



REMARKS FOR

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OF YORK UNIVERSITY**

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good afternoon.

I want to begin my remarks with a confession: I have never been so happy to see the end of an academic year! I am looking forward to convocation this year, more so than most years.

This has been a challenging year for us in more ways than one, but I'm pleased to say that the clouds have begun to part for York. The measures we have taken to help students navigate through the extended academic year appear to have been successful. We seem to be making headway in regaining the trust of our key stakeholders and the government.

And so we end this year on a hopeful note, knowing that we still have work to do, but knowing we are equal to the task at hand.

Academic Freedom

I want to speak briefly about academic freedom. For better or worse, York has been in the news a lot lately. No doubt you have heard some of the controversy surrounding next week's conference on Israel and Palestine.

The University has been under constant pressure to distance itself from this event or to cancel it altogether. But I will say now what I have said to our concerned friends and to critics of this conference alike: the principles of academic freedom must prevail for all activities that fall under the auspices of the university, so long as these activities meet certain obligations.

Scholars' academic activities must be based on evidence, rigorous thought and extensive research, for example. All universities — not just York — must be dedicated to supporting reasoned discourse. They must be willing to accept dissent and deal with complex issues.

We understand that the subject at the heart of the conference is one that many people find difficult, sensitive and very personal. But we believe that the University remains the most appropriate forum for academic debate of these issues, and for a conference such as this to take place.

These issues are discussed on a daily basis in all parts of the world, especially in the Middle East — including Israel. There is no reason why they should not be discussed at a university in Canada.

Student Environment

I spoke a moment ago about the limitations of academic freedom. As I have said before, academic freedom cannot be used as a shield for racism or bigotry.

So I am very concerned about persistent complaints about the environment in our classrooms, specifically about students who say they are being intimidated

for their political views or personal beliefs. They say they feel unsafe or unwelcome. Many of these complaints reference anti-semitism.

I'm sure you will all agree that if this is true — that students feel threatened because of their own strongly held views, or the views of their peers or instructors — this state of affairs cannot be tolerated.

We must ensure that all York students can enjoy an education free of harassment, free from hostility, free from bullying in the classroom, which is really what I'm talking about here.

We have a shared responsibility — the administration and Senate — to do our utmost to create and maintain an environment in the classroom where ideas are challenged, and not attacked; an environment where every member of this community feels welcome and respected.

I have always assumed this to be the case at York, but the time for assumptions has passed. So I look forward to receiving the report from the Task Force on Student Life in August. That report will guide us as we create the best environment for learning we possibly can in every classroom. I sincerely hope that you will all join me in this effort.

President's University-wide Teaching Awards

Our job is to provide the best conditions in which our students can learn, and we will do this in spite of the challenging economic times we face.

Within the University, we celebrate excellence in teaching with the University-wide Teaching Awards. These awards highlight the innovation and commitment of our faculty and recognize our outstanding educators for enhancing the student experience.

I'm pleased to announce that the Office of the President will be providing funding to the University-wide Teaching Awards, at \$3000 per award, beginning this year.

The awards will also be renamed The President's University-wide Teaching Awards to reflect the change in funding, raise the profile of the awards, and to reflect my own commitment to promoting excellence in teaching.

Osgoode

At the last meeting of Senate, I announced that York was going to receive \$70 million in funding for the Life Sciences Building. I alluded — maybe more than alluded — that there was more to come.

The next day, we received \$25 million for the Osgoode Renovation and Expansion Project under the federal-provincial Knowledge Infrastructure Program.

This project will permit us to accommodate more graduate students, faculty and staff; it will improve teaching facilities and student community space, and house six legal and interdisciplinary research centres. The renovation work includes much-needed deferred maintenance work, including the removal of asbestos, and it will provide improved access for persons with disabilities.

The project is targeted for a LEED CI Silver classification — a nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high-performance green buildings.

These two projects — the Life Sciences Building and the Osgoode Hall Renovation Project — together represent a major step forward for York, a step towards becoming a more comprehensive University, and a real vote of confidence in York by both the federal and provincial governments.

Budget direction

I want to speak for a moment about state of the University's finances and the direction future budgets will likely take.

You may have seen the [Statement on Endowment Distributions](#) posted recently on the website. You could read that document and feel pessimistic — an 18 per cent drop in the endowment fund is no small thing. But relative to our sister institutions, our conservative approach to investing has served us well.

We are in a difficult economic period, not of our own making. Now is the time to plan, so we are ready to seize opportunities when they present themselves. You need look no further than the Life Sciences and Osgoode announcements for examples of what I mean: we were able to take advantage of government funding through the Knowledge Infrastructure Program because we had plans in place for both of these projects.

This is the time to think hard about the University we want to build, to make the plans, to chart the course, so that when the winds change, we are in a position to benefit. This is also the time to think carefully about how to exercise fiscal responsibility in a way that makes sense. We need to make some cuts, yes, but they need to be made carefully, in a way that does not risk diminishing the academic enterprise.

York team wins the Mars Rover Challenge

I want to end with a couple of terrific stories.

First: a team of York students has won the 2009 University Rover Challenge. The York University Rover Team is made up of undergraduate and graduate students from a variety of disciplines.

The challenge took place at the Mars Desert Research Station in a remote part of the Utah desert. The idea is that teams must design and build an exploration vehicle capable of withstanding the conditions found on Mars.

The team improved on its third-place finish in 2008 and won with a score that was more than double that of the second-place contestants.

So a warm congratulations to the York University Rover Team.

Pasha Malla wins Trillium Book Award

And just this week, York alum Pasha Malla won the prestigious Trillium Book Award for his debut collection of short stories, *The Withdrawal Method*

Mr. Malla attended York for film production; he graduated from the Faculty of Arts with an honours BA and, not surprisingly, made the dean's list.

The Trillium Prize jury hailed Malla as "a brave new voice in Canadian fiction". It was the second major prize awarded to Malla in the past month; he also won the Danuta Gleed Literary Award in May, and his book was also long-listed for the Giller Prize last year.

Conclusion

Just before I close, I want to acknowledge Vice-President Academic and Provost Sheila Embleton, Dean Cercone, Dean Drummond, Dean Monahan and Dean Lenton for their hard work and leadership over the years, and to say thank you on behalf of the entire York community.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, this has been a challenging year for us all, and I wanted to close by thanking Senate for all your hard work, for your perseverance, for your dedication to York.

I wish you all a relaxing and enjoyable summer and I look forward to working together in the new academic year as we head into York's next 50 years.

Thank you.