

**Imagine UBC Pep Rally
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How many people would say that they are having a great first day at UBC?

How many think that they have chosen the best university in Canada?

How many think their faculty or program is better than any other?

Well I am glad you feel that way, and I think you are in for many wonderful experiences during your time here. But in order for that to occur, you're going to have to put your imaginations to work.

Imagine truly is a perfect theme for a day like this. I hope that the word itself is an inspiring call to action. The other reason I like Imagine as a theme is that its meaning in the context of this day is appropriately subject to interpretation.

The way I see it, to imagine...is to be original.

With that interpretation as a premise, I want to share some simple ideas concerning the importance of originality, of becoming a skilled and independent free thinker, which many contend is the single most important objective of an undergraduate university experience.

Sounds simple enough, but finding originality and thinking for yourself is a process. It's a process that begins with a willingness to be open-minded to varying points of view, followed by a careful analysis of the evidence offered in support of each one.

The final step in the process is to draw your own conclusions based on what you have determined to be the most compelling evidence to support your views. It's the opposite of sub-consciously conforming to "conventional wisdom" or popular opinion.

If at some point you study American literature, you may come across the writing of the 19th century transcendentalist philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In a famous essay appropriately titled, *On Self Reliance*, Emerson implores the reader to resist conformity with the words: “Insist on yourself; never imitate.”

But even if you don’t ever read Emerson, chances are a parent or a relative has already offered the same advice in similarly blunt terms.

“Be a leader, not a sheep.”

“You came into this world an original; don’t leave it a copy.”

Now I’ll admit that remaining an original can perhaps be challenging in an era in which pop culture is pervasive. Everywhere we go we are reminded of a world seemingly bent on conformity – conformity to clothing styles, conformity to a narrow range of popular music, or to certain verbal expressions.

As an example, consider the drastic overuse - and misuse - of the word, “awesome.” There was a time when it was a highly useful and expressive term, one selectively used only to describe things that elicited slack-jawed amazement. Sadly, its meaning has become

distorted. It's fallen victim to sub-conscious conformity - the antithesis of free-thinking originality.

So here's an idea. Whenever you hear the word casually used to describe things that aren't even vaguely "awesome," let that be a reminder to you about how one of your principle objectives during your time here is to strive for originality – originality in your thoughts and in the manner in which you express them.

I have three recommendations for how you can refine these skills.

The first is to leave your comfort zone. Seek the discomfort of new experiences.

You'll never have a better opportunity to try things you've never done before than here at UBC. Take a course in an unfamiliar subject; try a new sport; volunteer for a new cause; consider community or international service learning opportunities; sign up for co-op or mentorship programs; join a campus club, or explore the fine arts. The possibilities are infinite.

The second recommendation is to interact with the widest possible range of people, and do it in a direct and respectful give-and-take manner. Facebook is a wonderful tool, but it can never be a substitute for face-to-face engagement. For that matter, consider more talking and less texting.

Become friends with somebody from a completely different country and culture than your own. Resist the natural urge to associate primarily with people from your home town, from your program or from your residence.

You may not know it, but in many cases the connections you make in the days ahead will become important lifelong relationships, so ensure that your network is large and diverse.

Third, and I cannot emphasize this enough; strive to become an effective communicator.

Remember that one of the essential aspects of being an original and skilled independent thinker is the ability to articulately express both your thoughts and the rationale that supports your views. Not only that, but learning to communicate effectively in both written and verbal

exchanges will be of paramount importance in every future endeavour you undertake – personal and professional.

Finally, a solemn assurance: at UBC, undergraduate students matter.

Your success and fulfillment matters to me personally. It matters to your professors personally, and it matters personally to the staff members and student volunteers who have arranged this wonderful day called Imagine.

With that in mind, I sincerely hope that you take advantage of the many rich opportunities before you, and that you will consider these recommendations to seek new experiences, to open your minds to diverse perspectives, to hone your communication skills and...

To imagine...and to remain...an original.

Best wishes to you all, and welcome to UBC! It's awesome!