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Strangway's quest for GLOBAL education

Former UBC president closes in on opening the first secular, private university in Canada

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"There is so much pressure on the system to be homogenous. Is Canada ready for this kind of an institution?"

-- David Strangway

David Strangway had wanted to run a private, secular university since retiring as president of the University of B.C. in 1997. He felt it was time to have a place of learning where the student-teacher ratio was better than the Canadian national average of 30 to one, and where students could get a general arts and sciences curriculum that focused not on specific disciplines, but rather how those disciplines operated within the world at large.

"So often today, people are becoming excessively specialized too early in their careers and their lives, in a world in which there is an incredible breadth of problems and issues and opportunities," says Strangway, sitting in his spartan temporary office behind a Squamish mall. Across the Sea to Sky Highway and up the hill in the Garibaldi Highlands, 120 construction workers are labouring on Strangway's dream, Quest University, scheduled to open in September.

It is the first private, secular university in the country. If you want homogenous, don't come here.

Ten years ago, the school was just an idea. Back then, Strangway, along with Quest founding directors Peter Ufford, who was Strangway's vice-president, external affairs at UBC, and lawyer and fundraising expert Blake Bromley, worked out a game plan. They formed the Sea to Sky Foundation (SSF), accepting contributions from donors and seeking to purchase a parcel of land, of which they could sell bits and pieces at market value to pay for construction of the university.

Originally they thought about setting Quest up in Whistler, but while land in Whistler is available, trying to sell market housing was the snag. Several communities bid to host Quest, with Squamish winning out. Squamish has experienced job losses in the forestry and railway industries, and needs an economic shot in the arm. Quest University, once it reaches its maximum enrolment target of 640 students, will contribute significantly to the area's economy, not to mention the construction jobs created with \$100 million of campus building, \$18 million in current market housing and more millions in future housing construction.

DONATIONS AND GRANTS

A wealthy donor -- Strangway won't reveal the person's identity, but did say it is a B.C. individual -- provided a \$1.7-million loan that allowed SSF to purchase a 97-hectare (240-acre) property outside the Squamish community plan that was not zoned for market housing. Squamish council approved the university zoning, allowing Quest to sell up to 960 units of market housing.

SSF then got a \$2 million seed-money grant from the J.W. McConnell Foundation, which allowed Quest to bring in staff and consultants. The Stewart and Marilyn Blusson Foundation kicked in an unspecified but "sufficient" donation which, combined with land sale amounts and donations from the McConnell Foundation and the R. Howard Webster Foundation (both Montreal-based philanthropic institutions which provide funding for, among other organizations, public universities) is covering the \$100-million construction costs.

Stewart Blusson co-founded the Ekati diamond mine in the Northwest Territories.

With 22 developers bidding, Quest then started selling parcels of land. The first sale of 19 hectares went to University Heights Development Corp., a joint venture of First Cambridge Capital Corp. of Squamish and the Holborn Group of Vancouver, which will build and sell 200 housing units. It sold a small (under one-hectare) parcel to Wall Financial Corp., which is building two condo towers it will lease back to the university for student housing. Another small sale just went through, although the details have not been made public. Several other land deals are close to being finalized. Quest is also using the market housing land as collateral for loans, holding the property to sell as the land appreciates.

A glance at real estate in the area shows that a 60-by-124-foot lot in the Garibaldi Highlands lists for \$290,000, and houses range from \$429,000 to \$1.2 million.

Quest is a not-for-profit entity, so what it earns from land sales goes back into operating the university.

SSF paid for the \$3.25 million construction of the Mashiter Creek Bridge, a 197-metre-long span that connects the campus with an extension of the Boulevard, the main road through the Garibaldi Highlands. SSF had to consult with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans over construction of the bridge, to make sure everything was done to protect the environmentally sensitive Mashiter Creek ravine.

Establishing the university has not been without controversy. Residents of Garibaldi Highlands expressed displeasure over the Boulevard's use as a road to the school. Eventually a compromise was reached: a second access road will be built as the primary route to the campus.

OFFICIAL STATUS

There have been rumblings among other post-secondary education individuals that not-for-profit schools can still access public money. Certainly, MIT and Harvard have had some state and federal funding for projects, and while

Strangway says no public money has been used to date, "that doesn't mean that we will never expect there would be some public funding in this."

The financial scheme is impressive, but it would mean nothing if the school lacked credibility.

Prior to all the land deals, the university lobbied hard for the capability to grant degrees. In May 2002, the provincial legislature passed the Sea to Sky University Act, granting the university official status.

To further give the new venture credibility, Strangway approached 18 universities from around the world and asked them to be "founding partners." The 18 schools, which include University of London in the U.K. and Siam University in Thailand, offer exchange programs for students and annually send teams to Quest to observe the operation, offering critical advice as to what Quest is doing right and doing wrong academically.

The Quest team also visited universities around the world to ensure those institutions will accept Quest degree-holders into their graduate and professional programs.

Having established credibility, Quest placed ads internationally to get the word out. Strangway, other staff members and four dedicated recruiters, called "admissions counsellors," travelled across Canada, throughout the U.S. Pacific northwest, as well as internationally, visiting selected high schools to recruit students.

"We have a very serious commitment to diversifying our student body," says Mark Campbell, Quest's dean of enrolment management, who has visited Thailand, Hong Kong, China, Colorado, Washington state, Quebec, Ontario, Alberta, and other parts of B.C. on the recruitment trail.

So far, Quest has accepted 100 students from about 300 applications, meaning that half of those applying will be admitted in the first year, when 160 students will attend. To date 40 per cent of applicants are Canadian, 40 per cent American, and 20 per cent from other countries.

Life at Quest will not come cheap. Tuition is \$24,000 a year, and all students will live in residence, adding another \$11,000 to the bill. Textbooks will likely cost \$1,100.

Who can afford to attend Quest?

More people than you think, officials say. The university has set aside about \$3 million for scholarships, grants and bursaries to ease the financial burden for students. They range from \$1,000 per term to full tuition. The university handed out the first cash awards on March 2.

"We want to have a really diverse student body, and that's not just geography, it's socio-economically as well," says Campbell.

Quest has so far hired eight faculty members from 600 applicants. They have taught at Canadian schools (two are from UBC), some come from U.S. schools (including Columbia University), while others are recent graduates from such institutions as UBC and MIT.

A year's curriculum at Quest is divided into three terms consisting of four blocks per term, with 32 blocks required for graduation. Students can accelerate their graduation by taking consecutive terms. Rather than taking a bunch of courses at once, students take a single course at a time, each course running for three and a half weeks. This allows students to concentrate on one subject without distractions.

As they work toward graduation, students will focus on a general area of specialization, choosing from arts and humanities; imagination and expression; social sciences; self, community and the world; life sciences; life and the natural environment; physical sciences; and science, technology and societies.

THE BIG PICTURE

As you can gather from the program, Quest will not be an ivory tower environment. Its recruitment slogan focuses on three I-words: intimate, international and integrated.

Intimate refers to the size of the campus (four buildings plus a residence), the student population (160 in year one, no more than 640 students at any one time) and the student-to-teacher ratio (10-1).

International, because the students will come from all over the world in a global community.

Integrated, because students will not become specialist mathematicians or specialist physicists, but rather will learn subjects that are connected to the world at large.

When recruiters from Quest meet with prospective students, they will ask them what subject they would take to best tackle an issue like AIDS. Most students will say it's a medical issue, but as the discussion grows they realize that things like economics, politics, education, demographics and lifestyle can all be factors in coming to grips with the disease.

Quest wants students to look at the big picture.

"The idea is, even for the advanced level [of students], to try to keep oriented on problems and issues, and how you bring thinking together to try to deal with these kinds of issues," says Strangway.

Quest also has an agreement with Vanoc which permits use of campus building for housing during the 2010 Winter Games at Whistler.

"We're not totally sure which kind of housing they will want," says Strangway. "We know they need housing for security services and for the press."

Aside from the construction, most of the hard work has been done. The campus is now open for business, and time will tell if Canada is ready for a new kind of educational experience.

"We're really at the point of no return," says Strangway. "We can't fail."

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