

# Nation Building:

## SESQUICENTENNIAL UNIVERSITY EXCHANGE PROJECT WOULD STRENGTHEN CANADA

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How best can Canada's post-secondary system preserve, protect and enhance our youth's pride in our country? How can we ensure they are celebrating our strength, resilience and prosperity as a nation? It's a question for every senior academic administrator – and a much bigger question than the ones that normally capture our attention.

As students across the country return to school this week, we certainly are thinking about how to provide the highest-quality educational experience. We wrestle constantly with apparently conflicting priorities: What is the right balance of investments across disciplines? How much energy should go into teaching versus research? Should we devote our efforts to educating highly-skilled graduates who can move immediately and productively into the wage economy and/or should we be educating students for creativity, adaptability and citizenship?

Those are, of course, trick questions. We should be investing in all of those things. But the larger question, again, is: To what purpose? One answer must be to reinforce and strengthen our national identity.

Aspects of this conversation are much in the news. The federal government has been sharply focused on the Arctic, drawing Canadians' attention to a part of the country that we are in danger of taking for granted. And provincial premiers, meeting in Charlottetown last week, took up the question of reducing interprovincial-trade barriers, encouraged by federal Industry Minister James Moore's argument that Canada's 43 international free-trade agreements can make it easier to do business with other nations than among Canadian provinces.

But provincial and regional boundaries seem to throw up barriers to more than just trade. Canadians, ever distracted by all things American, have also turned their attention to the international stage. This is excellent. The University of British Columbia's expertise and connections to the Asia Pacific, for example, are unsurpassed in the country and critical to Canada's linkages to the economic powerhouses in that region.

Yet, we must never take our own country for granted. Are we doing enough to foster cross-country appreciation for what Canada is and what it could be? Why do parochial provincial interests so often dominate our conversations? Surely, our strength as a nation arises from our ability to see ourselves as greater than the sum of our parts. Canada will only remain one of the most enviable places on the planet if we continue to work together for mutual benefit.

Canada's sesquicentennial in 2017 is a chance to reflect on how we can come together so we get to know each other better, and learn to appreciate all this country has to offer. So let me propose a bold new program to get there. Let's create a national Student Mobility Scholarship that would make it possible for 50,000 post-secondary students annually to study in a region where they had never previously lived.

The program would be simple: recipients would identify an institution in some region where they have never lived. That institution would host them in classes and in dormitories, arranging transfer credits so students would continue their academic progress. This is similar to what often happens with international exchanges.

The benefits would be immense with a figurative army of young people living, learning, and appreciating a new region of the country. The friends and contacts would form a national network that would spur new social, cultural, and economic activities. Future efforts to improve interprovincial trade or take on other national priorities would be enhanced as these young people became our future leaders. This program would erode regional rivalries, promote national understanding and remind young Canadians that we are one very great nation.

By our 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, this program would propel an additional 2.5 million Canadians beyond the bounds of parochialism, bolstering the building blocks of cooperative federalism. It would be an investment in strengthening the fabric of the country. There could hardly be a better way to mark Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday.

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