Forum: NAFTA Opening Dinner and Welcome
Speech: Remarks
Date: March 16, 2009
Title: NAFTA Conference Welcome

Good morning. ¡Buenos Dias! ¡Bienvenidos a todos! I am delighted to welcome you to UMUC, for what promises to be a day of thought-provoking discussion and lively collaboration.

I would like to begin by thanking a few of the many individuals who have made this conference not only possible, but truly special, as well.

Our esteemed colleagues and counterpart from Athabasca University and Tecnologizó de Monterrey.

Our distinguished keynote speaker, Mr. Franklin Vargo, Vice President for International Economic Affairs, at the National Association of Manufacturers.

Our outstanding group of panelists…Dr. Guillermo Aguirre, Dr. David Annand, Dr. Wilfried Backhaus, Mr. John Bulloch, Dr. Alejandro Gonzalez; Ms. Susan Harper, Mr. Maurice Hladik, Mr. Gary C. Hufbauer, Dr. Deborah Hurst, Mr. Daniel Inda, Dr. Paul Tesluk, Mr. Adam Wasserman, and Mr. Gustavo Zentner.

UMUC Board members – Mr. Joe Bower, Mr. Ted Peck, Mr. Bill Wood. Athabasca Board member Mr. Tim Nerenz.

The visionary group of university leaders who conceived and cultivated what is now the North American Alliance of Innovative Universities….Dr. Jaime Alonzo Gomez from Tec de Monterrey, Dr. Alex Kondra from Athabasca University, and Dr. Greg von Lehmen from UMUC.

And of course, our conference planners, who have spent many months putting this incredible program together. Mr. Troy Tait, Ms. Lilia Gamboa, and Dr. Matthew Prineus.
This conference marks the first in a series of such activities, which grew out of a unique alliance among three amazing universities — Athabasca University, Tec de Monterrey, and UMUC — all of which share one common mission: To educate creative and competent 21st century knowledge leaders, by providing them with unparalleled access to world-class higher education, using a variety of distance learning strategies and technologies. And while each university represents a distinct region of North America, all have established an extensive global presence...together serving nearly a quarter of a million graduate and undergraduate students worldwide, many of whom are busy, working adults.

Having been founded in 1970, as a traditional, campus-based institution, Canada’s Athabasca University took a decidedly different direction two years later...after launching a pilot project to test its potential as an open, distance university.

Today, Athabasca University is a fully accredited academic institution...dedicated to breaking down the many barriers that often prevent otherwise qualified students from pursuing higher education. As such, it operates one of the world’s foremost and fastest growing virtual campuses...offers more than 90 undergraduate and graduate programs...and educates some 37,000 students from every Canadian province and territory, as well as in 84 countries.

It also generates some three million dollars per year in research activity...and maintains over 350 collaborative agreements with other Canadian and international post-secondary institutions, professional associations, and business organizations.

Tecnológico de Monterrey was founded in 1943 by a group of entrepreneurs headed by Don Eugenio Garza Sada. And today it is recognized both nationally and internationally for its academic excellence....known by many as the “MIT of Mexico.”

With 34 campuses in 35 Mexican cities, along with an up and coming online campus, this rapidly expanding university serves around 95,000 students, in 34 undergraduate and 59 postgraduate programs.

To strengthen its global presence, Tec de Monterrey maintains offices in the United States, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Latin America...through which to facilitate an extensive international exchange program. This outstanding program provides academic research and lifelong learning opportunities for students, as well as faculty members, from all over the world.

And finally, my own University of Maryland University College is also an open access institution, and a truly global academic enterprise. As America’s largest
public university, UMUC operates divisions on four continents, serving some 94,000 students in 25 countries around the world…both onsite in 156 locations and online through its award-winning virtual campus.

Having first opened its doors in 1947 to meet the academic needs of returning World War II veterans, UMUC still caters primarily to adult students, including a significant number of military service members and their families. That said, we offer flexible and affordable access to 130 undergraduate and graduate certificate and degree options….including one of only a few Doctor of Management programs in the country.

What’s more, like Athabasca University and Tec de Monterrey, UMUC has built an extensive worldwide learning network, which includes a growing number of collaborative relationships with other institutions of higher education….with federal, state, and local governments….and with corporations who share our mission.

Nearly three years ago, administrative and academic leaders from each of these preeminent global universities gathered in Wisconsin to further a collective vision for higher learning. One that would enable them to anticipate and address the demands of a world in which continuing education and international collaboration are paramount to planetary survival.

This retreat served as the launching pad for what is now the “North American Alliance of Innovative Universities”….a think tank of sorts…through which to generate intellectually demanding, globally relevant, and collaboratively rich distance education strategies and lifelong learning opportunities.

By pooling their extensive knowledge and extraordinary resources, the partners set out to develop and sponsor a series of conferences….organized around the overarching theme of North American “wealth creation” within the context of an ever-evolving knowledge economy.

So in making this first discussion a truly memorable beginning, we convened a special group of distinguished educators, government officials, business executives, and NGO leaders. And we ask that together, you explore the many ways we may more effectively educate knowledge leaders for the future.

Ethically and culturally responsible individuals…who are both skilled professionals and great global citizens…and who understand what it means to create a future that is environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable.

The alliance will then use your recommendations to develop a joint certificate program…which will eventually lead to a master’s degree specialty…around global entrepreneurship and its implications for sustainable growth and development. These
programs will be offered fully online, with each school providing specific courses within a mutually agreed upon curriculum.

Universities such as ours are uniquely positioned to lead discussions such as this one. As dynamic communities of scholar-practitioners….with the capacity to reach hundreds of thousands of learners….we are virtual greenhouses for ingenuity and innovation. By design, we are always prepared to look past the immediate and beyond the local to the view and the international perspective.

In examining the social, financial, and political impact of sustainable wealth creation, our attention must be focused not only on the generations to come. Our vision must transcend national borders….to encompass an entire planet….the one we live on today….as well as the one we seek to leave for tomorrow.

Yet, as the saying goes, one hand cannot cover the sun. By sponsoring today’s conference, we hope to enlist the many different and certainly capable hands we will need to embrace this enormous challenge…from among other equally significant communities in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors.

We will undoubtedly create a far more inclusive and empowering knowledge ecology….in which information, ideas, and inspiration flourish and cross-pollinate…fostering the rapid growth of new knowledge and sustainable action.

It is certainly an important step in our shared journey to secure a brighter and more productive future for this world and its citizens. Let us all be inspired by the truly profound words of American anthropologist, Margaret Mead:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

On that note, then, let the conference begin. Thank you! ¡Muchas gracias!

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