Convocation and Congress: the right mix to keep a dean going

> DOUG PEERS, Dean of Arts

Over the course of my career, two events have come to define spring: Congress and Convocation. Amongst my favourites in the academic calendar, these events signal new opportunities and directions. In fact, I can date myself much like a tree by counting the number of Congresses I have attended. Coincidentally, this year’s Congress is in Victoria which is where I attended my first Congress some twenty-three years ago.

Congress 2013 has been marked by many of the same characteristics as the one we hosted last year: a superabundance of provocative and insightful papers, the seemingly intractable project on how to develop effective signage for Canada’s campuses, and growing evidence that our scholarship is attracting the attention of the national media. While one cannot deny Victoria has offered a venue unmatched for its combination of sea and sky, I find its ring road sadly lonely as it is bereft of geese standing sentinel.

The big difference, however, between the Congress I first attended in 1990 as a freshly-minted PhD and those of recent times (besides scale - they have roughly doubled in size) is the increasing sense of an academy under siege. The growing chorus of journalists and politicians calling into question the value of a university education, coupled with rumours of declining undergraduate applications,»
has - not surprisingly - triggered considerable soul-searching. Never mind that the employment data used against us is often flawed, or that forecasts for Canada’s future indicate the need for people who offer mental agility and social engagement such as precisely those who we graduate, or that student satisfaction surveys confirm we’ve delivered the education we promised. We need to respond more effectively and more vigorously to our critics. We need to demonstrate how, in this alleged knowledge economy, our graduates’ ability to learn and re-learn outfits them better than simply teaching them narrowly defined skills.

This brings me to convocation. I have long since lost track of the number I have attended, the convocation addresses I have endured, the mispronouncing of student names I have made, or my attempts as convocation marshal at uCalgary to chase down rogue cellphone users. But I do remember the student who was so swept up in the moment that, as she crossed the stage, she ran straight into me, knocking off our hats, and in her sudden panic she grabbed mine by mistake and proceeded to leave the stage differently attired than her arrival. I also remember the many parents who have asked me to stand in their photos - not because I had taught their children, but because in my gowns I symbolized the value of the university.

It is far too easy these days to dwell on the negative - Congress and Convocation are the tonics that can keep us going. Have a great summer and see you in the fall.

Did you know…?

Diplomas are sometimes referred to as “sheepskins,” because they were originally written on parchment made from animal skin.
Christine White’s convocation: a defining moment

CHRISTINE WHITE, Coordinator, Co-op and Arts Special Programs, Arts Alumni Liaison

• BA Hons. Speech Communication

I was determined to finish my degree program in the fall of 1996. And I did. And with it came a huge surprise – I was named the departmental award winner for Distinguished Academic Achievement in Speech Communication, and received a $500 scholarship. When I accepted my award at a departmental function held in the Theatre of the Arts, I was so shocked, I tripped and stumbled across the stage. My advisor at the time, Jill Tomasson Goodwin, put out her hand to catch me. I looked out at the rest of the class looking on, and said, “I’m speechless!” That was the extent of my acceptance speech.

On Thursday, May 29, 1997, I was presented with my BA in Speech Communication. On convocation morning, I woke up from a restless night, feeling anxious, excited, and proud. Driving to campus was like no other day in the 13 years that I had been driving to work. This day was different – I was finally graduating after eight years of part-time study combined with working full-time on campus and being a mom. I recall telling my younger sister Cindy that convocation felt like I was getting married!

While in the convocation procession, I glanced up into the bleachers where my son and daughter were sitting, and the pride on their faces almost made me cry, but I held it together. When my name was called, I couldn’t remember ever feeling such immense joy (and relief), other than the birth of my two children. Walking across the stage in the PAC was a big deal – I would finally have a piece of paper to show how hard I had worked. It was an extra special event, because I was hooded by Professor Peter Woolstencroft, the associate dean of Arts Special Programs at the time (and my boss). I still have my convocation hood (it holds a special place in a trunk in my basement!). The pomp and ceremony associated with convocation really made an impact on me – it was definitely a defining moment in my life. And, I didn’t trip...

Did you know...?

The cap and gown combination can be traced back to the academic and clerical dress commonly worn at the medieval universities of Europe. These early universities didn’t have buildings, so students would usually meet at churches. Since these churches were unheated, historians believe students wore long gowns and caps for warmth.
Kayla McKinnon’s not-so-distant convocation memories

KAYLA MCKINNON, Economics Administrative Coordinator and Advisor, Undergraduate Studies

• BA Hons. Social Development Studies
• Master of Public Service

When I think about convocation at the University of Waterloo, I have fond feelings for my not-so-distant academic past. After a smaller ceremony at Renison, my classmates and I were escorted to the main campus by a group of bagpipers. I had no idea that this would be happening and so I definitely felt important! After sitting through three uWaterloo convocations for my older siblings, I felt a very strong sense of pride once it was finally my turn. “I’m part of the club!” I thought to myself as I scanned the crowd of attendees to find my parents aggressively waving. There was something very special about posing for pictures on the lawn outside the PAC in front of the same tree where my Dad had his photo taken 45 years earlier. But I just couldn’t get enough; two years later I did it all over again when I graduated with a Master’s degree. Did the ceremony feel much different when I was wearing a black hood with green trim as opposed to a full green hood? No, it didn’t. But in that black hood with green trim I did have an even stronger sense of personal accomplishment; I did this one for myself.

KAYLA MCKINNON, Economics Administrative Coordinator and Advisor, Undergraduate Studies

Linda Warley reports on Cuban teaching experience

LINDA WARLEY, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies

Why would Cuban professors and students be interested in Canadian literary and cultural studies? Well, for some reason, they are. And this past April, for a second year, I travelled to the University of Holguin, Cuba with other English professors from Canadian universities who teach Canadian literature. We talked with the Cubans about the topics that are current in Canadian literary studies—such as indigenous literatures, autobiographical drama, identity politics, digital humanities, social class in literature and translation. And we listened to what the Cubans had to tell us.

One thing that became abundantly clear to us is how few resources Cuban professors and students have to study foreign literatures. Their access to the Internet is limited; they are short on books; their access to journal articles is almost non-existent. Nevertheless, students are interested in Canada, partly because so many Canadians visit their country as tourists. Students in the English programs at Cuban universities learn the language, and this gives them an advantage when they apply for jobs. Many of them aspire to be writers and teachers or work in government, but many of them also aspire to work in the tourist industry where they get access to the Cuban convertible peso which, in turn, they can use to buy consumer products and take advantage of some of the finer aspects of Cuban cultural and social life.
Quote by Simon Bolivar written on a wall at the University of Holguin translates to:
“All men are born with equal rights to the benefits of society.”

Arts Teaching Award: inaugural recipients

Last year the Dean of Arts introduced a series of new Faculty-based awards to better recognize the accomplishments of both faculty and staff members: Arts Teaching Awards, Arts Research Awards, and Arts Service Awards.

Launching this new recognition initiative, the first recipients of the Teaching Awards were recently selected by the dean-appointed Arts Awards and Honours Committee, with a formal award event planned for September.

Congratulations to the inaugural Arts Teaching Award recipients:

Dr. Christina Vester,
Department of Classical Studies

Dr. Greg Andres,
Department of Philosophy

An invitation from the Dean to faculty and staff

Please join the Arts 2013 Convocation Reception (even better, wearing your academic regalia). Co-hosted by the Office of Alumni Affairs and the Faculty of Arts, this is an important opportunity to congratulate our students, meet their families and give them a warm Arts send-off. I hope you can make it.

The Arts Convocation Receptions take place on
Wednesday, June 12th in the Student Life Centre, Great Hall
12:00 pm to 1:30 pm
&
4:30 pm to 6:00 pm

The receptions follow immediately after each Convocation ceremony, which begin at 10:00am and 2:30pm.

Join your favourite graduands in the Arts Photo Booth in the SLC for a fun foto with infamous Arts icons.

Arts convocation photobooth (a sample)
On the web

Did you know...?
The tradition of cap-tossing originated in 1912 at the U.S. Naval Academy's graduation.

We have a new ARTS website!
Check it out: uwaterloo.ca/arts

Feedback, please
We publish five issues of Inside Arts per year.
Send your comments and ideas to wphilpott@uwaterloo.ca.