PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: A DISCUSSION PAPER DRAFT 2*

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***The previous draft was called "Navigating Cultural Diversity"**

Introduction

UBC is discussing a comprehensive strategic plan to support its primary mission to create a learning environment fostering excellent teaching and influential research. The plan will be built upon several components including: Aboriginal engagement, community engagement, equity, enhancing the student experience, interdisciplinary work, international reach and influence, strengthening research capabilities, and sustainability. Within this context, this discussion paper offers preliminary thoughts on an additional strategic priority, namely helping future generations of students to recognize the significant value of cultural, religious, intellectual, and other forms of diversity,[1] and to navigate amongst interdependent communities and societies. I hope that these reflections will generate a community dialogue on how we can better enable students to treat diversity as a strength in their academic, professional and personal lives.

Ours is a culturally diverse university now and for the future. There are many social and cultural groups within UBC: indigenous peoples, international students, immigrants, visible minorities, those born in British Columbia, women, men, members of sexual minority communities, members of religious minorities, those of differing socioeconomic status, and so on. Although our active respect for diversity is already reflected in the academic and administrative systems of UBC, more could be done to build community out of this diversity, and to ensure a wholly-felt sense of inclusion and belonging. Universities, by their very nature, privilege certain kinds of knowledge, traditions and forms of conduct over others. To remain legitimate in their claims of intellectual strength and innovation, and to serve as leaders in confronting the challenges of the 21st century, however, universities within multicultural societies such as Canada, and with student bodies as diverse as UBC's, must encourage the expression of views and aspirations of those groups new to the university and those groups traditionally marginalized in society. All students must be encouraged to interact actively with students from other cultural and social backgrounds, and facilitated in serious thinking on their place in a complex and diverse world. This practice implies openness to intellectual diversity, to engaging with people who hold strongly different views of the world, even views that would question the value of cultural diversity.

We faculty members and staff must first challenge ourselves. Given the remarkable changes that have taken place in the make-up of Canadian (and especially Vancouver) society over the last quarter century, many staff and faculty are not well equipped, technically or experientially, to recognize, understand and manage diversity in our work and in the classroom. Achieving greater intercultural understanding is not just a need for our students. If we are to encourage and guide effective learning, we may need first to do some learning ourselves.

A recent study by UCLA researchers indicates that a focus on diversity is rapidly growing at colleges and universities in the United States. Seventy-five percent of professors surveyed said that they work to "enhance students' knowledge of and appreciation for other racial/ethnic groups." This is up 17.6% in

[1] Throughout this paper "cultural diversity" will be used as shorthand to encapsulate many forms of diversity, between and within groups. I do recognize, however, that there are important differences associated with various forms of diversity, as between the concepts of culture and religion, for example. What is more, groups that look homogenous from one perspective (people of Caucasian ancestry) may be quite diverse from other perspectives (religion, sexual orientation, social status). Given the limited scope of this paper, and its focus on planning for UBC rather than upon a detailed academic consideration of fundamental concepts, I ask the reader to forgive the shorthand. I chose "culture" as the encompassing concept primarily because it is fluid, and can be broadly encompassing.

three years since the previous survey. Why is this pattern occurring? For one thing, the current university student population, in part owing to gains in educational attainment among previously excluded groups, is now much more culturally diverse than it was 10 or 20 years ago. Secondly, in our multicultural world, the ability to work with people different from ourselves is a necessary skill and a critical advantage in the workplace. People who do not know how to recognize, understand and appreciate cultural difference or how to communicate across cultural and situational boundaries, are people who are unable to function effectively in many circumstances, and who do not enable, and may impede, critical work in our societies. Universities are excellent environments in which to acquire skills in dealing with diversity and to acquire the necessary training (e.g., language acquisition, appreciation for other regions and cultural practices, and experience engaging in productive discussions with a wide range of culturally diverse peers). Although some of this may be absorbed passively, active teaching and learning along these lines will greatly enhance the student experience. Indeed, one of the primary duties of a university in a democratic society like Canada is to promote intercultural understanding amongst students, alumni, staff and faculty.

In order to make strides along these lines we may have to re-imagine, at least in part, what UBC is and who it serves. Long before the government of British Columbia chose Point Grey as the ideal site to carry out the province's mission of higher education, the Musqueam people recognized the land as an important place of education and learning. Although a particular culture's set of ideals regarding human intellectual heritage came to dominate UBC's academic mission and practices, our university's rich and diverse origins as a site of intellectual learning provide a valuable foundation to move forward. UBC Vancouver is on the traditional territory of the Musqueam people just as UBC Okanagan is on the land of the Okanagan Nations Alliance. We are engaging in new thinking about how this history and our current relationships with First Nations should matter throughout the university.

To embark on a culturally more inclusive future while still maintaining focus, UBC must engage in an active process of reflection and change. We must also devote more attention and resources to the goal of having our faculty and our university leadership better reflect the cross-section of Canadian society (and more closely approximate our student body as well). In my view, this is best done not through quotas that tend to undermine the people actually hired, but through a conscious and determined effort to expand and diversify the applicant pool of outstanding talent. Embracing cultural diversity will carry us into a wider frame of life. We must make the values and standards that we think should characterize life at UBC as transparent as possible, and facilitate continuing discussion about these values and standards. In doing so, we will have to acknowledge a difficult reality: for some people, the idea that we should adopt affirmative postures towards multiculturalism and diversity is itself a cultural bias.

A pedagogy acknowledging diversity

How do we turn the very real challenges of diversity into an opportunity for the university? How do we ensure that our diversity is widely recognized as an asset? Here we need to do more as an institution. We can think about how to link our pedagogy, and our sense of social responsibility, to our diversity. We can encourage engagement with diversity across the curriculum, with students learning about multiple cultural perspectives, cross-perceptions of one cultural group toward another, manipulation of cultural systems in power relationships, and the like. Our students can learn from their collective diversity by sharing and validating their experiences when discussing these issues in the classroom. We can link the development of individual cultural self-reflection with a more self-aware institutional

culture. We can both strive to help students understand their role in a diverse society (i.e., respecting difference but also encouraging their capacity for critical thought), and strive to create an institution that does the same.

The many social and cultural groups within UBC enhance our entire community by contributing new ways of thinking, diverse perspectives and new values for consideration. And yet we often fail to build university learning experiences that account for different ways of learning and knowing, for different kinds of needs, and that aim to promote understanding instead of antipathy. To the extent that the university fails in enabling students to function effectively in situations of profound cultural difference, often where there are real and perceived power imbalances as well, we all suffer from the consequences: we don't know how to have the conversations we need to have. Conflicts escalate when polemics and confrontation prevail, rather than reasoned debate. As an institution, we have a choice to send out students who replicate this pattern of failure or to nurture the skills and competencies that can produce far more productive social interactions. Addressing our differences, real and perceived, calls for genuine curiosity and dialogue. Recent isolated incidents in the UBC dorms remind us where antipathies, often bred of ignorance, can lead; if they are not dealt with constructively, then everyone is damaged, from the students involved to the university and the wider community.

Learning from those who go with us and have gone before us

Within our university there already exist well-developed environments that foster the exploration of diversity both with a sense of inclusivity of other cultures and critical distance from one's own culture. One expects this from departments that tend to focus on topics of diversity such as Anthropology, English, Geography, History, Human Development-Learning and Culture, Law, Social Work, and Sociology. There are also programmes based outside traditional departmental structures that achieve this goal such as First Nations Studies, Go Global, Humanities 101, The Institute of Asian Research, The Learning Exchange, Museum of Anthropology, Musqueam 101, Trek, Women's and Gender Studies, etc. UBC's Centre for Intercultural Communication in Continuing Education has great experience in promoting learning around cultural difference; we rarely take advantage of that expertise within UBC itself. We should seriously consider applying the strategies that have worked in all these programmes to the university at large; if we don't learn from our own work, we are failing in one of the chief obligations of an institution of higher learning.

A fundamental opportunity for our community at large

Cultural diversity is obviously a fact of life not only for UBC but for the larger community of the Lower Mainland, and for other communities across British Columbia and throughout Canada. Diversity poses challenges to previously dominant groups; it also represents a primary source of dynamism that Canada requires to remain prosperous and forward-thinking in the early 21st century. Inasmuch as we endeavor to understand how diversity changes our communities, and to build institutions that harness the opportunities diversity creates, we position ourselves to remain a vibrant, livable, and attractive region, province and country. A strong UBC benefits all of British Columbia, and indeed all of Canada. People from all cultures of the world need to feel welcomed, respected, and at home in this institution.

The university is a dynamic but relatively safe space; it is a place where one's first significant conversations across difference often take place. Learning to converse effectively may be easier at

university than in the typically more polarized circumstances of work and community life. One way to help build up respect for diversity is to recognize the inherent dignity of individual people; it is harder to ignore difference or to stereotype when it becomes a friend staring you in the face. Our students can graduate not only with the important experience of having reached across boundaries, but they can have built networks with other people who will assume leadership positions in various communities. Students will know others who may have started from very different places, but with whom they have already learned to converse. This possibility is essential for the future health of our societies.

The significant inherent value of cultural diversity

It is important to go beyond the obvious truisms (though they need to be stated) that developing research and student learning strategies related to diversity is a civic obligation and virtue in a multicultural society such as Canada. We can go further, and assert that in a complex, interdependent world, equipping students to engage constructively with cultural diversity is as much part of our institutional responsibility as the instilling of higher-level literacy and numeracy.

Given the complexity of our societies (local, national and international), people are increasingly thrust into situations that are unfamiliar. We all have some modest experience of what it is to be uprooted from set patterns; we can find ourselves in unsettling territory even at home. Although this experience can be alienating, it is also potentially liberating to the extent that we can develop a critical stance on our own culture. This critical stance can deepen and enrich the social critique and cultural memory that are so central to all areas of endeavor within universities.

The late cultural critic Edward Said once suggested that universities should encourage students to know their own cultures and religions with the sort of critical distance that comes from being in exile. Cultural diversity is essential to fostering such a perspective because experiencing difference so close to ourselves unsettles us and compels us to question our assumptions. Without such diversity, our ideas can be shallow and circular, self-awareness is limited, and self-critique is constrained. Innovation is stifled. To take but one example, great History departments thrive by studying difference over time and between cultures. They depend on comparison and the greater the range of differences, the better able they are to develop deep understandings of their field of study.

Research and cultural diversity

Greater exposure to cultural diversity also means that students will be better prepared to excel as researchers in a world in which collaborative innovation on an international scale is becoming the norm. Although science may strive to be objective, biography and personal experience frequently guide the choice of research topics and how those research questions are formulated. Similarly, a non-diverse population will tend to focus on a narrower range of social and policy concerns. Diversifying the student body, staff and faculty, and paying more attention to "other" ways of thinking increase the development of new topics, and new views on old topics. The passion to conduct research on an infectious disease that strikes disproportionately in South Asia may be more likely to arise in a person with strong family ties in the region. Furthermore, when we educate and mentor those who are historically under-represented in the professions, they may go on to affect public policy in ways that people from a "majority" background may not be inclined or prepared to do.

Recent research in social psychology demonstrates that having diverse cultural experiences can enhance one's thinking toolkit (e.g., creativity, problem-solving), enabling one to approach problems from different perspectives, and to think "outside the box." Those with enriched cultural environments become more psychologically ready to accept and recruit ideas from unfamiliar sources and places.

It won't come easy

Diversity is not easy or trouble-free. At times it can even be threatening to strongly held beliefs and patterns of conduct. Conscious, time-consuming effort is required to be open to, and to understand, others' points of view, and to revisit our own worldviews in this light. One of the hardest forms of diversity to embrace is intellectual diversity, but it is the bedrock of the university.

Attempts to embrace diversity must go beyond superficial celebration of diversity in and of itself. Grappling with diversity involves difficult and sometimes painful efforts to interrogate the real differences amongst us and to find resolutions to the conflicts that arise from those differences that satisfy as much as possible the needs of different kinds of people. This is serious work that requires challenging deeply-rooted yet misleading views that assume that those who are culturally more distant from us are somehow lacking in various ways or are less trustworthy. And it is work best done at the university, which is by definition the place where people examine the manifold dimensions of our shared humanity.

Engagement with the complications of diversity

Perhaps the greatest good of cultural diversity comes from mere respectful exposure, or as Kwame Appiah puts it, from "getting used to one another." But behind the open embrace of others lurks a nagging question about whether we have addressed problems of value and identity. For example, should moral relativism--that is the notion that no culturally-based moral view is truer, better, or more reasonable than any other--be defended? Is "cultural equality" possible? Or are certain culturally-based moral views less defensible than others? Are there universal right and wrongs? There is an ineradicable tension between universal tolerance and universal value. Many of us would resolve this tension through compartmentalization. But this approach is never fully satisfying, and is a serious issue that can only be resolved with time, patience and extraordinarily careful thought.

Religious and atheistic diversity is particularly important because religion foregrounds one of the basic issues that institutions of higher learning tend to avoid. The university's most valued exercise is dialogue. Most scholars harbor the fundamental belief that everything can potentially be resolved by way of open and reasonable communication. Everything, in other words, can be observed, discussed, put on hold, questioned, maybe even jettisoned—but not communication itself. Yet, some belief systems, for example some of the world's most prominent religions (and in fact some atheist groups as well), often appear to limit communication that might encourage questioning of perceived "core" or "basic" truths. We must find ways to respectfully engage with belief-systems that cannot accept the possibility of alternatives. Here, the university faces an enormously difficult task. It is not a matter of teaching tolerance—for tolerance implies a power differential, in other words, it implies that one has the power or the right not to tolerate. It is not even simply a matter of respect—for that still implies an even ground that allows for an exchange of glances, no matter how far apart. It is, rather, a matter of fostering an intellectual climate that gives students the tools and capacity to understand the roots,

dynamics and consequences of cultural and religious differences, whether or not they agree with them. It is a matter of helping students understand how to deal with the difference between positions that allow for differing positions and those that do not.

We must be prepared to turn the lens inward. The cross-cultural skills we seek to engender must start not with a tendency to stigmatize the other, but with contemplation of our own situation. We must also recognize how cross-cultural communication can unintentionally increase cultural divides. For example, encounters with unfamiliar cultural values and practices can sometimes result in the reinforcement of stereotypes or biases about the other. Rather than ask why individuals from other cultures hold certain values and engage in certain practices, we could ask instead: why do we hold certain values? Why do we engage in certain practices?

Thinking about cultural diversity, far from being innately divisive, ultimately informs our understanding of universal human experience. With time and effort, one may observe another culture and perceive what is common to all humanity. Someone may spend 20 years studying Balinese music before recognizing that its modular construction rests on principles of balance and symmetry analogous, if not identical, to those in European music. However, none of this is to suggest that cultural difference is superficial or inconsequential. Culture plays an essential constitutive role in the formation of a person, that is, we are not full human beings without culture. Culture's effects are profound and influence us from the cradle to the grave, and that is why crossing cultural borders is so demanding.

If we move towards a stronger recognition of the distinctions that make us unique from one another, do we run the risk of failing to appreciate the myriad important ways in which we are similar? Might we be less likely to invest in the ties that bind us together? How can we successfully accommodate diversity, while still reconciling it with the goal of living together? When does the promotion of diversity and the expression of cultural pathways blur into cultural ghettos? For example, at UBC we like to talk about the incredible diversity of our student body, but how much interaction is really going on between groups of students from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds? Not just casual interaction, of course, but interaction that advances cultural sensitivity and understanding? How often are students encouraged to think deeply about critical issues in other countries and cultures? How can students themselves work to improve cross-cultural connections?

Student opportunities to engage with and about diversity

As citizens of the 21st century, our students must be informed about diverse cultures of the world – their traditions and beliefs, social and political systems, their geographies, economies, and psychologies. As Lester Pearson anticipated over 50 years ago we are moving into "an age when different civilizations will have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other's history and ideals, art and culture, mutually enriching each other's lives. The alternative, in this overcrowded little world, is misunderstanding, tension, clash, and catastrophe."

Universities have the responsibility to create environments in which we can engage in vigorous debate over culturally-sensitive and complex issues in a productive and respectful manner. I fear that Canadian universities are too often places where we shy away from the social realities of deep diversity, where comfort is prized over robust and challenging debate. We are not so good at principled but open-minded engagement with people whose values are not entirely compatible with our own. Conflict-averse

behavior can sometimes escalate conflict.

We must strive harder to create curricular and extra-curricular opportunities where students can freely and respectfully engage in dialogue around tough cultural, religious and political issues, including potentially contentious ones, with their peers and professors. A powerful and challenging example of work being done along these lines is "What I Learned in Class Today: Aboriginal Issues in the Classroom," a video project by two graduates of the UBC First Nations Studies Program in which Aboriginal students are interviewed about their classroom experiences. The video exposes the alienation that occurs when discussions take place in an ill-informed and insensitive environment. This compelling documentary introduces the problem and then challenges the university community to transform the dialogue around difficult issues from ignorance and faulty assumptions to productive and intelligent exchange.

Our students must learn to engage with others with a conscious appreciation that the other person might view the world in very different ways. We should encourage students to develop their own conceptual framework for understanding how different life circumstances, assumptions or experiences may affect thoughts, feelings and behaviors. An open-minded orientation can enhance understanding and empathy and reduce ethnocentric projections and cultural misunderstandings. We continue building the bridges amongst cultures by fostering healthy person-to-person relationships. In other words, we have to help each other learn how to hold people in esteem even when we disagree with them.

Our cultural mix at present

UBC's student demographics have changed dramatically over the past 25 years. It is impossible to compare today's demographics with specific points in the past because until recently UBC did not keep track of such demographics. But at present our student body is roughly 40% white (to adopt the Statistics Canada terminology), 32% of Chinese ancestry, 7 % other Asian (Japanese, Korean, Filipino, etc), 5% South Asian, and 10% mixed heritage. Interestingly, in the first year class, the proportion of Chinese heritage students is even larger, at more than 35%. From these statistics, the existing pattern of cultural diversity at UBC might be described as "lumpy." Our students are predominantly white or of Chinese heritage. South Asians come next, but are a far smaller proportion of the population than one might expect given the size of the South Asian community in BC. Every other cultural or ethnic group is but a small proportion of the total. The Aboriginal population remains small, at just over 5% at UBC V, not matching the proportion of Aboriginal people in the wider BC community. UBC should consider how to further diversify the student body, through revised local, national and international recruitment strategies.

Concrete means to help students understand and address cultural diversity

If any of the observations set out above have merit, then UBC must find practical ways to help future generations of students significantly value cultural diversity and appreciate its enormous complexity.

(1) *Diversity in the Curriculum*: UBC should offer even more courses, and enrich current courses, with content related to other countries, cultures and religions. These courses should be fundamentally challenging, prompting students to confront material outside areas of their cultural familiarity. (We might conduct internal evaluations, or invite research proposals, to assess the effects of taking these

courses on stereotyping, and on world-views.) In addition, one could consider the creation of courses in various Faculties and other units that specifically address the question of diversity using students' own experiences at UBC to encourage discussion. I have already noted that students of various ethnicities on campus tend not to mix as routinely as one might hope. Could this be specifically addressed in the curriculum?

(2) *Harness the diversity in our student body*: As argued above, diversity is a resource that we do not now fully leverage. We should find structured ways to promote interaction amongst students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds both inside the classroom and in informal learning environments. Examples include more group work, intentional mixing of students in classroom discussion, shared artistic and intellectual pursuits bridging cultural groups, and encouraging international students to share experiences in informal settings. Living arrangements are also a crucial way in which students can learn to live with and reason through diversity. Should UBC be more active in promoting mixed housing opportunities for students (further blending international and Canadian students; creating virtual "colleges" that link students from various backgrounds together through meal plans, targeted activities and academic programming based around housing options)? Virtual colleges could also be extended to include commuting students by enriching meal opportunities and providing informal student space for "college" members.

(3) *Language Education*: Should UBC demand more in terms of language requirements? This could happen at an institutional or programmatic level. Should those students who speak only English be required to engage actively with another language as part of an academic programme? Should we actively encourage the retention of a heritage language (e.g., Chinese) as well as the acquisition of new languages? For example, should UBC award credit for the perfection of a heritage language (after an entry-level assessment), and require a modest degree of fluency in another language (apart from English) before graduation? Should UBC engage even more in work to advance Aboriginal languages, especially those Aboriginal languages of BC that are threatened?

(4) *Study and work abroad experiences*: Should UBC establish more aggressive targets for the number of undergraduate students who can experience international study or work as part of their undergraduate programme? Should our current set of internship, Go Global, and international Community Service Learning options be expanded, or should we consider new programmes as well? For example, we might specifically select groups of students from different backgrounds who would visit key sites of pivotal world events, and discuss the important historical issues that have caused conflict amongst their cultural groups and how these conflicts might be better resolved. Or we might expand options that combine courses with travel experiences, such as Professor Henry Yu's course in which students from both UBC and the National University of Singapore each visit the other city to examine the complicated cultural diversity of its urban spaces (and in so doing come to see their own city with a fresh set of eyes). Or we might build on the "Term Abroad in Global Citizenship" course designed by Professor Sylvia Berryman, which is an interdisciplinary Faculty of Arts initiative, integrating service learning with coursework, to introduce students to global disparities and to challenges faced by civil society organizations working for change across borders. Could we expand the new ATLAAS (Arts Travel and Learning Abroad Awards for Students) to support more students, and extend outside the Faculty of Arts?

(5) *Expand local community service learning opportunities*: The local communities in which UBC's principal campuses sit are rich in social and cultural diversity. Our students are fortunate in that they do

not have to go outside Canada to challenge their own assumptions and to develop the capacity for critical self-reflection. Should UBC establish more aggressive targets for opening up the curriculum with community service learning options? Might the options be further extended to work in communities throughout BC, including in First Nations and other Aboriginal communities? (The First Nations Studies practicum might be a useful model to pursue and expand).

(6) *Encourage research on cultural diversity*: Should UBC's research strategy establish a frame around the wide range of work done on "diversity" in the university? How might work in social, cultural and biological diversity be linked? Perhaps one or more of our existing research and education centres such as the Liu Institute for Global Issues, the Institute of Asian Research, Women's and Gender Studies, the Asian Studies Department, the Psychology Department, the Centre for Sustainable Social Enterprise, Critical Studies in Sexuality, or the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies might serve as the locus for diversity research. Alternatively, a consortium of existing centres might consider joint programming to find ways to link diversity research across the university.

UBC might also try to enhance its programmes of local, community-based research in which students are the main drivers. Students would have the opportunity to learn about the value and dynamism of diversity directly from the communities in which they live, as is currently the case in programmes such as First Nations Studies. Research projects could prioritize the development of academic-community linkages. Some students could also conduct research on topics to help illuminate the changing dynamics of an increasingly global and transnational Vancouver (i.e. analyze the formation of community centres and organizations, the complexities of transnational civic and political life, the development of transnational family forms and economic strategies, etc.). With appropriate research protocols in place, UBC might also consider focusing more research work in local Aboriginal communities, especially working with the Musqueam and groups within the Okanagan Nations Alliance.

(7) *Diversity hiring*: It may seem strange to refer to hiring in a list of suggestions around how students can be helped and encouraged to appreciate and work with cultural diversity. However, modeling is one of the most compelling forms of education. If students see the university live out its articulated values, they are more likely to be inspired to do so themselves. UBC may want to explore best practices from other leading global universities in enhancing the diversity of applicant pools for faculty and staff positions. For example, might UBC consider the creation of a post-doctoral fellowship programme targeted to traditionally under-represented groups within academe? This might help to identify promising candidates who would otherwise not come to our attention.

Conclusion

Amongst globally influential universities, UBC is one of the best positioned to benefit from the intellectual and social vitality that cultural diversity helps to create. Our position in a country that has been relatively open to immigration and that promotes an active multiculturalism is an asset. So too is our location in a region that has grown more and more diverse over the last three decades, a trend that promises to continue. UBC's status as a leading university on the Pacific Rim opens up unique opportunities, as does our presence in locales rich in the heritage and dynamism of First Nations. Over the last quarter-century, UBC has made significant progress in opening itself to the changing world by becoming more diverse internally and by seeking out engagement in diverse communities in BC, in Canada and around the world. But our openness can become deeper and richer if we exert ourselves to

value and foster cultural diversity as a good in and of itself. Not only would this process enrich our research and our community life, it would begin to meet one of the great responsibilities of the modern university: helping our students to achieve greater intercultural understanding in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.