

The University of Manitoba as global citizen

Discussions about the idea of global citizenship have been growing both in prominence and frequency in recent years. The reasons for this are many, but a common thread runs throughout: that in many of the things that matter most, borders are irrelevant. The air we breathe, the waterways that nourish, the challenges we face and the ideas we pursue all transcend geographic boundaries.

What does this shift in thinking mean for the University of Manitoba? For over 130 years, our university has been “Manitoba’s University”, proud to be part of our province’s foundation. Our tradition as Manitoba’s premier university continues today in locations across the province – the majority of our over 26,000 students study at our two Winnipeg campuses, but we also provide social work education for inner-city residents at the William Norrie Centre; offer degree and certificate programs in partnership with First Nations and Métis communities at the Aboriginal Education Centre; collaborate to provide programs with other institutions such as the University College of the North; and undertake research at our agricultural research farms and field stations. Our course and program offerings are delivered throughout the province in a variety of ways, and our faculty conduct their research even in the furthest reaches of Manitoba.

Our connection to the community is obvious in our alumni as well. Over 80 per cent of our graduates continue to make Manitoba their home a year after graduation. Of all of our known alumni – not just those who have graduated more recently – still more than 60 per cent continue to live here. The end result is that Manitoba communities benefit greatly from the contributions of our graduates, who fuel economic growth, populate the professional ranks of Manitoba organizations, and provide leadership, knowledge and assistance in their communities.

All of this may suggest that the University of Manitoba’s focus is strictly local. The University’s strategic planning framework makes specific mention of our close connections to Manitoba’s communities and people and our commitment to being an active contributor to issues of particular importance in Manitoba. And there is no question – these things are a continued priority for the University.

At the same time, we also hold full citizenship in the global community. The University of Manitoba has long embraced the concept of internationalization, evident in the reach of our activities. At last check, the University had in place over 600 cooperation agreements with over 450 different institutions in more than 70 countries. Our 2,600-strong international student population comes from countries around the world. There are opportunities for our students to begin to cement their connection to this global community, through a range of international service learning programs. And, of course, we know of about 10,000 of our alumni living outside of Canada.

Before I arrived here, I was not fully aware of the extent of the University’s international activities but my discovery of their scope has been a revelation. In the past year I have visited projects from several faculties in different parts of the world, including in Nairobi, Kenya and Bangalore, India, where members of the Faculty of Medicine are working on infectious diseases, especially HIV/AIDS – a concern that affects us here as well. This work has been underway since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic almost 30 years ago and has involved a large number of Canadians going to work and learn abroad, and a large number of students coming here to learn, before returning to their own countries as research colleagues with our teams. University of Manitoba researchers, some of them our alumni, have obtained funding to sponsor a world class laboratory in Nairobi in partnership with the University of Nairobi, the best laboratory in the entire central part of Africa.

Visiting these projects has been personally transformative for me. To see colleagues working with deep humanity and dedication on the science of the disease and the clinical needs of those infected is a humbling experience. It makes me proud to be their colleague and it makes me want to help them find the resources needed to continue this work.

It also is a great example of research, teaching and public service coming together, of local and international issues being fundamentally intertwined, and of University of Manitoba faculty, students and alumni being engaged on public and population health, one of our priority themes.

These trips, like one I took earlier this year to Hong Kong, also offer the opportunity to get to meet alumni whose paths have taken them far from our campuses. I come to these encounters with great anticipation, fascinated to learn how former students of our University have brought their learning and experiences to their new homes. I am always left with a feeling of pride in the accomplishments of the members of our community, and of the contributions they are making around the world.

The University of Manitoba’s already strong connections in our global community, which I have only begun to describe, are ones on which we can continue to build. I am excited by the prospects that the future brings.

David Barnard president and vice-chancellor

