

Planting the seeds for internationalization

Only two months on the job, University of Western Ontario president Amit Chakma has already amassed a lengthy to-do list.

Even before taking over the post, Chakma has been forward about his international aspirations. He hopes to create opportunities for students to experience studying abroad and to increase the number of international students at Western. For Chakma, offering the 'best student experience' means laying the groundwork for students to become well-educated, engaged citizens.

His plans also fall on the desks of faculty members, whom he sees as serving a key role in placing Western's stamp on the world. He wants researchers to make an impact in their respective fields and to be open to collaborations both internally and internationally.

Western News reporter Heather Travis sat down recently with Chakma to get a better sense of the course he has set for Western during his term as president.

Western News: You're not yet to the end of your first 100 days. Are there particular accomplishments you hope to mark off?

Amit Chakma: I'm not a big fan of those first 100 days or 1,000 days. I just look at what needs to be done and it varies with situations and circumstances. Things just happen, you respond to opportunities. When I accepted the offer I was thinking about what are the areas I should be paying attention to in order to get to know my colleagues and try to see whether there are synergies that I can create or point to for my colleagues to look at. That process is well underway.

The second area I would like to think about for the long term is how we build with our aspirations and the budgetary reality. I have concluded well before coming here in my previous roles that we simply need to pay a great deal of attention to revenue generation beyond the normal things you will do. We are essentially funded by the province, so that's the standard pot that you go after. But I want us to think about other opportunities. I am planting ideas, urging my colleagues that we need to think about it for our next budget cycle.

WN: What does 'the best student experience' mean to you?

Chakma: To me, what it means is really multi-faceted. We provide our students with the best possible education that we can provide under the circumstances. I would like to ask the question that I have been asking myself, 'are we doing enough to educate our future leaders.' If the answer is yes, fine. But at least we have to be asking that question.

Coming from an academic world, I don't think we should ever be satisfied with what we do. There should always be opportunities for us to adjust, do things better and do things differently.

The world is changing; the student body is changing. The way our students learn is different from the way some of us have learned. We need to be able to respond to that changing generation of our students. If we do not, then at some point in time we will find ourselves out of

place. We cannot do everything that our students may or may not need, but you can certainly prepare the groundwork for them to be aware of some of those opportunities and challenges.

If you want to be an engaged citizen in Canada, you have to understand Canada's role in the world. What does it mean in terms of what we do at Western? Wouldn't it be wonderful for students to go and spend some time abroad? Similarly, we need to bring students to our campus from different parts of the world so that our campus is a bit more enriched.

Although I focused on our global reach, the reality is that Canadian universities by and large still draw a large number of students from their own region and we want to change that. I would like Western to draw students from coast to coast. If a student is thinking of studying business, medicine, liberal arts, history, philosophy, we should be at least coming in their mind that Western is a possibility. Is it the case today? For a limited number, maybe, but by and large we don't have that national appeal/reach the way Queen's does, the way McGill does.

WN: What does internationalization look like to you at the student level or research level, etc.?

Chakma: Let's just start with research because it is the easiest one to talk about. When you do good work, we want to make sure our work has impact. I define impact in the broadest possible sense.

Then the question becomes how do you achieve excellence in your research activity? Again it's a multi-faceted answer. Sometimes there is that 'eureka' moment. You work in your lab, you work in your study and an idea comes. You can't plan these sorts of things; they happen by accident ... or through sheer study. For that to happen, for that eureka moment to arrive, whether it is in literature, public policy or in medicine and law, etc. you have to be able to exchange ideas with other scholars. That cross-fertilization across academic boundaries, as with geographic boundaries, is important.

We all have to aspire to do the best that we can in the field of study we

have chosen. In research, there is no excuse for us not to be aspiring to be among the best. For an assistant professor, it'll take some time, but the path should be there, the trajectory should be there. For a senior professor, you'd expect them to be on top of their field. That's the international dimension.

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The second part would be how do you have impact? If we all just did little things, as excellent as that work might be, it might not have the kind of impact it would possibly be able to make if we collected all those ideas, built excellence and put the puzzle together. We need to create that cluster, that capacity to bring disciplines together towards finding a solution to a complex problem.

Coming back to education, I'll give you two examples. At Western, about three per cent of our undergraduate body would be international students. Across the country at all major universities, when you look at the averages it's about 10 per cent. Waterloo's first-year intake is about 10 per cent; McMaster is 10 per cent; Queen's is a bit low in the four per cent range; McGill is 20 per cent. If we are like one of these institutions, and we tend to think that we are, then we have to question whether

three per cent is the right number.

There is no right or wrong here. The question is what is the critical mass you need to create sufficient exchange between international students and our domestic students? My common sense tells me the critical mass is not there.

How do we exactly achieve that? At this stage, all I am pointing out is that three per cent is low relative to our peers. I suspect we do not have adequate capacity to support them now because we are only at three per cent, so we need to build this up.

The second question which is equally, if not more important is what opportunities do we create to send our own students abroad? Again there are many possibilities. Most of the arrangements and opportunities we have are small in terms of scale. I want to see whether we can do something big so a large number of students can benefit from it. To that end, I requested our former president Paul Davenport to explore possibilities for Western while he is in France to see whether we can send a large number of students to France.

I'm exploring the possibility of creating some other academic and research opportunities. One example is looking at the possibility of doing something more in enhancing our presence and reputation in dealing with U.S./Canada relations.

WN: Why is internationalization important?

Chakma: It is important to me because I believe it is important for our students, for our future leaders. Everything I do, I try to ask a very simple question so that I keep my focus: 'what is good for our students?' Without students we would not be the place that we are. I cannot afford to forget that.

We are part of a privileged group to have been given the opportunity to go to university supported by taxpayers. You owe it to provide some leadership on how you think because in theory you should be able to make better decisions.

I would say our students actually are demanding it. If Western falls behind other institutions in meeting the needs of students, we would not be providing our students with the 'best student experience.' We have to respond to them. We need to do it also for our own sake because we are attracting now some of Canada's and Ontario's best and the brightest. When you achieve that level of excellence in attracting top students, they demand more. Just routine classroom instruction is simply not always sufficient because this student body will require more than that. I think that's our challenge, but it is also our opportunity.

And finally, which is more altruistic than anything else that I have said so far, I tend to believe Canada is a great country that the world can benefit from. If Canada can share the lessons that we have learned together in building a great country

that is so tolerant and respectful of each other's culture, it seems to me we can create many more mini-Canada's across the world and the world would be a better place.

These are the main reasons, but from my own experience I have benefited so much by being exposed to different cultures. I know personally how attractive, how important these sorts of things are.

WN: Do your ideas of internationalization conflict with the university having a local impact?

Chakma: Not at all. It is part of the puzzle. My way of looking at internationalization is really forming partnerships. We start locally and go to the province and make it national, and then you make it international. You can't do any of this in isolation. You cannot have an international university if you are not even a national university.

I believe that our university can be a positive force in making sure that the economic future of the City of London can be as good as it can. I believe it is self-serving that unless the community and the university can work together, the city will not be very successful. This is a knowledge-based economy, so the city has to think of Western as a partner and we have to do what we can.

If we say all we do is teach, do research and do some community service, that is simply not sufficient for a modern university. If London suffers, sooner or later Western will suffer.

WN: Are there universities Western should aspire to be like?

Chakma: I look at many universities; I picked the best from all. I like Harvard, as an example, for its emphasis on service. I have a sense that Western's student body is analogous to Harvard's student body. Our students want to make a difference, want to serve.

Within the context of Canada, I like the international profile that McGill has created. When I look at Waterloo, my former institution, I like Waterloo's ability to bring experiential education into co-ops. I'm not married to the co-op model, but I'm a big fan of learning and doing, doing and learning.

If I look at the University of California, Berkeley, they were founded 10 years before Western. I admire what they have been able

to achieve: 20-plus Nobel laureates; 30-plus Olympic gold medalists, etc. One thing I take great inspiration from is their desire to be among the best and that existed from day one and that continues until today.

There are good things to take from many different institutions large and small. The University of Guelph has embraced online learning more than any other Canadian institution that I know of, so I admire them for that.

WN: What is the role of staff in supporting your mission or furthering the work you want to get done?

Chakma: Within the academic environment, our heroes tend to be our students, our professors. Those of us, and I include myself in that role, who create the environment for our students to thrive or our faculty to thrive are the unsung heroes. Without the support of our staff nothing will be possible.

WN: Is there anything else you would like to say?

Chakma: I am a very privileged and lucky person. I am grateful to have been given the opportunity and I'm confident something good will come out of that. I'm grateful to the community for being so nice to me so far. I hope that continues for the rest of my term, but I'm sure there will be ups and downs. But, I certainly feel at home.

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Closer to home

How did you spend your summer vacation?

"Our children are grown up now and unfortunately they don't like to travel with us anymore. My wife and I went to Florida. We have a place there and we like to take it easy, do some gardening. I did quite a bit of reading and had downtime to think about the future."

What book is on your nightstand right now?

"Western's First Century. If I just focus on reading just one book, I am not going to be able to do justice to my appetite to read. There are a number of books that I might be (reading) at one time. I'd say my primary (reading) focus right now is on education, educational policy, and philosophy."

What do you have playing on your radio?

"I listen to CBC. The other one I find useful is AM 680. I play CDs - all sorts of music. I like classical music, Spanish music, French music, Indian music, so I am more international in terms of my taste. I have a CD with music from Peru and other places - sort of a mixed bag."

Do you have any pets?

"No. We say we have two pets and love them a lot but they are so consuming we cannot afford to have any more pets. They are the two kids."

Do you see your wife, Meena, playing a role at Western?

"She is a very people-person, much more than I am. Whenever we have events at the house, she will be a very good host. If you have any sense of how many events you have to host, and how many community events you have to go to, it's almost a full-time job."

Do you like to cook? If so, what type of food?

"I am not a good cook. Do I like to cook, probably the honest answer is no. Not that I don't cook. When we had our first child I worked very hard when (my wife) was coming back from the hospital and cooked a number of dishes. She politely threw everything in the garbage bin because she didn't like it. My role is what in the restaurant business is called 'kitchen porter.' She cooks; I do all of the cleaning. I love to do the dishes; I find it quite soothing."

Do you have any hobbies?

"My hobbies are mostly leisurely-type things. I like to golf, walk through gardens and bushes and listen to music. Swimming is kind of natural to me. If we manage to get time, we go to concerts and movies."