

**UBC Equity, Diversity and Intercultural Understanding  
Colloquium 2012  
April 05, 2012—The Longhouse**

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Thank you, Larry [Grant], and thank you all; it's an honour to have been invited to speak at the inaugural Colloquium on Equity, Diversity and Intercultural Understanding, and to celebrate this significant 'first' with you.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive."

Neglect of the needs of migrant students in our public schools.  
Student engagement theory that has no research basis in the experiences of international students. The line between education and voyeurism in using guest speakers to teach trans topics. The media's responsibility for reinforcing negative perceptions of

Canadian racial groups. Human rights issues in acute hospital care for patients with disabilities. The lack of heritage language education in BC schools. Rates, and effects, of Aboriginal male incarceration. The integrity of place-based learning at a university that rests on traditional Aboriginal lands.<sup>1</sup>

My gut clenches and at the same time my heart sings when I look over the topics to be presented today. The most valuable exercise a university can undertake is genuine dialogue. What comes up for discussion today may be frightening, even threatening; ideas may be observed, analyzed, questioned, set aside, even jettisoned. But not the communication itself. And perhaps the higher the tension, the greater the potential reward.

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<sup>1</sup> *Note: All of these are paraphrased from the topics of papers to be presented by graduate students at this Colloquium.*

Tension is defined as “a stretching,” or “the condition of being stretched.” And we are. All 19,000 faculty and staff, all 55,000 students. All of UBC, stretched between our present state and the commitment we made, the *promise* we made to our stakeholders and to the community we serve, to become an institution of intercultural understanding and fluency.

We committed to nothing less than a re-imagining of the University—an act of great creativity and courage that requires, paradoxically, a great deal of tension.

Artists, perhaps better than most people, understand the dynamic energy inherent in tension, and its power to provoke a creative response. Musician James Taylor described music as a huge release of the tension between his vision and what he was able to convey with instruments and voice. Actor Annette Bening

described movies as lightning in a bottle, waiting for a spark of tension from the actors to illuminate the story and ignite the action. Choreographer Twyla Tharp talked about the energy that comes from tension, and said that when directed properly, it can result in laughing together! And poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The world is all gates, all opportunities, strings of tension waiting to be struck.”

UBC is home to every imaginable form of diversity, including gender, sexual orientation, indigenusness, mental and physical ability, religion, racial, ethno-cultural, socio-economic status, regional, and above all intellectual diversity. All gates, all opportunities, strings of tension waiting to be struck. But *contact* with diversity does not in itself produce intercultural understanding. Tension, in and of itself, does not engender a creative response.

For UBC to remain a global leader among institutions of higher learning, intercultural experiences must be *intentionally* and *structurally* embedded in both the academics and the operations of the University. So when we opened the office of Intercultural Understanding Strategy Development, our first task was to test our assumption that what UBC needed was *more* such experiences. We hired a Director. We conducted a literature review and a University-wide activity audit. And what we learned surprised us. In the ‘good news’ category, we discovered within the first two months that there were more activities, initiatives, trainings, and programs happening, at every level, than we could actually capture. Just as one example, we found 14 training programs in intercultural fluency! In the ‘bad news’ category, within the same period of time, we quickly realized that literally

all of it was occurring in isolation. Of those 14 training programs, for example, not *one* of them knew the other 13 existed.

The work that lies ahead of us falls not into the realm of generating more activity; rather, it is now a matter of institutionalizing these scattered but significant successes, providing infrastructure and resources, tapping the best practices they've created, and implementing them across the University as a whole. Student Services is training staff advisors to work with in-residence and international students using the very latest theories and methods pertaining to equity, diversity, and intercultural fluency. But they don't have the capacity to train everyone.

Likewise, the First Nations House of Learning is *the* centre of excellence, bar none, for creating a safe environment for difficult conversations. But not all the tough conversations that need to take place at UBC can happen in the Longhouse. The Centre for

Intercultural Communication, in Continuing Studies, offers a full range of courses and a Certificate in Intercultural Studies. But there is no equivalent *for-credit* program at UBC.

How do we parlay these successes into University-wide practices?

How do we avoid adding to the heavy workloads both staff and faculty already bear? How do we not turn everything into another workshop? Most of us are workshopped out. We are almost certainly pilot-projected out.

How do we ensure that the critical research you're conducting, and will present here today, reaches not just this roomful of people but a campus-ful? A city- or province- or country-ful?

I'm going to leave you with these questions, because I don't have answers yet. I hope you'll hear them as a challenge. You are our

brightest and best. I invite you to come back to my office, or to the Equity office or the Intercultural Strategy office, with ideas so bold they scare you. Ideas threaded with strings of tension waiting to be struck.

You are learned enough to be able to play a leading role in creating systemic change; unfettered enough in your thinking to be relatively fearless; and creative and committed enough to direct that tension toward positive change. It's a powerful combination.

I have said in the past that Canadian universities too often shy away from the social realities of deep diversity, prizing comfort over robust and challenging debate. But not here, not today. From what I have already seen, I expect the ideas you have to share today will make more than a few people tense. May your guts



clench and your hearts sing! And may your minds always be

asking how we take the next step forward. Thank you.