

APRU 16th Annual Presidents' Meeting
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Session 1: Shaping Asia-Pacific Higher Education
in the 21st Century (June 28)

Focus on Research as a Bridge for Building East-West Dialogue

Thank you, Gene [*Block, Chancellor, UCLA—session chair*], thanks also to our hosts here at the University of Oregon and to the APRU Secretariat. I bring greetings to you all from Canada and from The University of British Columbia. It's a pleasure to be with you again.

Wherever in the world I have traveled this past year, whatever the topic of the gathering, and whomever the audience has been, my message has, at its core, been the same: *we need to talk!* Across borders and oceans, across barriers of discipline, race, and gender, across politics, economics, and cultures. We need to speak with one another, far more than we are doing now, and with far greater urgency, constancy, and compassion.

And here is why: None of the university networks that arose at the end of the 20th century or at the beginning of this one has yet fulfilled its promise. The great crises of our time persist—as we

have just heard from climate change to pandemic disease to pervasive poverty to terror and war—and the networks, while rightly intentioned, are not helping to produce solutions at the rate at which they are required. Networks make logical sense, certainly, since individual universities, no matter where we are on the globe, are no longer optimally organized to do what the world needs us to do.

But what I have come to believe, because I am seeing it succeed, is that dialogue *at every level* within and across an institution, as well as between individuals at separate institutions, is the way forward. The kinds of conversations I'm talking about can't be mandated from the top; they must happen organically. But what we *can* do—as university presidents and as active members in our international networks—is foster the conditions within which such conversations can take place.

When I received an invitation to speak here today, I turned to some of UBC's top researchers in their respective fields to check my perceptions against theirs. I wanted to know why east-west

research partnership, which is prohibitively challenging for so many, was effective and successful for *them*. I expected some serious answers, and I got them, but as they talked about their projects, what I heard over and over again were words like ... *excitement. Adventure. Creativity. Friendship.* And the word I heard most often? *Fun.*

Twentieth-century Swiss psychologist Carl Jung said, “The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.”

The fourth-century Greek philosopher, Plato, said, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.” He also said, “Life must be lived as play.”

We academics tend not to describe what we do in terms of “play” or “love.” We prefer to leave that vocabulary to the theatre majors and the theologians. But in my conversations with UBC’s Director of the Institute for Asian Research, our Chief Librarian,

and an Associate Dean of Medicine, among others, I had to acknowledge that I was speaking with people who are fully engaged with and utterly passionate about their research. Whose *love* for their research subject has led them to form strong bonds, some now decades old, with fellow researchers throughout the Pacific Rim who feel exactly the same way they do. I had an “*Aha!*” moment as I realized I may have stumbled upon the driving force that could shape Asia-Pacific higher education in the 21st century. Let me tell you a little about their research

1.

I asked UBC Chief Librarian Ingrid Parent about the digitization of rare archives, and she answered with a story about Captain Cook. The 18th-century British explorer made several voyages around the globe, and with each trip, he and his fellow travelers collected a treasury of cultural artifacts, artwork, and natural history specimens. Back in Europe, one man might have given a drawing to his hostess when he attended a dinner party. Another might have used shells or carvings as favours or bribes. So what was once a unified view of a particular culture became scattered.

Digital technology is recreating that original view; what *powers* the technology is partnership.

There are challenges: Copyright law varies drastically between our countries. Digital character recognition of vernacular Asian scripts is unreliable, and requires the eyes and minds of human partners. Ultimately, it's the interplay between the technological process and personal encounters that allows these scholars to reassemble a historical worldview that can inform and even reshape our worldview now.

2.

Zhichun Jing spends much of his working life in a city that no longer exists. He's the Canada Research Chair in Pacific-Asia Archaeology, his longtime partners are the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Peking University, and the University of Wisconsin, and his "office" is the lost Shang city of Huanbei. Excavations there uncovered the first-ever substantial body of writing in East Asia, and Jing believes the

project will contribute to an understanding of how China's past and future are linked.

Canadian as well as Chinese students are helping with the fieldwork, and Jing has seen firsthand the problems that can arise out of cultural and linguistic barriers. "It's always a risk," he says, "to work with people from different backgrounds and [to] get students involved in such adventures." His answer is "... to encourage more interactions with mutual respect I tell my colleagues to enjoy [the] frustrations!" he says. "The rewards are great and long-lasting."

3.

There is some decidedly *non*-traditional Chinese medicine happening in China right now, thanks to a number of medical partnerships. UBC's Dr. Weihong Song is conducting human clinical trials of a drug that could help prevent Alzheimer's Disease. Dr. Peter Leung partnered with researchers at my colleague Yang's university, Zhejiang, over 20 years ago to build a collaborative research centre in reproductive medicine, and it's

been so successful that UBC has just entered into a new partnership with Peking University Health Science Centre. What all three projects share is their need for large patient populations—larger than Canada can provide. Our Chinese partners have met that need, and added their expertise.

UBC's Dr. Kendall Ho oversees yet another partnership, with Chinese researchers, China's Ministry of Health, and Chinese regional health authorities. Its goal is to assist China's policy makers in reforming their primary health care system. Dr. Ho describes the partnership as "symbiotic" and is committed to involving students from both countries to make it sustainable over the long term and to get to the scale needed to make a real difference in people's lives. He says, "While [the] challenge [of] access to care is common [to] both rural China and [rural] Canada, a significant difference is scale: a rural Canadian community might have a population of 100 [people] ... yet a rural Chinese community has a population of tens ... if not hundreds of thousands." It is of interest to both countries, he says, to know how to scale up.

Finally.

A professor with UBC Fisheries Centre, and Director of the Nippon Foundation-UBC Nereus Program, Dr. Villy Christensen knows something about scale. Villy and the Nereus partners are studying the impact that climate change is having on life in the world's oceans, and working to find solutions. Because ocean life affects *all* planetary life, and because insights are needed from fields as diverse as habitat science, marine biology, market demand for fish, food security, and governance, the Nereus partnership transcends both geographical and disciplinary boundaries. Their aim is to influence policy-making in international fora such as UNEP,¹ UNESCO, and UNCLOS.

His advice for other researchers who need answers to urgent global questions? "Get out of your comfort zone." He says, "I love working in my little corner. But ... I want to contribute to ensuring that there will be ... a healthy ocean for future generations [and] it

¹ UNEP=UN Environment Program; UNESCO=UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; IOC=Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission; UNCLOS=UN Convention on the Law of the Sea

goes beyond my expertise to do so. It is only by working with colleagues, policy makers, and stakeholders that we have a chance of actually contributing to change. It calls for ... talking new languages (in the disciplinary sense) and getting an understanding [of] what other disciplines consider important ... for progress. The reward ... is learning how other disciplines—or cultures—see the challenges, and how we jointly can work toward solutions.”

Conclusion

We can fear the problem—whether it’s an international legal dispute, Alzheimer’s Disease, or an ocean devoid of life—or we can love the process of searching for a solution, risks, challenges, frustrations and all. The distinction may seem small, like two sides of the same coin, but I believe that in that distinction lies the pathway to the partnerships and the conversations and the dialogue that we in this room keep saying we want to see happen.

That distinction prompts an entirely new set of questions for us, as university leaders: What role might ‘play’ have in ending

poverty? Excitement, in tackling economic disparity? How can we foster daring in the face of devastating disease? Friendship in place of fear? Clear, frank speech in place of silence? Because I believe this is our job now. Play, excitement, fun, daring, and dialogue—these are the qualities common to the researchers who are speaking successfully across cultures. They're the same qualities that led them to pursue their research subjects in the first place—but instead of just turning them inward in inquiry, they've risked turning them outward as well, in friendship - - seeking out equally passionate and daring colleagues around the Asia-Pacific.

Friendship can't be mandated. But it *can* be taught, and fostered; it is best taught by example. And so I look forward to exploring these ideas, and those of my co-panelists, with you—my friends and colleagues—today and in the coming year.

Thank you.