Eminent Chancellor, Your Honour, Minister McCall, Distinguished Platform Guests, Graduates, Colleagues, Family, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:

[Thank His Honour, Dean Bergman, URSU President Burton]

I retired from the University of Regina last summer. As I told many people at the time, I decided to retire because the University had run out of things for me to do. Was I ever wrong!

It is exciting, daunting and humbling to be standing before you today as the sixth President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Regina. This is a tremendous honour, but it is particularly special for me to have been asked to lead the university in my home town and a place at which I have enjoyed a long and satisfying career. This is a great way to cap my career – again!

I want to thank the Board of Governors for the honour and privilege of serving the University of Regina as its President. I promise to do my best to justify the faith and trust the Board has placed in me. I will take my responsibilities very seriously, but will try hard not to take myself too seriously.

No one reaches a position like this on one’s own. All of us, as we journey through life, encounter special individuals who make significant, positive differences in our lives. I could list any number of people who have made such a difference for me and who helped pave my way to the office into which I have just been installed. But I’m going to single out three such individuals.

Two are former presidents of this university, Dr. Lloyd Barber and Dr. David Barnard. I had the good fortune to work closely with both of them during their respective terms of office. From them, I learned many valuable lessons that will serve me well during my own term as President. They taught me that there is often more than one way to think about a problem; they reinforced the value and importance of collegial decision-making processes within a university; they
showed me the value of collaboration and teamwork and partnerships; they shared with me the satisfaction that can come from the challenges of senior administrative work. Quite simply, I would not be President if Lloyd and David hadn’t taken an interest in me and my career, and I’m very grateful to both of them.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and thank my closest advisor, my best friend, my soul mate – my wife, Lynn. Through forty years of marriage – forty years this coming Sunday, in fact – Lynn has been a steadfast and reliable source of thoughtful advice and support. Her counsel has always been especially helpful, because it is always devoid of political considerations and is motivated solely by her assessment of what is best for me. I’m a lucky man.

The State of the University

My rather sudden appointment as President resulted from some upheaval in the senior administrative ranks of the University of Regina in the past year. However, while I must acknowledge the turmoil, I must also tell you that I believe that the University of Regina is in excellent condition. Let me explain.

The University of Regina is not the same institution it was ten or twenty years ago. We expect universities to evolve, but the transformation of this university has been stunning. The most obvious change is in the physical appearance of the campus. During the past decade, the University has constructed seven new buildings, and all of the buildings constructed in the first phase of the University’s development, between 1965 and 1974, have undergone significant renovations. When one takes account of the construction of the home of First Nations University, the development of the Regina Research Park, and the maturation and enhancement of landscaping, the University boasts a very attractive main campus. Keeping in mind our historic College Avenue Campus, the University of Regina’s physical attributes complement and augment the beauty of Wascana Centre, the largest urban park in North America.

Of course, what is truly important is what is happening inside those facilities. As new buildings were planned and renovations undertaken, the University consistently put an emphasis on enhancing teaching effectiveness. A number of older classrooms have been turned into “smart” classrooms, teaching spaces that provide instructors with easy access to modern technologies for use in the classroom. New lecture theatres and classrooms are similarly equipped. In addition, the University established centres that provide faculty and graduate students with opportunities to learn the latest developments in teaching
effectiveness, and help instructors incorporate audio, video and Internet-based material into their lectures – and to develop such material to be shared with other institutions. A number of exciting new degree and certificate programs have been introduced. All in all, the University of Regina today possesses a broad array of teaching resources that are being used by an excellent set of professors to produce an effective learning environment for our students.

There is now considerable evidence to support this statement. A recent comprehensive survey of graduates of Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions showed that, while the vast majority of graduates were satisfied with the institutions they attended and the programs they pursued, University of Regina graduates had the highest satisfaction rate of all the institutions with respect to the quality of teaching they received. Our students have shown a consistently high regard for their programs, their professors and this university in a number of other recent surveys.

Everyone knows that teaching is a core function of a university, but not everyone fully understands the importance of research to universities, and to society at large. Every university assembles a teaching staff of well-educated, highly-motivated, curious individuals. It is only natural that such people will want to follow their curiosity, to develop new knowledge, to analyze and re-assess existing knowledge from new vantage-points, and to disseminate their findings in articles, books and conference presentations. This is research, or scholarly activity. Research activity at the University of Regina has increased dramatically, as evidenced by the fact that external research funding has increased by a factor of four during the past decade. Moreover, the new construction I’ve described earlier includes state-of-the-art research facilities that will help us to attract and retain an outstanding group of professors and students.

Every discipline is deeply engaged in scholarly work. Moreover, the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of research today is impressive, as many research projects involve faculty and students from several departments and faculties or from several universities. Some research is theoretical or curiosity-based, but many researchers at the University of Regina are responding to real problems facing our city, our province and, indeed, our planet. This university has never been an “ivory tower”, in my judgment, but it is now, more than ever, embodying its motto: As One Who Serves. That motto is also reflected in the countless hours that the University’s faculty, staff and students devote to various kinds of public service in our community and in their professional organizations.
As an accountable public institution, the University requires all academic units and programs to be reviewed regularly, with the reviews to include advice and expertise from other universities. Similarly, many administrative units have undergone external reviews and their subsequent re-organizations have led to even higher levels of service and more fulfilling careers for administrative staff members.

I am pleased to report that the University’s most recent fund-raising endeavour, the Building Dreams and Futures campaign, has recently been concluded successfully – its ambitious $75-million target having been handily exceeded. Further, a subsidiary $25-million planned-giving campaign, announced just two years ago, is nearing the halfway mark. These fund-raising successes, I believe, reflect the University’s growing reputation.

The University of Regina remains focussed on its five declared areas of thematic emphasis: Culture and Heritage; Energy and Environment; Health; Informatics; and Social Justice. The University’s relationships with the provincial government and with the University of Saskatchewan are excellent. The University is supported by and is committed to working with its federated college partners – Campion College, First Nations University of Canada and Luther College – to achieve its stated mission and goals.

For all of these reasons, I believe that the University of Regina provides excellent education programs for its students, from Saskatchewan and abroad, and is contributing to the well-being of the society which supports it. This is certainly not to say that we have no challenges, but the University of Regina is in a good position to address and resolve those problems.

The State of Canadian Universities

But what of the Canadian university system as a whole? How is it doing? I believe that the nation is served well by its 90-plus publicly-funded universities and colleges. Those seeking an education seem to agree with my assessment, as national enrolment statistics hit new records every year. Nevertheless, some voices have been raised to challenge the advisability and desirability of such high enrolments, arguing instead that university enrolment should be restricted. There are four main facets to these arguments.

1. Too many students are insufficiently prepared for university studies. Following this train of thought to its conclusion, some advocate limiting
access to only the very best, the most serious students. This argument is sometimes tinged with nostalgia for a simpler time, when students were all well prepared for university and single-mindedly focussed on their studies. In response, I must first ask when that simpler time existed, for it certainly wasn’t during my lifetime. Further, I would ask how the universities are supposed to identify the very best students. High school marks are still the best available predictors of success in university, but they are not very good ones. Every university has many examples of students who did well in high school who struggled with post-secondary work. And, conversely, there are countless students whose high school marks were not so good but who flourished at university. Perhaps those students spent a lot of time in high school participating in athletics or student politics; perhaps they were at sea about their life’s aspirations until some professor made a subject come alive to them; perhaps their maturity levels rose considerably during the transition from high school to university – it really doesn’t matter why or how these students find themselves at university. My point is that we simply don’t have the tools to identify the “best” students and, even if we could, the universities would fail to admit many other students who could have excelled at university-level work.

2. Universities have watered down their curricula. The argument here is that universities have lowered their standards for success and the quality of their degrees over the past fifty years in order to accommodate the huge influx of students. The solution, it is argued, is to raise both admission and graduation standards, and thereby decrease enrolments and increase quality. An auxiliary argument holds that class sizes are too big for any real learning to take place. And yet, huge lecture theatres have been common at universities for at least a century. Many of us know from personal experience that large classes taught by an enthusiastic professor can be engaging and enriching. It’s probably true that the traditional blackboard-and-chalk approach to teaching won’t always work well for larger class sizes, but all universities now have classrooms equipped with the latest teaching technology. Students can learn the material just as well, but by somewhat different means.

This University’s admission and graduation standards have not changed, on paper; however, satisfying the minimal admission requirements is no longer sufficient for a student to gain access to some professional programs. So I could argue that, in practice, admission standards have actually risen in some cases. And the requirements for the honours, awards and medals that will be presented later today remain stringent and demanding.
3. **Universities shouldn’t be admitting students to programs if their job prospects look dim.** This argument suggests that, if there seems to be a glut of engineers or teachers or lawyers in the offing, then admission to those programs should be curtailed. This seems to make sense. And yet, university degree programs take four years or longer to complete: who can be sure of job markets years down the road? Further, a surprising number of teachers never teach in the school system and a surprising number of lawyers never practise law; instead, they use their university educations to pursue other vocations and careers. Every university program requires students to learn how to analyze, critique and assemble information, how to think, how to learn. These skills will be useful in any occupation. For these reasons, I’m certain that the graduates sharing the stage with me today can look ahead to bright, challenging and interesting futures.

4. **Universities shouldn’t be pandering to “creeping credentialism”.** This argument suggests that too many employers are requiring university credentials for positions that really don’t need them and that, by restricting enrolments to only the top students, universities could slow or stop this trend. Perhaps there is “creeping credentialism”; I don’t really know. But, if there is, it’s not clear to me that it is the universities’ job to stop it. University graduates who are over-qualified for particular positions will, in time, move to other careers that challenge them more and make better use of their talents and education. Further, the impending labour shortage, arising from the anticipated retirements of the Baby Boomers over the next 20 years or so, will ensure that employers are realistic about the credentials needed for specific employment opportunities.

Rather than being troubled that we might be admitting too many students, I worry about individuals who will live their lives lamenting that they did not have, or did not seize, the opportunity to attend university. I don’t believe that a democratic society can have too many well-educated citizens.

And so I can say to today’s graduates that I am confident that, as your futures unfold, you will find that your degrees and certificates from the University of Regina will provide you with excellent foundations upon which to build your careers and your lives. My colleagues and I are confident that you will make a difference and make the world a better place – by helping others, by helping to resolve some of the critical issues facing our country and our world, and by being good citizens. In short, you are well-positioned to be future leaders in this country. We hope that you will have fond memories of the University of Regina, and trust
that you will not forget your *alma mater*. We wish each of you well, wherever your life’s journey takes you.

**Conclusion**

One hundred years ago, in the second year of Saskatchewan’s existence as a province, its leaders had the foresight to establish the University of Saskatchewan. Regina College and some other post-secondary institutions soon followed. Right from the start, the goal was to make educational opportunities widely available to the citizens of this province. In my judgment, this goal is every bit as wise and important today as it was in 1907. That is not to say that we should be complacent, as any institution with low standards or watered-down curricula will necessarily have a poor reputation – a reputation that will reflect poorly on its graduates. Instead, the University of Regina must continue to dedicate itself to providing high-quality teaching and research programs, responding to the demonstrated needs of this province and this nation – and it will.