

VIU direction undergoes examination

Institution relies upon grassroots guidance to serve future requirements

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Vancouver Island University's (VIU) metamorphosis from college to full-fledged university creates complexities and its leadership is reaching out to communities it serves for solutions.

Dr. Ralph Nilson, president and vice-chancellor, told members of VIU's Powell River advisory committee it's his perspective that the institution has grown out of the community.

"It's only been because of the community support and advocacy that this institution has managed to achieve what it has," he said. "As we take on this new university moniker, and take the responsibilities that come with that, the last thing we want to signal is that as a university, we are changing all that. This institution is still an institution that will grow from the community and will evolve as a result of paying very close attention to the needs of the community and the region."



WETTING THEIR APPETITES: Dipping a paddle donated by Vancouver Island University's (VIU) chancellor Shawn Atleo at Willingdon Beach are [from left] VIU vice-president academic Leslie King, Elsie Paul, Tia'Amin (Sliammon) First Nation elder and Arlette Raaen, principal of the Powell River campus. The chancellor, when gifting the paddle, said on the first day of a feast or ceremony, it should be dipped as part of the journey, and on this day, the university held a first nations feast. (Paul Galinski photo)

Nilson said the university, in moving forward, has to be very relevant in terms of being responsive to the needs of the community. "We also know we have to be really innovative in providing the programs," he said. "This whole notion of being relevant, responsive and innovative is very important to us as we evolve."

Nilson said the university has a responsibility to not only those graduating from high school. "We have a responsibility as an institution of higher learning to provide for people across the age spectrum," he said. Consequently, some programs specific to the aging population become more relevant.

Arlette Raaen, principal of VIU's Powell River campus, said she thinks the university has a real opportunity to create a focus for a campus in a community context. She said Powell River is a community in transition, it is moving away from resource dependency and that's a very healthy sign.

"It's all part of developing a labour force, skills and people resources that we need," she said. There will be continued opportunity in the resource sector, she added, but there are growing opportunities in service-oriented sectors as well.

"If we can provide the people power to meet those opportunities then we will realize net growth in this community over the coming years," Raaen said.

During the advisory committee meeting, seven local representatives provided input and ideas for senior administration from the university. They included:

- Scott Randolph, manager Powell River Regional Economic Development Society, Tourism Powell River and PRSC Limited Partnership.
- Pam Krompocker, executive director of Community Futures Powell River.
- Bob Butkus, retired principal of Malaspina College.
- Lyn Adamson, Career Link program director.
- Chris McNaughton, City of Powell River councillor and president of Tourism Powell River.
- Sandra Donnelly, former Malaspina College employee.
- Jim Donnelly, former paper mill employee and chair of Powell River Academy of Music board of directors.

Randolph said there is a major issue in Powell River regarding labour retention, with layoffs and downturns in a number of different sectors. "It's important to have a labour pool that's ready to go with the necessary skills," he said. "Most of the growth has been on the commercial side. Going forward, what's crucial will be light industry tied to the resources here and the need to access good transportation systems."

Sandra asked what programs would have to go to make room for new programming.

Raaen said there has been a rotation of programs that allows the campus to provide a broader range of programming based on community need. One of the themes she's been thinking about is the umbrella of sustainability. "That is a primary focus for the community," she said. "That umbrella can involve environmental, social, cultural and economic components."

There was discussion about partnering university music programs with the academy of music. Raaen said the university learned a lot when it ran first-year bachelor of music and jazz diploma programs in partnership with the academy.

Jim said, however, the quality of teaching was not up to the academy's standards and the cost to bring instructors from Vancouver Island was hard on the budget for the program.

Raaen said she thought the downfall was that there was only a one-year offering. "If we'd had a full diploma program here we would have been able to successfully attract students," she said. "The reason we stopped running it was because we didn't attract enough students and it didn't make sense for students to relocate here for one year and move on after that. When we are looking at developing some niche programming we need to look at completion."

Nilson said the cost of running a first-rate music program is comparable to dentistry and medicine. "I'm not sure there is the capacity within the system here to fund it if indeed the target here is as high as you are suggesting," he said. "Tuition is nowhere near the cost of implementing the program. It's not going to work on a government-of-BC funding formula."

McNaughton said it would be good to explore the economic benefits of being a university town. "If young people are able to continue learning here, the money is retained rather than exported," he said. "How can we attract people to come and learn in our community and retain people for at least the first two years?"

Also discussed were distance and online learning opportunities, the coming use of videoconferencing at the Powell River campus and the prospect of establishing a residence and other facilities and programs to attract and retain young learners in the community.

Jim said if the university could become more widely seen as a supermarket gateway to a variety of learning experiences, it would be beneficial. "It's getting the message out there that it's not just a university, but it's a gateway for people to come in and that there's a resource for them," he said.