



## **SPEECH TO 1ST ATLANTIC LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE\***

Robert Burroughs  
Executive Director

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*\*Check against delivery*

Good afternoon.

I think we can admit that money's tight in this part of the country. There's not a lot of it to go around right now and our governments are desperately searching for that silver bullet — that one thing on which they can bet the bank — that one thing that's going to jumpstart our economies.

So they've bet on pipelines, on natural resource exploitation, on call centres, and all the while our deficits grow. Our tax rates climb. Our population ages.

This is our reality here in Atlantic Canada. This is the Atlantic Canada we are inheriting.

Money is tight and that means we don't just need to make choices; we need to make the right choices because our gambles haven't paid off.

This weekend's provincial editorial here in New Brunswick suggested that we need to broaden our economic policies to support big-picture opportunities. I agree. So here's a big picture opportunity we can take advantage of.

As Kristin said, I'm the executive director of the New Brunswick Student Alliance and I'm speaking today on behalf of my partners and colleagues at the UPEI Student Union and Students Nova Scotia who could not be here with us today because they are currently — as we speak — meeting with their Minister of Higher Education back in Halifax. Collectively, our organisations speak for a dozen student unions and the 40,000 postsecondary students they represent across the Maritimes. From Fredericton to Charlottetown to Yarmouth to Sydney, we are the future of this region.

Now, we are all young people and haven't really lived, so we don't have many life lessons to share with you. But there is one thing that we know very well: education.



Our proposition today is simple: reinvention and renewal in the region will not happen unless we commit to investing in our youth. We need to rebuild our provinces around and through our postsecondary sectors.

We worry, I would argue, too much about the economic output of our young people. What does it say about the health of our communities when our only measure of political or cultural success is “job growth”? What does it say about the spirit of our communities when we prioritise “productive programs” in the search of economic answers, the questions for which we haven’t taken the time to ask? Instead of worrying about our people leaving, we need to be investing in them.

We believe that the futures of our provinces are to be found in our educational institutions. Instead of the political bickering and squabbling that often results in bad or worse uninspiring economic policy, we could do something different:

We could make education the big ask. We could make education the central pillar of our economic policies.

To do that, we first have to reinvent our thinking because the status quo simply won’t do. The status quo won’t help us bridge the educational attainment gap for First Nation and indigenous students. It won’t help us recruit and retain the best international students and talent. It certainly won’t help us increase access to our schools for first generation students and those from impoverished families.

In other words, the status quo is bad economic policy. Don’t believe me, I’ve got receipts:

Last year, Canadian postsecondary institutions generated almost \$200 billion in new income for our national economy with a societal return of investment of 5.4. That means that for every dollar that the public invested in students and schools, our communities received almost five and a half dollars back in total benefits.

Want a more local perspective? Across the Northumberland Strait, UPEI contributes 2.5 percent of the provincial GDP on the Island. Down in Halifax, Dalhousie University generates \$1 billion a year in GDP impacts and \$33 million in healthcare savings. Here in New Brunswick, up the hill, UNB’s economic output alone constitutes 4.5% of our provincial GDP. That’s just 3 of the 16 public universities we have here in Atlantic Canada. They are the source of great untapped social wealth generation that we have yet to adequately harness.

Likewise, international students: our governments want and need more of them here on the east coast. For the ninth consecutive year, international student enrolment in the



region has grown — this time by 4.2 percent. If you don't think that's significant, remember that Global Affairs Canada estimates that international education in this country is an almost \$10 billion industry. You wonder why our governments don't offer their international students full medicare coverage. Our latest studies show that the return of investment of international students here in Atlantic Canada is almost \$2 for every government dollar invested in them.

Our sector does all this despite being underfunded. Imagine the potential if we invested in them properly.

Unfortunately, a chronically underfunded higher education sector is the status quo. The highest per capita student debt in the country is the status quo. Consistently declining enrolment rates is now the status quo. And we're not doing nearly enough, not nearly enough to fix that.

With targeted, sustained, and committed investments in our PSE sectors, we can attract the most ambitious, creative, and inspired young people across the country and the world who can see firsthand the rewards of their hard work and talent. We can bring in and foster young people who don't see the HAVE NOT but rather the potential to HAVE. The potential to be the most innovative hub in Canada. The potential to not just be the smart provinces but the dream provinces.

When I first moved to New Brunswick seven years ago, I came under the illusion that there was a future to be built here. That there was a community of communities that was willing to believe the best in people regardless of their past — because they could always have a future here in the Maritimes. I wonder if we have forgotten that.

I do not for a moment suggest that this is a 1 year plan. What we, the students of Atlantic Canada, propose here today is a project that far exceeds the limitations of our electoral cycles. It is a generational vision.

So if this region wants a silver bullet, we have one: education. Education is our silver bullet. Education is everything. Education is our future. We don't need incremental change for our education policy. We need monumental, sweeping changes. Higher education should be incredibly expensive for government and increasingly accessible for its citizens. Because that is what we do here on the East Coast:

We believe in one another. We trust one another. We invest in one another.

And I'll bet my last dollar that that'll be the smartest investment our governments make in the next decade.