



Presentation to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

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October 15, 2008

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about the priorities for the 2009 provincial budget. My name is Maureen Shaw, Vice President of the Kwantlen Faculty Association and an English instructor. With me today is Suzanne Pearce, Secretary Treasurer and a Chemistry instructor. We are here representing the Kwantlen Faculty Association. We are keen to see post-secondary education opportunities in our region available for all segments of our population. We want to ensure that our students build confidence about their future through their learning experiences at our institution. We also want to address the challenges we face as the newly created Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

To illustrate some of what we are concerned about, we want to tell you some of Emily's story, provided to us by Robyn Rushford, a Kwantlen counsellor who has written a report "Supporting Students with Children in Post Secondary Education."

Emily is 24 and a single parent of two children ages 6 and 4. She first came to Kwantlen when she was a 19 year old married mother of a 1 year old son seeking a short term training program and decided upon our Special Education Teachers Assistant Program. Much to her surprise, she found post-secondary education exciting, and for the first time began to see possibilities never previously imagined. She began to work towards a B.A. and fantasized about attaining a long-term goal of a PhD in Psychology. It was feasible – she was a star student, obtaining a CGPA of 3.5, while working as a student assistant in two departments, and serving as a great role model to other student-parents. She convinced her husband to also begin studies, and soon they were both Kwantlen students. Two years into her studies, she was on top of the world.

Then her marriage broke down, and all the supports she had in place slipped away. Her family, who had very strong cultural values against divorce, first harassed and later abandoned her. Her husband left town.

There were more problems around the corner. Emily's husband refused to pay child support. Her financial debt grew quickly, and she soon discovered that her student loan would not cover her rent, a car loan and maintenance, and the extra \$500 a month needed for daycare (after subsidy). She had to get a job, and slowly her second semester slipped away from her. She thought of quitting school entirely but knew that because she was unskilled and had little work experience, the work available to her would never provide enough income for a family to live on. Emily was now amassing debt, not for education, but simply to live.

She then tried to take courses through distance education but encountered more difficulties and failure.

Emily is now back at Kwantlen and slowly rebuilding, but still confronting life's challenges (a serious car accident and her son's illness) that can impede successful completion.

We all need to be mindful of the struggles many Kwantlen students like Emily face in order to achieve their educational goals. The biggest barrier they face is financial.

Kwantlen serves over 17,000 students enrolled in a wide range of programs that will lead to completed apprenticeships, certificates and diplomas in a various career programs or to associate and undergraduate degrees.

Kwantlen has always worked to be an integral part of the communities "south of the Fraser River". Through our campuses in Richmond, Surrey, Cloverdale and Langley, we have developed programs designed to not only meet specific post-secondary goals for our students, but also address the incredible diversity within our communities.

We will touch on a number of points that our faculty association wants to see addressed in the 2009 provincial budget, but before we do it's important to talk about the financial crisis that seems poised to put provincial and national economies on the ropes. Committee members have no doubt given much thought to what this crisis means to BC. Members of the Minister's Economic Forecast Council have already made downward revisions in growth forecasts for 2009. There is certainly a view out there that says in uncertain times government should hunker down and trim back on program spending.

However, government is our collective effort at planning and managing the communities in which we live and the future we hope to achieve. Part of that future is going to need skills and knowledge as we make the transition from a resource-intensive economy to a knowledge-intensive one.

If ever there was a time to invest in those skills, now is that time. Post-secondary educators know from experience that when economic growth begins to stall out, people look for ways to improve their future. Going back to school is an obvious and viable strategy for them. However it is only viable if they can afford to return to learning.

The unfortunate fact is that government hasn't been making sufficient investments in post-secondary education and that lack of funding undermines our capacity to meet the challenge we know is there.

That challenge is made all the more urgent because, separate and apart from the financial crisis that has developed in recent months, BC faces a major skills shortage. A number of studies have documented this problem, the most notable being the Conference Board of Canada report in June called "The Future of Work: Confronting BC's Labour Shortage Challenge" Let me read from its Executive Summary:

The Future of Work report provides compelling evidence that the province will face an estimated shortfall of 160,000 workers by 2015 with an optimistic growth rate of 1.4 percent. Moreover, this situation will intensify beyond the next decade, underscoring the importance of increasing the continuous supply of labour through the effective employment of under-represented groups.

The report calls for collaborative leadership involving government, business, education and communities, working together to build a prosperous and vibrant future for BC. Shared goals are important; so is the willingness to invest money, expertise and time in developing the knowledge and skills of BC's people. That investment can alleviate the province's labour shortages and yield important economic returns for both employers and workers.

Unfortunately, that message didn't make its way into the provincial government in mid-March when it decided to cut provincial post-secondary operating grants by 2.6%. Without any consultation, in the second year of a three-year budget planning arrangement—an arrangement that was supposed to provide post-secondary institutions with certainty and stability—the Ministry announced that operating grants were being cut by 2.6%.

To say the system was blindsided is an understatement. On short notice, programs were cut back or eliminated at Kwantlen, there were at least five programs that were reduced or eliminated: Floristry, Auto Trim, ESL, Horticulture, Gerontology Based Therapeutic Recreation. As well, many departments have cut back on the number of sections that are being offered. Student services, which were already bare-boned, were scaled back even more; for instance the Young Parents program was eliminated. The message imbedded in those cuts was all too clear: Post-secondary education was not a priority.

In the context of my earlier points about economic prospects, economic transition and the skills shortage, that assessment doesn't make sense. How do you build skills and increase learning opportunities by cutting the funding to the very institutions that are in place to deliver the skills and learning needed in our province?

We don't want to suggest that the 2.6% cut is our only concern. The fact is that the 2.6% cut is simply part of a continuing narrative for post-secondary institutions. Real per-student funding has been declining for the last seven years. At Kwantlen, our per-student operating grant was close to \$7,000 in 2007/08. If that per-student funding had simply kept pace with inflation over the last seven years, it should be closer to \$7,300.

That shortfall means that for much of the last seven years, Kwantlen, like many other post-secondary institutions, is constantly forced to do more with less. That's not a blueprint for dealing with the challenges outlined by the Conference Board. Nor is it a strategy for encouraging and supporting students to either return to post-secondary education or to complete that education.

In previous presentations to this Committee, our association has talked about the problems of affordability and access. We know from first-hand experience that our students are facing increasing debt-loads, debt-loads that, in some cases, discourage students from continuing their post-secondary education. For other potential students, it is the prospect of student debt that acts as a barrier to their post-secondary education. We need to address both of those barriers and in my recommendations we have highlighted two priorities that could make a positive difference.

In the last year the post-secondary system had two surprises. The first was the 2.6% budget cut. The second was the change to university status for five existing post-secondary institutions, including Kwantlen. Moving from University College to University means many changes in governance structures and practices. However, it seems those aspects of the change were not completely thought through from a cost point of view. The change to university status did not include any additional funding. Yet Kwantlen has to absorb a whole host of new costs without any compensating increase in funding.

The change in our status also raises expectations, but we are expected to do more with less. We are to continue with the many valuable programs we have had, fulfilling our comprehensive mandate, and also develop new degree programs with no new funding. Kwantlen faculty members have worked hard to develop the 17 degrees we now offer, and they have done so with full teaching schedules. They have made a commitment to Kwantlen and its students but their work has been done often “off the side of their desks.”

We want to conclude by emphasizing the importance of investing in post-secondary education. Certainly, the Finance Minister has been emphasizing that BC has the fiscal capacity to make investments in key public services. The projected surplus is estimated to be in excess of a billion dollars after taking the forecast allowance into account. The funding needs of post-secondary institutions like Kwantlen are well documented. The growing skills shortage and its impact on the BC economy are also well documented. What we hope to see from this Committee’s report to the Minister are some clear priorities that show how post-secondary education is going to be supported in the 2009 budget. With that in mind, we would like to recommend the following as key priorities for the 2009 budget:

- 1) Immediately restore the 2.6% funding that was cut from provincial operating grants in mid-March.
- 2) Earmark \$200 million from the existing budget surplus to allow post-secondary institutions to increase access and affordability. That commitment would move real per-student funding up to the level that was in place when the current government took office in 2001.

- 3) Make a long term commitment to reduce tuition fees over the next five years to ensure that middle and lower income families are able to fully participate in post-secondary education.
- 4) Provide sufficient funding for Kwantlen to make a viable transition to university status.
- 5) Bring back the student grant program. De-regulated tuition fees have pushed more students into debt. The average debt for students completing their post-secondary education is close to \$30,000. Those debt loads are both discouraging new students from entering post-secondary education and penalizing those who are trying to complete a degree.

We are happy to answer any questions you may have.