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A Report from:
***“Making the Connection: Universities and Community Economic
Development”***

Wu Conference Centre, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB

October 19, 2011

In his opening remarks to conference delegates, Dr. Eddy Campbell was blunt in stating Canada's key economic challenges, and confident in championing the role universities can play in putting the nation back on a path to progress. Dr. Campbell, the President and Vice-Chancellor, University of New Brunswick (UNB), said natural resources won't guarantee Canada's success in the long term. Indeed, he suggested that the nation must escape the “curse of natural resources . . . (that) allow us to coast on the wealth they provide.”

Dr. Campbell's comments were made at *Making the Connection: Universities and Community Economic Development*, an event led and organized by the Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU) in collaboration with the Economic Developers Association of Canada (www.edac.ca), October 19, 2011, Wu Conference Centre, UNB.

The purpose of the event was to create greater awareness and understanding among the region's economic development leaders about the role universities are currently playing, as well as their potential to further enhance community economic success.

Dr. Campbell went on to tell conference delegates that Canada must develop a more innovative, productive, knowledge-based economy. Citing International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Conference Board of Canada reports, Dr. Campbell said Canada was a “laggard” among leading economic nations when it comes to productivity and innovation. The solution: Leverage the brain-power inside Canada's East Coast universities to grow the economy in the region and the nation. That, in essence, was the challenge Dr. Campbell threw out to a blue-chip audience of economic developers, business and community leaders, government officials and academics.

The response, from both guest panelists and audience members, was that the region's academic institutions are willing, eager and able to meet that challenge.

Indeed, they are already doing so.

University officials from across the region provided insights into programs that directly connect the ‘academy’ to community needs, such as Memorial University's opening its doors through yaffle.ca; Cape Breton University's MBA in Community Economic Development, designed to support the Island's economic and cultural growth; the reach of St. Francis Xavier University's internationally-recognized Coady Institute into economically-struggling communities across Nova Scotia and the University of Prince Edward Island's focus on encouraging and nurturing business-minded students as the next generation of PEI's entrepreneurs.

One dramatic success story was told by UNB physics professor Bruce Balcom and Jill Green, the co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of Green Imaging Technologies (GIT) of Fredericton. Green founded GIT in 2005, alongside another graduate engineer from UNB – her husband Derrick Green. The Greens continued to collaborate with Balcom while they built their careers in the United States, but were drawn back home to work with Balcom when he encouraged them to commercialize technologies developed at UNB’s MRI Research Centre.

In collaboration with Balcom, the Greens were able to deploy MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) technology to analyze core samples for the upstream oil and gas industry. This is leading-edge technology inside the multi-billion dollar petroleum exploration sector – an industry that Jill Green says should remain strong for decades to come. Within a few years of the Greens’ return to Fredericton, GIT had become a supplier to major oil and gas companies on five continents. Today, GIT continues to develop new MRI applications with Balcom, a leading physicist with more than 100 publications and ten patents either awarded or in progress. Balcom is also a firm believer in the commercialization of research, which he described at the conference as a win-win proposition for academic laboratories and Atlantic Canadian firms.

Jill Green, meanwhile, calls the GIT-UNB story an example of the “power of partnership.” Leigh Huestis would certainly agree with that notion. In her role as the Director of Industry and Community Engagement at Acadia University, Huestis oversees more than 30 research projects linked to the burgeoning vineyard and winemaking industries in Nova Scotia’s Annapolis Valley. She told conference delegates that research teams at Acadia are partnering with the industry to adapt to climate change, and to grow grapes suited to soils and micro-climates in the area.

Stephen Kerr says research being done at Acadia and other universities has the power to transform the wine industry and the area’s economy. As Executive Director of Kings Regional Economic Development Agency, Kerr is responsible for an area that includes both Acadia and many local vineyards. To Kerr, wine-making and university research is a marriage made in heaven. Because of the region’s wine industry, now supported by Acadia research, the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia can be branded as the Maritime Home of Food and Culture. “This trend of food and culture as a primary source of entertainment has swept the planet. It has transformed places like Tuscany and Niagara-on-the-Lake.” And, it can do the same for Kings County – which can develop a major international tourism industry on the back of a wine industry, which is being built in turn on the platform of research done at Acadia.

The Kings County wine story, like the UNB-GIT saga, answered Dr. Campbell’s challenge, by showing that universities can be – and are - key players in developing a more productive, diverse knowledge-based economy. So did presentations from several other academics at *Making the Connection*. The gathering also confirmed the wisdom of Dr. Campbell’s opening remark to the Oct. 19 event. “Intellectual capital,” he said, “is no good unless you can spend it.”

Visit atlanticuniversities.ca to view all presentations from *Making the Connection: Universities and Community Economic Development*.

