

Northern Opportunities Economic Summit

January 22, 2009

I'm sure that no one in this room would disagree with the notion that Northern British Columbia has been – and still is – the major economic engine for this province.

However, it's an engine that has been built on the reality of a different time. Much of the northern economy is based on policy decisions and investments made in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

It's time to re-tool our economy. How we should do it goes to the heart of why a university president is speaking in a session about productivity.

In the late 1980s, the North spoke with a single voice about the importance of having a university in the region. The primary motivation for this effort was to prevent the brain drain of talented northerners. The plan has worked. Today, UNBC has about 7000 alumni and more than half of them living and working in Northern BC, including many who came to UNBC from other parts of the province. Brain drain has turned into brain gain.

UNBC is also a research-intensive university. In fact, it's one of only four research-intensive universities in the province and the only one wholly to be located outside of Vancouver or Victoria. This is a tremendous economic asset for our region in a country where research and innovation are overwhelmingly concentrated in big universities in big cities.

If we're serious about re-tooling Canada's and BC's resource economy and sustaining rural, resource-dependent communities, we need to redirect R&D investments toward those regions where much of Canada's wealth is produced.

How can we ensure that university research is used in the service of northern economic growth and diversification?

Answering that question takes me back almost exactly 8 years to an event that was held in this very building: the national rural health summit. It was there that the idea of the Northern Medical Program was born in response to a crisis in rural health care.

The NMP has been a remarkable success by demonstrating how universities can partner with communities, industries, and governments to address critical issues, and how universities themselves can work together for the benefit of all.

The challenge of economic renewal we face today is no less great than the healthcare crisis we faced in 2001, the need for action is no less apparent, and the opportunity for universities to rise to the occasion is no less obvious.

Today, I am excited to present a proposal to establish an entity at UNBC to be called the New North Foundation for the purpose of connecting northern communities and the northern BC resource economy to the knowledge power of UNBC and BC's research universities.

The New North Foundation will be mandated to mobilize university research in the direct service of northern communities. Think of the New North Foundation as the knowledge portal, serving as a single point of contact connecting communities and researchers. The researchers could be faculty members, research fellows, graduate students, or undergraduate students. They could be at UNBC or elsewhere.

Once established the New North Foundation

- will connect researchers to communities in areas that are critical to economic development.
- through its Board will be guided by the needs and aspirations of the region
- will utilize the existing capacity of UNBC and its research.
- And will connect the region to other research universities and institutes .

When this summit was first announced, Premier Campbell described it as a "New North" summit that would explore the unique opportunities and challenges of our region with respect to productivity and competitiveness.

What's new about the North today?

Maybe more than anything, during the past decade northern BC has begun to build a regionally-based research capacity that simply didn't exist in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. It has also made significant progress in educating people in the north for the north and in developing the human capacity that knowledge-based economies require.

Half a century ago, the only practical thing to do was treat this region as a source of resource wealth and to focus R&D investments exclusively in Vancouver and Victoria. Today, the new north needs to expand its own capacity for research and innovation, strengthen the connection between this region and the provincial knowledge infrastructure, and mobilize this capacity in the direct service of northern communities.

This is precisely the motivation for the New North Foundation. In a new north, we will move further along the road to building a knowledge-based, resource economy that is connected to the world, competitive, innovative, and led by educated northerners. UNBC looks forward to building on the foundations established over the past two decades in order to build a prosperous new north in

partnership with northern communities and northern peoples. We and the province of British Columbia deserve nothing less.

Dr. Charles Jago, CM

Interim President and Vice-Chancellor

The University of Northern British Columbia