

## Message from Fraser Forbes

By Fraser Forbes on April 23, 2018



To our Engineering Community;

I am writing you about what I believe is a direct and alarming threat to our Faculty of Engineering and the worst crisis, a crisis of trust, that we've faced in more than three decades. Although we've arrived at this unfortunate juncture via the announcement of the conferral of a single honorary degree, in my conversations with you, it has become pointedly clear that the problem runs much deeper.

I thank the many of you who have taken time to write or phone me during the last two weeks to express your views on this matter. The conversation that you've started has helped me understand just how deeply Albertans feel that we have, without fairness or justification, been made climate-change pariahs by much of the world, as well as being vilified by our fellow Canadians.

It truly saddens me to know that many of you are, as am I, left feeling that one of Alberta's most favoured children, the University of Alberta, has betrayed you by choosing to confer this honorary degree. I am not surprised by the level of outrage being expressed across the entire breadth of our engineering community – surely such is to be expected when one's fundamental values are so directly questioned! I want to assure you

that I have been using what I have heard from you, in our conversations, as I have argued against this degree conferral over the past weeks.

That the university has aggrieved Albertans with a single decision, demonstrates, I believe, that our university has become, certainly in this process, too disconnected from the people that we are meant to serve. Having come to this conclusion, I then, like every engineer, first turned to identifying the fault in the system. Upon investigation, I discovered the following:

- Honorary Degree recipients are selected by the university's Senate;
- Faculties, including Engineering, are not invited to participate in the selection of recipients, or indeed consulted in the selection process in any way.

This I feel is where the problem rests – voices that should be heard in order to make an informed and sound decision, are not.

While the makeup of our Senate is intended to be broadly representative of the communities that define Alberta and our university, that the impact of this year's honorary degree selection has created such a rift between our university and Albertans, shows the university didn't simply miss the mark, but, as you have told me loud and clear, left many of you, its supporters, feeling hurt and devalued. The University of Alberta must do much better.

It is critically important that our voice – the Engineering voice, the voice of Alberta's industrial sectors, including energy and natural resources – is given a place at the table of the key decision-making bodies of our university.

Now we must answer the question, where do we go from here? The immediate and first start will be the rebuilding of Albertans' trust of our Faculty of Engineering. I propose we begin with the following:

- Intensify our advocacy for Alberta's industrial sectors, within the University of Alberta, and beyond.
- Continue to support Albertans by providing an exceptional engineering education to our students.
- Drive innovation in every sector, by continuing to work with our partners.
- Become a leading voice in ensuring that everyone, our youth in particular, understand the crucial role that our energy and resource industries play in powering our life, protecting our environment, and building fair and equitable societies.

My call to action today is to ask you for your help. I am going to need your thinking and advice as we pursue success with each of these initiatives. In the coming weeks stay tuned for details on how we will begin to rebuild Albertans' trust in the integral place we hold in Alberta, Canada and the world. For the immediate short term, I truly believe that you can depend on your Faculty of Engineering to exemplify Albertan values in all of our endeavours.

I want to close with an apology. I am deeply sorry (ashamed, in fact) for the hurt that we at the University have caused Albertans in the last two weeks. It need not have happened. It should not have happened. My apologies.

Sincerely yours,

Fraser Forbes, Ph.D., P.Eng.  
Professor

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