Introducing Dr. Max Blouw

The Cord sits down with Laurier's incoming president to find out his vision for the future of our school.

As the Laurier community begins to welcome another crop of fresh-faced frosh to campus, there is another new face that is just beginning to become accustomed to life at the school: incoming President and Vice-Chancellor Dr. Max Blouw.

On December 14, 2006, the WLU Board of Governors announced that Dr. Blouw would become the eighth president in the history of Wilfrid Laurier University, including the two presidents who presided over the school's previous incarnation as Waterloo Lutheran University.

This means that for the first time in nearly ten years, Laurier's president's office will not be the home of the venerable Dr. Bob Roseheart. Instead, as of September 1, it will be up to Dr. Blouw to help usher the school through another period of change, and possibly growth.

In a recent 30-minute, wide-ranging, sit-down interview with The Cord, it became obvious why the WLU Senate and Board of Governors unanimously chose Blouw, from a field of six interviewed candidates, to help ease the school into a transition period, which follows the unprecedented growth at the school in recent years.

READY FOR CHANGE

Although he will most certainly miss his family and friends in British Columbia, Dr. Blouw has no regrets about making the switch to Laurier. Having just recently found a home in the Waterloo area, Blouw, his wife and his dogs are excited to begin another phase of life in Central Canada.

"I've enjoyed everywhere I've lived and I don't expect that to be any different here," says Blouw, "but I do expect to be very busy for the first little while."

In fact, Blouw recognizes that the simple task of getting to know Laurier as a community will be a challenge in and of itself. "I'm in listening mode right now," says Blouw, demonstrating his tendency to solicit and accept the input of others when making important decisions.

"I'm the new guy, so I've come in and had the opportunity to take a look at what the facts about Laurier are. What I don't yet know is the culture of the institution or the mode by which it makes decisions."

As the highest-profile new addition to the Laurier community, Blouw realizes that there will be a "steep learning curve" associated with his new position. However, after having helped to triple the research funds at his previous school, the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), he is ready to use his personal and professional experiences to help Laurier grow and mature.

"My mandate at my former institution was to be an advocate for and to grow the research intensity of the school, " says Blouw. "I was very successful at that, of course not by myself."

"Here I hope to create environments where people can excel - its faculty members, students and staff members. Because if you can create an environment where the greatest human potential can be realized, then you're really serving society well," he continues.
**Blouw’s Background**

Born in Holland in 1951, Blouw and his family moved to Canada in 1957 and settled in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It was there that he began to cultivate a love for the outdoors that would become a life-long passion.

His interest in nature led Dr. Blouw towards pursuing both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in zoology, at the University of Manitoba. He later acquired a PhD in biology at the University of New Brunswick. Dr. Blouw’s Master’s research gave him a considerable amount of experience for his PhD work, as it took him to the Arctic regions of Canada, where he spent a considerable amount of time alone or working in small research teams consisting of only a few members.

His time in the Canadian North helped Dr. Blouw to develop a “certain level of self-confidence and self-awareness,” he says. “I spent quite a bit of time alone so I had to become accustomed to and comfortable with myself.”

This self-confidence helps allow Dr. Blouw to utilize a leadership style that draws upon the skills and tools of others. “One of the things that I’m going to be doing is seeking a great deal of input from a lot of people about where the school is going to go,” says Blouw, describing his plans for a consultative process through which the future of the school will begin to emerge. “I’m not going to impose a view from the top. I’m going to be asking students and others about what the right size for Laurier is and how many campuses we should have.”

This openness to listening and learning is something that Dr. Blouw hopes to impart upon the students of the school. “I’m going to lead by example; I’m going to be doing a lot of listening,” he says. “I don’t have any preconceived notions or answers. I hope by doing a lot of discussion and a lot of listening we can develop a consensus surrounding many of the school’s key questions.”

By engaging the entire Laurier community in a discussion about how the school as an institution will be shaped in the future, Blouw hopes to strike a perfect balance between a comprehensive university and providing the intimate learning experience that students have come to expect.

“One of the wonderful things about Laurier is that the students have such an intimate, family-like experience here. Laurier, in the minds of many people here, is still a small institution,” says Dr. Blouw, commenting on the reputation that the school has sought to cultivate and preserve. “Well, in fact, Laurier is not a small institution any longer. So the big challenge for Laurier is ‘how do you stay small while growing big?’”

While Blouw is eager to gather input from the school’s community, he has a few thoughts regarding how to maintain the small-campus feel that so many Laurier students and professors treasure. “One way that has already started, and that is, ‘if the main campus of Laurier is getting too big, then start other campuses.’ We have one in Kitchener now, and one in Brampton, so that’s one way of maintaining small campus sizes while the overall institution itself grows larger.”

**Growth was Necessary**

Although he is only just beginning to become accustomed to the school itself, Dr. Blouw understands the concerns of many students and faculty who feel that the expansion of the school has begun to threaten the level and type of education that Laurier offers. “As you grow large, some people will argue that the quality of education suffers,” acknowledges Blouw. “So how can we prevent that from happening? How can we make Laurier even better as an experience for the students than it has been in the past? That will be my agenda.”

The unprecedented growth that occurred in the past decade has been controversial at times, however, according to Dr. Blouw, this growth was necessary in order for the school to remain competitive on the national post-secondary scene.

“I know that students have been concerned with this growth, and rightly so - it’s disrupted the environment that they have been accustomed to,” he says. “However, if Laurier had not grown it would be a very tiny university amongst a very rapidly growing sea of other universities. I’m not sure that anyone wanted that to happen, it’s a very difficult position to be in. To be competitive as a university, scale is important, so growth was important.”

**Laurier Internationalized**

One aspect of the school that Dr. Blouw is already certain that he would like to see grow is Laurier’s involvement with international opportunities. As an avid traveler himself, Blouw believes that traveling offers numerous opportunities for personal growth. “I believe that universities are particularly well positioned to bring the world into a particular community, and then to get those ideas and cultures,” says Blouw.

“Universities are very cosmopolitan. You’re almost a conduit or a pipeline to the world. I’d love to see Laurier reach out more and get connected with the world in a variety of ways,” he continues.

“We could bring more international students in and send more of the students from this region out for international experiences. In my experiences, it is one of the most wonderful and one of the most enriching ways to learn about the world and about the issues of the world,” he says.

**Global Focus**

One pressing world issue that hits particularly close to home for Dr. Blouw is the current state of our environment. As a passionate outdoorsman, Blouw is conscious of how human actions affect nature, and looks forward to having a chance to look into innovations that will help make Laurier “greener.”

“I think all of society has to get greener, including me personally. I don’t know what the opportunities are quite yet to make Laurier greener. If there are opportunities, then of course I’ll look into them,” he says. “I think it’s essential that universities have a position of leadership in this regard. The more we can do to showcase new technologies and new ways of approaching things the better off we’ll all be.”

“Society sometimes requires someone to show that something can be done in order to then pick up on it,” he continues, before cautioning that this priority may take time to develop as he becomes accustomed to his role and responsibilities as president. “Over the course of a five-year term it will reach a high priority, but for the first year to 18 months, I will have a great deal to do with the visioning exercises.”

With his willingness to listen to others it seems that the Board of Governors has made a wise choice for the school’s next president. With the very fabric of Laurier culture at an uncertain stage, it is necessary that before important decisions are made, all of the members of the school’s community are consulted so that the school can grow and adapt at a rate that is consistent with its heritage and reputation. Although it is still extremely early in his tenure as the President of Wilfrid Laurier University, Dr. Max Blouw has the qualities necessary to successfully pull this tall order off. And if all goes well hopefully he will get his wish and help make Laurier “become one of the most well-rounded and outstanding universities in Canada.”

**TIME FOR THOUGHT** - Dr. Blouw’s first move as WLU President will be to learn the culture of the school.

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