

President's Message – December 2017

There is a Muslim proverb that should resonate strongly with everyone at the University of Regina: “A lot of different flowers make a bouquet.”

At our University, we welcome the world to our campuses and pride ourselves on the diversity and inclusivity that characterize our particular “bouquet.” With our Indigenous and other domestic students, international students from more than 100 countries, and new Canadian faculty and staff members, for example, we recognize that there are distinct needs within our learning community. And that should also be the case for our learners with disabilities.

December 4 is International Day of Persons with Disabilities, an annual observance proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1992. I would encourage everyone to take some time on that date to think about those in our University community who face additional challenges in their work and education.

Based on a recent study, that cohort is growing. The recently released 2017 Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) study indicates that 22 per cent of the 1,065 University of Regina middle-years students who responded to the survey reported having a disability. That's up five per cent from the 2014 CUSC survey. And in 43 per cent of those cases, the reports of disability were related in some way to mental health.

How should we recognize International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 4? In addition to celebrating the day and the diversity that exists in our world, one of the things we can do is take action – which means engaging in activities to help realize the goals of persons with disabilities. It could be something such as committing to make recommendations in the coming weeks and months to our local political leaders, businesses, cultural centres and others to help ensure we leave a lasting and positive change for persons with disabilities.

I have had a longstanding interest in this because I began my career in the field of what was then called special education, working as a teacher in British Columbia and Alberta. At the time we were closing down segregated schools where children with disabilities learned separately from mainstream students. Inclusive education, where children with disabilities are educated with their age-appropriate peers, was becoming the new model. My doctoral work at the University of Calgary was in this discipline and it has remained my research interest and personal passion.

On our campus over the past 10 years, I have watched the remarkable growth of programs such as Campus For All and the Astonished! Teaching and Learning Centre. Not only do these programs provide post-secondary opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities and allow young adults with complex physical disabilities to participate in a teaching and learning environment, but they also further inclusive education. And perhaps most importantly, they are initiatives where meaningful friendships develop.

Campus For All is a four-year inclusive post-secondary education experience for adults with an intellectual disability. Campus For All students attend classes, participate in campus activities, make friends, prepare for the work world and enjoy the same opportunities as their post-

secondary peers. Last year, the University of Regina Alumni Association became the only association in Canada to extend full membership to graduates of an inclusive post-secondary education program.

The Astonished! Teaching and Learning Centre is an inclusive program where young adults with complex physical disabilities have meaningful academic experiences in the University's vibrant and inclusive learning and teaching environment. Astonished! staff support student researchers as they determine and navigate a PATH (Planning Alternative Futures with Hope) unique to each person.

We also have other supportive units on campus that are helping to ensure that all students with disabilities have the opportunity to succeed. Our Centre for Student Accessibility, for example, continues to provide services and support that empower students with disabilities to equally and effectively take on the challenge of university studies.

The University is also hard at work teaching and researching in the areas of inclusive education. In partnership with the Faculty of Education, the Centre for Continuing Education offers a Certificate of Extended Studies in Inclusive Education for teachers looking to upgrade their knowledge of inclusive education and effectively implement it in their own classrooms. And faculty members in Education are offering courses and conducting research to help ensure our future teachers are well prepared for today's classroom dynamics.

We have come a long way in how we view and support persons with disabilities both in society as a whole and at our University in particular, but we still have a tremendously long way to go.

As we get closer to the holiday season, it is important to remember that this time of year is characterized by giving, good will, and the spirit of working together to make our world a better place. It is my hope that in this time of tremendous diversity in our community, we advance inclusion as never before and our bouquet continues to flourish.

On behalf of my family and the University of Regina executive team, I wish you happy holidays and all the best in the new year!

Sincerely,

Dr. Vianne Timmons
President and Vice-Chancellor