation on BC's Central Coast – home to the Great Bear rainforest, and an area of unparalleled beauty and environmental richness.

We launched the Hakai Network in 2010, based on agreements between SFU, the Tula Foundation and Coastal First Nations. It enables SFU faculty, students and post-doctoral researchers in diverse science and social science disciplines to collaborate with First Nations partners and others on projects aimed at enhancing the sustainability, resilience and well-being of the people and ecosystems of this remarkable area.

The Network is founded on the principle that community-based research must be collaborative – that it must be done *with* rather *for* communities, with First Nations peoples engaged as full partners in, rather than subjects of, such enquiry. This intermingling of university research with Indigenous and local knowledge is producing better results for everyone: the people of the Central Coast are acquiring information and advice that will assist them to develop more sustainable communities; and SFU researchers are gaining a fuller and deeper understanding of the complex issues they are exploring in this unique area.

The third category – engaging communities – is potentially all-embracing. It refers to the opportunities universities have to draw upon the full spectrum of their intellectual, physical and programmatic resources to enrich public understanding, and to promote dialogue and deliberation on important issues confronting communities. The key here is to reach outside our traditional audiences of students, alumni and supporters, a task that goes beyond offering continuing studies courses or open access education.

My example here is a program called "SFU Public Square." In developing our Strategic Vision, we recognized the degree to which universities have traditionally served as gathering places – places of discussion, dialogue and debate. But we thought we could take this concept further. So we made it our goal for SFU to be "BC's public square for enlightenment and dialogue on key public issues, and … the institution to which the community looks for education, discussion and solutions."

To this end, last fall we launched our first SFU Public Square Community Summit. The Summit comprised a week-long program of events that engaged more than one thousand citizens in examining and developing strategies to address the problem of isolation and disconnection in Metro Vancouver – a topic our community partner, the Vancouver Foundation, had identified as the most pressing social concern in the region.

We plan to make this an annual event, each focusing on an issue of importance to this community. But we are also working to incorporate and expand our community programming, facilitate specific dialogues and, with the help of our online and social media presence, make SFU Public Square available 365 days a year.

I expect that most of you can point to other examples in your own institutions; most universities today are committed to some measure of community engagement.

My point is that, if we are to be instruments of "thicker," "stronger" forms of democracy, we need to move these commitments from the periphery to the center of what we as universities do.

Imagine the impact we could have if we sent forth a significant majority of our students with a deep understanding of community dynamics and a strong sense of their own agency – with a determination to let their voices be heard. What a bracing tonic for democracy that would be!

If more of our faculty participated in community-based research and capacity building, seeking not just relevance but impact, consider the contributions to the development of social capital and democratic capacity they could make.

And if we committed the full spectrum of our intellectual, physical and programmatic resources to fostering public dialogue and deliberation on the issues of the day, imagine the energizing influence this would have upon the democratic condition of our communities.

To be clear, I am not talking about sending theoretical physicists out to conduct polls with passersby. There are those within our organizations whose research, by necessity or choice, will never be shared with the broader community.

But, if we open every door – if we equip our students with civic knowledge and skills; if we encourage and support those researchers who are willing and able to work collaboratively with communities; if we harness our many other resources to facilitate public dialogue and deliberation – I submit that we will strengthen much more than democracy.

We will also boost our economies, enhance our societies and – at this so-critical juncture – help safeguard our fragile global environment.

In the days that you are here – and in the weeks after you return home – I hope that you will consider this challenge. I hope that you will think about the things your universities are already doing – and about what more can be done.

Finally, I encourage you to share your ideas and your best examples – with me and with each other – and please feel free to call on me if you have proposals or projects with which SFU might collaborate or assist.

We are determined. We are ambitious. But we're also realistic. If democracy is the ultimate act of social collaboration for the common good, then the best hope for building stronger democracies will be found in our institutional collaborations – in sharing and combining the considerable potential of our energies, our imaginations, and our efforts.

Here, as in my own university, I cast my vote for engagement. And I invite you to join me in this exciting endeavour.