

Changing times as Trent celebrates 50 years

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These are challenging times for education. As the province wrestles with its deficit, fiscal issues are the order of the day. In the case of universities, these concerns have been exacerbated by significant pension shortfalls, and by costs that are rising faster than revenues.

The budget of every university is built on undergraduate enrollment, but the number of 17-to-19-year-olds is in decline. It is ironic that this is happening not long after most universities enlarged their campuses to serve the “double cohort” of students that arrived when grade 13 was eliminated.

The result has been competition for students, not only between universities, but between universities and colleges, and between our universities and others outside the province that see Ontario students as the solution to their own enrollment challenges.

The stresses on the university system are exacerbated by questions that have been raised about the teaching model that has been the foundation of university education for hundreds of years: “the lecture.” Debates about its role have been fueled by the rise of “open” and “hybrid” models of learning which exploit the internet and other modes of digital communication, which have emerged from the fringes and entered the mainstream.

In the midst of all these issues, it may not be surprising that some have asked me why anyone would want to be a university president these days. As I begin a term as president of Trent University, I can say that I consider myself extraordinarily fortunate to have this opportunity. Some of the reasons are personal; others are rooted in university ideals and in Trent and the communities it engages.

The psychologist Viktor Frankl, who survived a Nazi concentration camp, spent his life studying what makes life worth living. He concluded that the good life is not the easy, comfortable life, but a life that revolves around the struggle to achieve something worthwhile. This makes worthwhile challenges a positive, not a negative, in life. It makes the life of a university president a good one at a time when universities must uphold and sustain some ideals that are worth defending.

In a world in which youth unemployment is an ever---pressing issue, students, their families and governments are preoccupied with the need for education to lead to employment. This is a narrow view of education, but even it suggests that university education pays great dividends. In the 25---to---34--- year--old cohort, the average annual earnings of university graduates continues to be the highest of any educational cohort. Students with only high

school lag far behind college and university graduates. University graduates continue to enjoy the lowest unemployment of any educational group.

But it would be a mistake to place the value of university education in short-term job prospects. What matters more is the ability to understand things from a broader perspective, to think critically, to assess evidence and data, to communicate well in writing and speaking (and increasingly, visually), to understand, respond to, and create different points of view. And it is these skills that are the key ingredients of a university education.

This vision is at the heart of education at Trent, which offers a full array of arts and science programs, interdisciplinary programs, and a growing number of professional programs. Despite its breadth, it remains a relatively small institution in the very best way, providing a close-knit community that benefits students and faculty on a stunning campus on the Otonabee River, internationally renowned for its architecture; and on a new Durham campus in Oshawa, a region in which Trent has been teaching for forty years. Our primary catchment area, which stretches from Toronto East to Ottawa, is a region with a growing population, a rich history and a bright future.

The challenges that universities face probably make changes to all universities inevitable. Trent is no different in that regard. But there are many ways in which it aims to be a key component of the future of Ontario – by continuing its tradition of great teaching; by expanding its repertoire of courses, programs and teaching methods; by conducting advanced research, and by engaging in partnerships of all kinds with the communities with which we intersect.

I expect the partnerships at Trent to include college and university partners, cities, service providers, volunteer groups and governments at all levels. Trent is already engaged in partnerships with Fleming and Durham Colleges and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology which are likely to continue and grow. Trent will have a special role to play in dealing with environmental issues and ensuring that Canada moves forward in a way that ensures a productive future for indigenous peoples, two areas in which Trent has already established a national and international reputation.

I look forward to the opportunity to help play a role in these developments.

Dr. Leo Groarke

President and Vice-Chancellor Trent University

Dr. Leo Groarke began his term as president and vice-chancellor of Trent University on July 1, 2014.