

# **Speech to the Vancouver Board of Trade**

**March 28, 2017, 11:30 a.m.**

**Four Seasons Hotel, Vancouver**

**Santa J. Ono**

Good afternoon and thank you everyone. It's an honour to be with you today.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we are gathered on the the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish people, the Musqueam, the Squamish and the Tsleil Waututh. I would also like to acknowledge and thank our sponsors, the Sauder School of Business, the Robert H. Lee Graduate School of Business and Boyden.

I am delighted and honoured by the opportunity to speak to the Greater Vancouver Board of Trade for the first time as president of UBC. It is a long-standing tradition for UBC presidents to address the board of trade and many in the room today will have heard my esteemed predecessors address the Board of Trade. It is my pleasure to stand here today to continue that tradition.

There is so much opportunity – at UBC, in Vancouver, in B.C. and in Canada. And given our collective capacity and influence, there is so much that we can do, together, that will produce benefits for our province and country.

I'd like talk about two things today. First, I'd like to introduce myself and tell you about why I came to UBC – not because I like talking about myself but because I think the reasons why I decided to come to UBC tell a story about where UBC is headed – what it has to offer today and what I am confident it will become.

Second, and this is closely related, I'd like to talk about innovation. This is a hugely important component of my job as UBC President. But it also comes as part of a mandate from Premier Christy Clark, who has asked me to serve as chief advisor on the new BC Innovation Network. Again, this points to the opportunities and, I think, responsibilities that we all have to work together to help B.C. achieve its potential.

But first: why did I come to Vancouver? Well, you need only look at the real estate prices to understand that a lot of people want to come here. It's a spectacular city. Although I have some serious questions about Vancouver's reputation.

For example, when I was thinking about coming, I was told that Vancouver is warm – and that Vancouverites are not. People said I would enjoy the no-snow winters, but that, as a U.S. transplant, I might find that Vancouverites have a sort of British reserve that can make them seem chilly.

This is all wrong. I don't think we have to talk about the rumor of warm weather. I'd really rather not. Enough to say that I had the wrong wardrobe for winter 2017.

But when it comes to the warmth of Vancouver's people, I have been overwhelmed. I have been blown away by how warmly the Vancouver community has reached out to me, and I am incredibly grateful.

Vancouver is also welcoming in another, extremely important way. You may know that I was born here, in 1962. My family had moved from Japan to the United States in 1959, and when my father's U.S. Green Card timed out, Canada opened its doors. Vancouver provided a safe and welcoming home at a critical time.

It turned out that other opportunities drew my father back to the States. After teaching for a year in the math department at UBC, he moved to the University of Pennsylvania and, ultimately, to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. That's where I grew up.

But Canada's openness is, once again, not just a matter of pride but a competitive advantage.

That became obvious to me on November 9<sup>th</sup>, when, in the aftermath of the US election, so many Americans enquired about coming to Canada.

The phenomenon grew even more in January, when the Trump Administration introduced its first attempt to ban travelers from seven majority Muslim countries. I got a surprising number of direct emails, not just from people I knew in the U.S., but from others who were afraid that, if blocked from entering the United States, they would not be able to finish their education.

This is real. Our applications from international students have risen by 25 percent this year. They're coming from people who might previously have preferred to study in the U.K., but are worried about England distancing itself from the European Union. They're coming from undergraduate and graduate students who are feeling uncomfortable, or unsafe, in the United States.

And the applications are not limited to students. We've also seen a steady increase in the number of inquiries from top notch post-docs and would-be UBC faculty.

You may have heard, too, how prominent this was as a topic of conversation at the recent BC Tech Summit. Aside from increasing our ability to compete for great talent at UBC, there is also a potential to open new high-tech operations in Vancouver or to expand existing offices, because we can welcome and embrace top talent from around the world.

As I say, this is a competitive advantage and one that could have lasting impact.

That said; I, personally, didn't come to Vancouver because I felt insecure or unhappy in the U.S. The University of Cincinnati, where I was president, is a fantastic institution.

But UBC is something else. Where UCincinnati is ranked among the top 300-or-so universities in the world, UBC is in the top three dozen. If you look only at public universities – which is a fairer comparison – UBC is in the top 25.

That's not a vain boast. It's an actual measurement of how well this institution compares when it comes to things like innovative capacity. It's what prospective students, faculty – and philanthropic supporters – look at when they are trying to choose a university. It's important.

That's not to imply that UBC chases rankings. Rather, we concentrate on excellence. Then, as the impact of our research reverberates, locally and globally, and as 300,000 UBC alumni make their influence felt around the world, UBC's reputation improves yet further – and with that, we increase our capacity to do even more.

So, even aside from the temptation of returning to this beautiful city, the opportunity at UBC was such that I just couldn't resist.

And now, here I stand as the 15th president of the University of British Columbia.

It's an interesting role. Being a university president is a little like being an orchestra conductor. You get to stand at the front. You get to wear the bowtie. But no amount of arm-waving will call forth success if you don't have a brilliant ensemble that is working well – together.

UBC's orchestra – to continue the metaphor – is comprised of brilliant faculty members, students, staff and alumni.

The graduates of UBC excel in practically every field of human endeavor. Three graduates have served as Prime Minister of Canada - including the incumbent Justin Trudeau. Seven members of the UBC faculty have won the Nobel prize.

Well over 200 current members of the faculty are members of academies such as the Royal Society, Royal Society of Canada, the US National Academies and the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. 70 graduates have been awarded the Rhodes Scholarship and 65 graduates have won an Olympic medal.

A significant amount of credit for the quality of the UBC ensemble must go to my predecessors. I live today in a house named for the remarkable Norman Mackenzie, who was the UBC president when my father taught here in the 1960s. I have to say, for a middle child who worked hard to meet the high expectations of a demanding parent, that's a sweet feeling.

Consider, as well, the more recent presidents. I stand on the shoulders of the late David Strangway, who is widely credited with lifting UBC from being a good regional institution in the 1980s into a great international one by the late 1990s.

It's no secret that we all owe a debt of gratitude to the redoubtable Martha Piper, who picked up the pace of Strangway's transformative work and who stepped back in last year to settle and refocus the university at a turbulent time.

I admire – and am instructed by – the passion, ambition and innovative spirit of Arvind Gupta.

And, returning to the international recognition of UBC's excellence, you may have heard that Cambridge University in England has chosen Stephen Toope to assume its presidential duties as its 346<sup>th</sup> Vice-Chancellor.



Add to the mix UBC's earlier presidents, from Frank Wesbrook to George Pedersen, and you have humbling list of talented leaders; I am deeply honoured to follow in their footsteps – to help move UBC from excellence to eminence.

One area in which we have achieved excellence is innovation. Innovation is both vital and, at this point, a little opaque. “Innovative,” as an adjective is like “sustainable”. It's one of those words that people use to mean so many things that it stops meaning anything at all. In some ways “innovative” has become a synonym for “better.”

Yet, there is much more to it than that. In aspirational terms, I think of innovation as the never-ending exchange between the realities of today and the potential of tomorrow. But it's worth digging deeper into the definition.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – the OECD – defines innovation as “the implementation of a new or significantly improved product or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external relations.”

Simply put, Innovation is the **implementation** of something that is new or significantly improved.

There are two critical elements here. The first – the one we probably think of most often – is the new idea: the breakthrough that might, one day, give rise to a world-changing technology or a transformative new social policy.

This is the aspect of innovation people often think about first when they contemplate the role of universities. UBC is an enormous generator of new ideas and knowledge.

Our annual research budget is now more than \$600 million. And a significant portion of that funding rightly goes into fundamental research, into pure academic inquiry – where we build our basic understanding of the world and the universe around us. There is still much to discover, and so many opportunities for new ideas that could change the world.

Consider, for example, the work of the Stewart Blusson Quantum Matter Institute, where some of the world's foremost researchers – people like Andrea Damascelli and Sarah Burke – are pursuing an understanding of how matter behaves at the most fundamental levels, and which may one day yield discoveries with applications in electronics and information technology, in sustainable

energy, in the automotive industry – even in the health care sector. Or perhaps there are revolutionary applications that we have not yet even imagined.

But innovation requires more than new knowledge or a good idea. If the new thing in question is a product or service, you have to get it to market. If it's a new method, you have to get it into practice.

So, at its simplest, innovation is conception-plus-connection.

Of course, any time you hear someone say, “at its simplest,” a little warning bell should go off in your head, because they are probably talking about something that isn't simple at all.

That's certainly the case here. Innovation has enemies.

One is inertia. Innovation is, necessarily, disruptive. The very notion of a great new product implies that a lesser old product is already in use. It's why Joseph Schumpeter referred to innovation as “creative destruction.” It threatens the status quo. So, well-established market forces can be expected to resist. I don't want to say that nobody likes change, but the people who like it least are often the ones who are, today, in the most powerful positions.

Another obstacle to innovation is caution. No engineer wants to be responsible for an innovative highway design that *almost* works. And who wants to be lying in the operating suite, drifting into unconsciousness, when the surgeon says, “Hey, I’m thinking about trying something new!” ...?

People are also cautious with their money, whether they are investors or purchasers. And Canadian investors have a particular reputation in this regard.

So, I’m not here today to tell you that I have the innovation riddle solved. Premier Clark has asked the B.C. Innovation Network to come up with some strategies to attract and retain talent, to encourage innovative research, and to ensure our students, young and old, are well prepared to advance their careers in a complex and rapidly evolving world. I hope we may also conceive and implement some policy recommendations that address the obstacles – that we may, ourselves, innovate.

But without prejudging the BC Innovation Network’s path, I have a couple of comments about the role of UBC in the innovation ecosystem.

UBC is already deeply committed to both conception and connection. To begin, I would argue that UBC is one of B.C.’s foremost sources of new ideas. You could

look into any part of B.C.'s economy and society and identify a benefit derived directly from an innovation that originated at UBC.

In health care, think about AIDS or prostate cancer research, brain health or any number of biotechnology advances. In architecture, think about the works of Bing Thom. In mining, our engineers and our methods are in demand around the world. In computer science, the “.CA” domain was created by UBC's Computing Facilities manager John Demco in 1987 – two years BEFORE the emergence of the World Wide Web.

Think about the influence of UBC researchers and UBC alumni in Law, in Psychology, in Social Work, in Aboriginal Studies – in Arts and Culture. In Environmental Studies, the very notion of an ecological footprint was conceived at UBC by Bill Rees and Mathis Wakernagel.

UBC is a hothouse for conception.

But we also connect. First, of course, we connect with students. We don't just instill knowledge in our students, we nurture skills and inspiration.

And they connect with one another and beyond the university. They carry newfound capacities into the community. I could ask you to imagine the impact of more than a century of UBC grads in Vancouver and now Kelowna – but it would be impossible, in 2017, to imagine either community without the benefits of our two campuses.

UBC connects, as well, to B.C.'s other great institutions of higher education.

For example, we collaborate directly with the University of Victoria and the University of Northern British Columbia in our distributed medical program, training doctors in every part of the province. We also have connections with BCIT, Simon Fraser, Kwantlen and other institutions, including BC's outstanding community colleges, so our programs are complementary and our students can move freely among institutions, depending on what mix of practical and theoretical knowledge they want or need.

No institution in North America is better connected internationally; Times Higher Education places UBC 12<sup>th</sup> in the world among all universities, based on our international reputation, the extent of our international research collaboration, the proportion of international students and the diversity of our students, faculty and staff.

We also enjoy some increasingly powerful connections closer to home. As you may have heard, we recently established the Cascadia Urban Analytics Cooperative with the University of Washington in Seattle, on the strength of a \$1-million gift from Microsoft.

We already have extensive links to UW, but this will be the largest industry-funded research partnership between our two universities, bringing faculty, students and community stakeholders together to solve problems in everything from traffic to homelessness.

I'm excited about this. UBC and UW are natural partners, close and complementary. Our combined research spending is over \$2 billion.

I'm also excited about the Microsoft connection. When the Cascadia cooperative was announced, Microsoft President Brad Smith said he saw the investment as a catalyst for broader and more sustainable efforts to connect our two institutions.

This mirrors the increasing Microsoft investment in Vancouver as an important part of what Smith calls its "string of pearls" – Microsoft's highly creative West Coast offices stretching from here, south to San Francisco. Bearing in mind that,

between the Gates Foundation and the company itself, Microsoft has been the source of more than \$1.3 billion in gifts to the University of Washington over the past two decades. Needless to say we're delighted to be part of the mix.

To be clear, though, UBC has earned its place. Consider another research investment that we announced this month: the \$2-million Scotiabank Cybersecurity and Risk Analytics Initiative. As in so many other fields, we have the expertise. And with cyberhacking becoming an unnerving feature in so much of our lives, this particular expertise was never so urgently needed.

Taken together, you have an example of UBC, in collaboration with post-secondary partners at every level and around the world, translating ideas into action – nurturing (and recruiting) highly qualified people and working with the private and social sectors to transform ideas into action.

UBC's University Industry Liaison Office, the first of its kind in Canada when it was created in 1984, now partners with industry, government and non-profit partners on more than 2,000 projects a year and has supported the founding of 190 spin-off companies that, together, have generated more than \$11 billion in sales.



It is no accident, then, that the high-tech industry in B.C. now employs more people than all the resource industries combined.

One of the other obstacles to innovation that I didn't mention earlier is competition. According to a recent Bloomberg analysis, Canada currently ranks 20<sup>th</sup> among the world's most innovative economies, down from 19<sup>th</sup> last year.

Canada is a small, incredibly well-educated, resourceful and probably underfinanced player in a global competition that we will not win by standing around. We need to leverage our creative capacity and our connections, whether it means consciously developing industry clusters or building longer-distance links to the best and brightest the world over.

Let me say, in all of those task, UBC can compete and in so doing, help British Columbia and Canada compete and succeed.

In closing, I'd like to once more say how honoured I am to be here and how excited I am about what we will do together – for UBC, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and the world.

Thank you.