

**OPENING ASSEMBLY  
2015-16 ACADEMIC YEAR**

**08/31/2015**

**REMARKS BY DÉsirÉE MCGRAW  
PRESIDENT AND HEAD OF COLLEGE**

Valued members of the Pearson Community – Board members, Faculty, Staff, and, above all, Students:

Good morning, or as we say in my native Québec, bon matin! Je suis ravie d'être parmi vous aujourd'hui. I'm so happy to be here and to warmly welcome all first year students to Pearson College! And of course to our second year students, to welcome you back to your home away from home.

I feel extremely privileged to have the opportunity to lead the College. I truly embrace the obligation, not only to uphold the tremendous legacy of the past 40 years, but also to advance it.

**UWC VISION & VALUES**

As you know, since Pearson College was founded 40 years ago, its mission has been to make education a global force of change. In today's very different and ever more complex world, Pearson's mission is more critical than ever.

As you know, Lester B. Pearson was the driving force behind the founding of this College. Not only was he one of Canada's greatest Prime Ministers, but he was a Nobel Laureate. And in accepting his Peace Prize, he asked: "How can there be peace without people understanding each other; and how can this be if they don't know each other?" This question illuminated Mr. Pearson; and after retiring from public life, Mr. Pearson became interested in the United World College movement. Convinced that there must be such a college in Canada, he envisioned a place where: "Students... will be welcomed without regard to race, religion or politics.... Students ... from all levels of society [who] will be

genuine representatives of their own peoples.” He predicted, “This system could become a revolutionary force in international education.” And indeed it has.

That mission – and that of the UWC movement more broadly is to make education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for a peaceful and sustainable future. We do so by combining experiential learning with academic excellence; by educating and nurturing the whole person – mind, body and spirit.

We continue to attract, educate and engage exceptionally promising students like all of you. Here, you will have a chance to think, collaborate and serve across different communities, countries, cultures and contexts; you will hone your leadership skills to make a difference in the world

### **WHY I CAME TO PEARSON**

I guess I know something about trying to make a difference in the world from a young age. I first came to Pearson College around the same age as many of you, our dear first years. I came not as a student, but as a member of SAGE (Solidarité Anti-Guerre Etudiante) promoting international peace and nuclear disarmament during the Cold War. Studies... At age 16, I was one of 4 Montreal teens who had taken a full year off school to tour the Canada – from Nfld to BC – to organize and speak in  $\frac{1}{4}$  of all Canadian high schools about the threat of nuclear war and what young people could do about it. We had success old-school before Twitter and FB – many high schools formed SAGE chapters, we raised national attention through the media old-school, we debated military generals and largely in response to our tour, Canada’s Department of National Defense started its own awareness campaign promoting nuclear deterrence). But we also came across plenty of apathy among our peers. It wasn’t until we came to Pearson College at the tail end of our nine-month cross-country tour that we felt a true sense of solidarity with our peers: the Pearson students were informed, intelligent, engaged, empowered – deeply committed to working for change and creating a better, more just and peaceful world. After hundreds of presentations to student bodies across Canada, this is the one that stuck with me most.

Based on my SAGE experience, I developed a bias for action and a tremendous sense of possibility – or empowerment. From a young age I learned that through hard work, through team work, through organization and passion – almost anything is possible. The fact that you all are here tells me that you know this, too. If at age 16, 17, 18, 19 you devel-

op a strong sense of possibility and responsibility to make the world a better place, you will carry that with you into whatever context, community, country or career you choose.

Since the SAGE Tour – as a student organizer, a global “youth ambassador”, an overseas graduate researcher, a UN reporter, a political advisor, advocate and, above all, as an educator, I have devoted my life to engaging and empowering a new generation of leaders to tackle global problems. And there is no better way to build the bonds that will go the hard, long distance required to create lasting change than to have a deliberately diverse and dynamic group of young people live, learn and lead together.

I am here, above all, because I believe in you. I believe in your potential and your power to change the world. At the same time, I recognize that it would be unfair to expect your generation alone to solve the problems of the world – problems created by my generation and those generations before me. So, above all, I believe in working in partnership across generations, countries and cultures to create a more just, sustainable and peaceful world. We, the adults on campus, pledge to do our part - in our respective roles – to support and collaborate with you.

## COMMUNITY CHALLENGE

And so with this in mind, I would like to issue a special challenge to the entire Pearson Community – the students, staff, faculty and residents gathered here today.

Yesterday morning, in introducing Chief Chipps, I acknowledged that we are here together living and learning on the traditional lands of the Scia’new (Chee-a-new) First Nation – also known as the Beecher Bay First Nation or, as Chief Chipps pointed out in his morning welcome yesterday, Spirit Bay.

Canada’s history with its indigenous people, including First Nations, is largely one of betrayal, exploitation and injustice. One particularly painful part pertains to the Residential Schools: for well over a century, generations of Aboriginal children (some as young as 3 or 4) were separated from their parents and raised in overcrowded, underfunded, and often unhealthy residential schools across Canada. They were commonly denied the right to speak their language and told their cultural beliefs were sinful. Some children did not see their parents for years, and when they did, they know longer communicate in the same language. Other children – the victims of scandalously high death rates – never made it

back home. The purpose was to “kill the Indian in the child” and it was nothing short of mass cultural genocide.

In the wake of this national tragedy, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was created and mandated to educate the Canadian public about residential schools and their place in Canadian history. After years of traveling across Canada – listening to and recording stories of thousands of “survivors” of the residential schools, the TRC produced its report in June – I have here a copy signed by TRC Commissioner Marie Wilson. Now that the report has exposed the truth, the Commission challenges the country to participate in reconciliation. This is not just a challenge to indigenous people, but to all Canadians. And if you care anything about social justice, it’s a challenge to all of us.

At Pearson, I believe we have a special responsibility – because we have the ability to respond to this challenge. The history and reality of residential schools run counter to everything we stand for. And as a residential school that celebrates community and diversity in all its forms, we have a special opportunity to make a difference.

What form our contribution takes will be up to us as a community to determine and create together. I would invite all students, faculty and staff – in our informal discussions and formal meetings – to start to bring your energy and ideas to thinking through what Pearson College’s contribution(s) to reconciliation might look like. Together, drawing on our diverse experiences and perspectives, we will participate in our collective reconciliation with our First Peoples.

## **KEY ACTIONS AND MESSAGES**

At the heart of the UWC ethos is respect for others in all our actions and words. This means that we must think about the common good and be able to rise above our individual desires and needs.

I know most of you have come in from far. I know you realize Pearson represents a tremendous opportunity for you to learn as a student and grow as a person, but I also know that this experience may at times be lonely and confusing. Some of you may be tempted to shut yourself away; others may seek to test the limits of your new-found freedom by engaging in risky behavior. I would encourage you to channel your energy into trying out new ideas and outdoor pursuits; and to try to find a balance – and our tremendous team of faculty and staff will work with you to find that balance.

While you are here on campus as minors, I serve as your legal guardian. I take my custodial role very seriously – more so than any other aspect of my job as President and Head of College. And so it is as your legal custodian who cares deeply about your safety and well-being that I must remind you of some of the things for which we have zero tolerance: No alcohol. No drugs. No smoking. No violence in any form.

On a more positive note and in thinking about what advice I could usefully offer our new and returning students, I came across 12 actions for living, learning, and working the Pearson College. These were developed and refined over time by students and educators alike; and should serve as a guide to the entire community.

1. Get to know one another: from knowing comes understanding, and from understanding comes support, respect, and trust.
2. Be optimistic: a positive view is the engine of growth.
3. Slow down: make a deeper commitment to fewer activities.
4. Collaborate: working together leads to more creative solutions.
5. Embrace change: a resilient community allows for spontaneous change and regeneration, and this is how we all grow.
6. Take risks: follow up ideas with considered action.
7. Try your best: you'll be amazed at what you accomplish.
8. Be mindful: listen to the needs, desires and stories of others. Don't speculate when information is available.
9. Cooperate: rotate positions of responsibility. Accept that anyone can lead, for this fosters compassionate, courageous, and diverse leadership.
10. Accept there is no right way: admit you might be wrong; reflect and respond in place of instant reaction.
11. Work out your mind, body and spirit: personal sustainability increases the strength of our community.
12. Speak up: voice community concerns in village meetings and in classrooms to ensure issues are dealt with as transparently as possible. Voice personal concerns directly with the person involved.

Each of these values presents us with unique challenges and opportunities to be the very best version of ourselves.

## **THE TEAM**

I want to see Pearson’s profile and contribution to Canada and the world flourish during my tenure. I realize that is ambitious, but I know that there is already a team of smart, passionate and committed people on the ground at the College to help me build on the incredible accomplishments that have made Pearson the force it is in the world today.

At Pearson we have a tremendous team of adults – faculty, staff and residents – who are here to support you as a whole person – whether it be through academic pursuits, physical fitness, mental and emotional health, or living in community.

During the course of this week, you will have a chance to meet the entire team so I will not name or introduce them all here. But I will ask the members of the College’s Leadership Team to please stand and be recognized:

- Mark Bannar-Martin: Deputy Head of College and Dean of Studies
- Heather Gross: Director of Admissions and University Counselling
- Libby Mason: Dean of Students
- Chris Blondeau: Director of Operations
- Ann Pennant: Director of Finance and Human Resources
- Alison Mackenzie-Armes: Executive Director of Advancement and Alumni Relations
- Nina Moroso: Executive Assistant and Secretary to the Board of Governors
- Brian Geary: new Director of Communications

## **CONCLUSION**

Like many of you, I consider myself to be an idealist – and a practical one. As a practical idealist, I believe to be true to our ideals, to create the kind of change the world needs, we need to work harder and smarter than those who prefer and seek to preserve the status quo for its own sake.

I see my central role as that of Chief Champion for Pearson College.

First, there is lots of listening and learning for me to do. I would invite you to think of me as a first-year student at Pearson College. I even arrived with the last group of “firsties” late Saturday night.

## PEARSON COLLEGE



To my fellow “firsties”: over the course of our first few months on campus, we will completely immerse ourselves in the culture and fabric of Pearson College. And we will very much rely on our second years as well as the staff and faculty to help orient us.

Working together, we will make this year @ Pearson College a unique and special one. Let’s make this one count!

Thank you. Merci.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Désirée McGraw".

**DÉSIRÉE MCGRAW**

PRESIDENT AND HEAD OF COLLEGE,  
PEARSON COLLEGE UWC