

# Installation Address

Professor Meric Gertler

On the Occasion of his Installation as the  
16<sup>th</sup> President of the University of Toronto

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UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**

*Check against delivery*

Thank you, Madam Chair. Your Honour, Chancellor, Minister, esteemed guests, fellow colleagues, staff and students...

20<sup>th</sup> ... 8<sup>th</sup> ... 2<sup>nd</sup> ... 1<sup>st</sup> ... and last. That is the paradox that is the University of Toronto.

20<sup>th</sup> in the world (according to the latest Times Higher Education World University rankings)... 8<sup>th</sup> in the world in scientific performance (according to the 2013 National Taiwan University rankings)... 2<sup>nd</sup> in the world in total output of scholarly publications (after Harvard)... 1<sup>st</sup> in Canada in all of these rankings... and yet *last* in Canada, and amongst the very lowest in North America, when it comes to public funding per student.

Ladies and gentlemen, I submit to you that – simply put – this institution defies gravity. Our ability to achieve these incredible results in the face of such a significant resource handicap is nothing short of remarkable.

These rankings confirm that we are a research powerhouse – Canada’s leading research-intensive university in one field after another, spanning the humanities, medicine, engineering, sciences, social sciences, law, social work, and many other professional disciplines.

Very recently, we surpassed the \$1 billion mark in funded research for the first time ever. Our faculty account for 35 percent of the most prestigious international prizes awarded to those based at Canadian academic institutions, despite the fact that we comprise only 8 percent of the nation’s total faculty complement.

What may be less obvious from our global rankings is another characteristic of this amazing university that sets us apart. We are arguably Canada’s most accessible university. Our three substantial campuses are home to 80,000 students, and we are situated in the world’s most open and diverse city-region. This accessibility is further accentuated by our remarkable student aid policy, which states that: “No student offered admission to a

program at the University of Toronto should be unable to enter or complete the program due to lack of financial means". We spend more than \$150M every year, over and above student aid support from government to make good on this pledge.

Very few other universities in the world combine these two characteristics, and deliver on this dual mandate of research excellence and openness as well as we do. It is embodied in the experience of Jessica Yeung, who came to Canada from Hong Kong as a child. A 4<sup>th</sup>-year undergraduate student in Linguistics, and the first in her family to attend university, she is working with Keren Rice, University Professor and one of the world's leading experts in the linguistic analysis and preservation of aboriginal languages in Canada's Northwest Territories.

And then there is Adam Virani whose family moved to Toronto from Tanzania. As an undergraduate specialist in Geology, he works with Barbara Sherwood Lollar, University Professor and an internationally renowned expert in environmental biogeoscience and carbon isotope geochemistry.

Great stories like these are found right across this university. They demonstrate that the University of Toronto is a merit-based portal of opportunity for many thousands of academically qualified students.

Our openness is not confined to residents of the Toronto region, Ontario, or even Canada. Some 20 percent of our incoming undergraduate class this year is comprised of international students. They are drawn here, in increasing numbers, for the same reason: to learn from – and work with – our leading scholars. And many of them stay in Canada once they graduate, building careers, spurring creativity and innovation in one sector of the economy after another, and catalyzing entrepreneurial activity.

Take for example Nilesh Bansal, who came to U of T from Mumbai to do his graduate work with Professor Nick Koudas in Computer Science. Together, they became

entrepreneurs and formed the software firm Sysomos, a leading producer of tools to monitor social media.

Our university is a critical piece of social infrastructure – one that opens up opportunities for newcomers and provides them with the foundation they need to thrive and contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of Toronto, Ontario and Canada.

And, after they graduate, they bestow honour upon us all. Our alumni include Prime Ministers Lester Pearson and Paul Martin, Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson and Lieutenant-Governor David Onley, Nobel-winning scientists such as Walter Kohn, acclaimed writers Margaret Atwood, Dionne Brand, Malcolm Gladwell and Rohinton Mistry, astronauts Roberta Bondar and Julie Payette, filmmaker David Cronenberg, journalist Lyse Doucet, musicians and composers like Mychael Danna, giants of the humanities such as Northrop Frye, Supreme Court chief justice Bora Laskin, medical pioneers like Frederick Banting (himself a Nobel laureate), and many other distinguished graduates. And 82 of our students have won Rhodes Scholarships – three this year alone.

How do we do all these amazing things? How do we defy gravity?

Let me begin with the most obvious point: the sheer dedication, creativity and commitment of our faculty and staff. One can also point to the ingenuity, energy and passion of our wonderful students.

We also owe a huge debt of thanks to our alumni (more than half a million worldwide), and to our benefactors and friends. They help us in ways too numerous to mention, with their time, their loyalty, and their generosity.

We are most fortunate to enjoy the support of some very important partners: in particular, our remarkable network of affiliated hospitals – working in concert with our Faculty of

Medicine and other units at the university, and with the support of other key partners such as the MaRS Discovery District and MaRS Innovation.

I also want to recognize the talented and visionary colleagues – past and present – who have provided such sterling leadership of this university: department chairs, directors, principals, deans, vice-presidents, provosts, and former presidents.

Here, I must acknowledge the phenomenal contributions of my predecessor David Naylor, who has steered this institution through challenging times with such clear vision, firm resolve, and utter dedication. Let me also acknowledge Robert Prichard, whose presidency put in place the foundations that have enabled us to move steadily upward over the past two decades. David and Rob are part of an impressive fellowship of former leaders that includes Robert Birgeneau, Frank Iacobucci, George Connell, David Strangway, and John Evans, a group whose collective achievements have stood us all in such good stead. They have been joined by a succession of dedicated Chancellors and Chairs of Governing Council, present and past, many of whom are with us here today.

We must also recognize and thank both the Ontario and Federal governments for their visionary investments in higher education and research over many years, ensuring access, fostering growth in graduate enrolment, and financing vital infrastructure.

So we have much to be proud of, and many to thank for our past success. However, as we look to the future, there is growing cause for concern. We face some increasingly strong headwinds that could well threaten our top-20 global standing in the coming years and prevent us from moving forward.

Public funding – already scarce – could become even more so if the fiscal position of our government partners deteriorates in the future. As our economic recovery advances haltingly, institutions of higher learning find themselves under increasing pressure to produce ‘job-ready’ graduates, and to abandon the time-honoured ideal of a broadly based

education. And our status as a preferred producer of knowledge has been challenged by societal change. In common with every other form of knowledge-producing enterprise, we now face intense competition from multiple sources, as the dissemination of knowledge explodes throughout the online world.

How are we going to meet these formidable challenges, if we hope to maintain and advance our global standing?

The ingenuity, creativity, and efficiency of our faculty and staff, and our academic leaders will of course be central to our efforts. The support of our alumni, benefactors and friends has never been more important than it is today, and will become even more so in the coming years.

Let me suggest three other strategies that I believe will help ensure our success in meeting these challenges and turning them to our advantage. First, leveraging our location more fully. Next, strengthening our international partnerships. Third, re-examining, and perhaps even reinventing undergraduate education.

Let me start with the first strategy: leveraging our location.

It is our great good fortune to be situated in the world's most open, cosmopolitan, and globalized city-region. Indeed, U of T would not be the success it is today were it not situated in one of the world's great cities. If we are to achieve our full potential in the future, we must leverage our location within this urban region of 6 million-plus people more fully.

Universities are fundamentally in the talent business. We develop talent by providing education of the highest quality – to our 80,000 students pursuing undergraduate and graduate degree programs, and to tens of thousands more who take advantage of our continuing studies and professional education courses.

But we are also in the business of attracting and retaining highly educated and accomplished faculty and staff. Our region's diversity, as well as the strength of our public school system and the safety of our streets, are huge assets for us when it comes to recruiting highly educated people. Such qualities also make it less likely these gifted people will leave once they've settled here.

The social and cultural diversity of this region is, of course, striking. To cite but one noteworthy statistic, some 50 percent of those living in the Toronto region were born outside of Canada – an astonishingly high proportion unequalled anywhere else in the world. Our diversity is also defined in terms of faith communities, sexual identity, our vibrant arts, culture, and food scenes, our economic base, and our distinctive neighbourhoods and communities.

The city around us confers other advantages as well. Our students engage in learning-by-doing, working with community partners in neighbourhoods right across the GTA. At the East Scarborough Storefront, addressing the social needs of residents in Kingston-Galloway and Orton Park. At Queen and Bathurst, where our students from Medicine and Social Work deliver health care services to refugees and others who fall through the cracks. At the Newcomer Centre of Peel, just blocks away from our Mississauga campus, where our students volunteer to help recent immigrants make a smooth transition to living in Canada.

Our faculty also benefit from our location in Greater Toronto. They have the opportunity to work on urban issues and challenges to advance our understanding of how cities develop and change over time. In this way, they lend their expertise and advice to government agencies, citizens' groups and community-based organizations on major urban policy questions.

Looking to the future, we must explore new and imaginative ways to take advantage of our location in the Toronto region, and to deepen our relationships with our local partners – public, private, and non-profit. This is clearly a case of enlightened self-interest. By working more closely with these groups to meet challenges and seize opportunities together, we will make this region a better place in which to live, work and prosper. And in so doing, we help ourselves by making it easier to attract and retain talented faculty, staff and students.

This means that we need to identify our most successful examples of community outreach and partnership, and scale them up to generate more opportunities for our students and faculty, and more benefit for our local partners.

We must seek new opportunities to open up our campuses to the city around us, using our physical spaces to convene public discussions of the most pressing and compelling urban issues of the day. We have a social obligation not just to host, but also to inform and to elevate, public debates on these topics by ensuring that we bring our expertise, our evidence, and our networks of colleagues to bear on these conversations. And we should invite other local partners to collaborate with us in this endeavor.

We need to acknowledge and embrace our role as a city-builder, in the three parts of the metropolitan region in which we reside. We must work closely and effectively with our neighbourhood and civic partners to ensure that our physical development plans not only help us achieve our academic mission but also address the needs and aspirations of our many good neighbours.

These are a few of the possible ways we can build on our local relationships for the mutual benefit of the university and the city.

My second strategy is to strengthen our international partnerships. In today's world, our identities are defined by multiple affinities and connections, and our daily experience is

permeated by both local and global relationships. We as a university must think ever more strategically about how to leverage and strengthen our international partnerships and reach. This is the other side of the local coin.

Indeed, we can use our global networks to enrich and deepen our relationships locally. We are fortunate to have international partner institutions in every major region of the world. A significant number of these partners are themselves situated in vibrant urban regions, including New York, London, Paris, and Berlin, but also Beijing, Tokyo, Mumbai, and São Paulo.

At a time when we are keen to expand our role as a city-building institution at home, it makes particularly good sense for us to leverage our partnerships with other great universities in other great world cities. Many of these institutions are engaging in their own city-building efforts, and can offer us entrée to their local projects, practices and partnerships. Not only does this provide access to fantastic research opportunities for our faculty and students, and encourage our students to become global citizens, but it also allows us to bring this experience and expertise to Toronto.

Building on this logic, it makes sense for us to focus our resources on these institutional partnerships, allowing us to deepen and develop these relationships to foster not just student mobility and faculty exchanges, but also joint research projects, joint conferences, joint teaching and, yes, perhaps even joint degrees. Excellent models already exist – including our research-based partnership with the University of São Paulo, focused around themes like global cities, international relations, oncology and neuroscience. Another noteworthy model is our partnership with Fudan University, where faculty and students in our Asian Institute collaborate with their counterparts in Shanghai on a jointly offered course.

Now onto my third strategy, re-examining and perhaps even reinventing undergraduate education. The challenges to our traditional role as a knowledge-sharing institution –

including the rise of digital technologies and the pressure to produce ‘job-ready’ graduates – demand that we do this. Here too, we can build on some excellent foundations.

Over the past eight years, this university has led a fundamental transformation of teaching and learning. We have multiplied small-group learning opportunities, building on smaller communities such as our distinctive colleges, federated universities, and newer campuses.

We have championed experiential and service learning, dramatically scaled up the number of research opportunities, and expanded the range and variety of international experiences available to our students. We need to build on these successes and maintain this momentum.

We have pioneered the use of online technologies, for both credit and non-credit courses, and we have learned much about how to use these new tools both to substitute for and to complement classroom-based learning. We need to extend this work still further, and study the effectiveness of online teaching formats in real time so that we can reap valuable knowledge from our experience.

Interestingly, the rise of online learning has had a somewhat surprising and salutary effect, since it compels us to ensure that the value of ‘being there’ in person, in the classroom or the lab, is sufficiently great to compete successfully against purely virtual modes of teaching. These new tools can help us rethink the way we teach in the classroom.

We need to reaffirm the enduring value of a broad liberal arts education at the undergraduate level, but also to ask ourselves how we can help our graduates extract the full benefit from that education. We need to demonstrate more clearly how the education we provide prepares our graduates for a lifetime of success and fulfillment, while also contributing to the economic, social and political success of the region, province, nation, and the world.

Here too, there is much excellent work on which to build. Recent curriculum renewal has ensured that our undergraduate programs deliver a set of core competencies such as writing skills, quantitative reasoning ability, critical thinking, and facility with ethical and moral reasoning. But more can still be done. We also need to support the growing interest in entrepreneurial activity amongst our students, and to provide more opportunities for them to study in professional programs.

At the same time, we need to remind our partners in government and business, as well as the taxpayer, that the value of a university education needs to be measured along many dimensions. In addition to enjoying better employment prospects upon graduation, we know that citizens with a university education are more civically engaged, enjoy healthier and longer lives, accumulate higher lifetime earnings, are less likely to engage in crime or to depend on social assistance, and ... they are *happier*.

So...leveraging our location in Toronto more fully, deepening and focusing our international partnerships, and rededicating ourselves to the enrichment of undergraduate teaching and learning are all necessary and sensible elements of a strategy to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

But in the end, there is one further and very important element that will be required. There is no escaping the hard truth that we'll need more support from our government partners, at all levels, if we are to succeed. We are grateful for their support in the past. But if we are to achieve our ambitious goals, we need our public-sector partners to recognize – through their funding and their policies – that institutions like the University of Toronto play a unique and differentiated role within Canadian higher education.

Just imagine, if we succeed on all of these fronts, what heights we can reach ...

I am deeply honoured, humbled and – above all – excited to have been given this great opportunity. While the responsibility is daunting and the challenges are great, I am

comforted by the knowledge that so many talented and dedicated people will be ready to help. And speaking of help, I must pay tribute to my family – my dear partner Joanna, our wonderful children Isabel and Miles, and the rest of the family, many of whom are here today. Thank you for your love and support.

In closing, let me say that, while the challenges we face are great, and our need to innovate has never been greater, the opportunities have never been more appealing. I look forward to working closely with all parts of the U of T community to build on our wonderful foundations and move this great good place forward. Let's get on with it!