

For a new philanthropic culture in Quebec

Speech given by Rector Daniel Jutras, at The Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal.

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Good morning and thank you for accepting this invitation to discuss the culture of philanthropy in Quebec. I also thank the Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal for giving me the opportunity to open this conversation.

There are over 700 people here today! It warms my heart to see that there is so much interest in philanthropy.

Two weeks ago, I was in Boston to meet with members of our alumnus community, fill them in on good news from Université de Montréal and, naturally, ask for a little contribution to support our work.

These meetings are inspiring but I always come across a few pessimists. When I talk about our big plans, our latest achievements, our major campaign and engagement, people reply, “Come on, Rector, it’s different in Quebec. We don’t have the same philanthropic tradition as English–speaking Canada or the United States.”

It’s a conversation I’ve had dozens of times. Everywhere I go, people tell me Quebecers aren’t overly generous to their alma mater, while handing me a handsome cheque. This paradox is worth unpacking.

Let’s begin by dismantling the notion that philanthropy is less ingrained in Quebec than elsewhere in North America. This idea persists because the amounts raised in the Francophone community are sometimes less impressive than in English–speaking Canada or the U.S.

There’s a reason for that. Philanthropy is largely a function of collective wealth, and Quebec’s prosperity is more recent. But it’s also true that major institutions in which we take pride, such as Hôtel–Dieu, which was Montreal’s first hospital, Sainte–Justine Hospital and the Montreal Heart Institute were founded by philanthropists. The culture of giving and helping others goes as far back in Quebec as anywhere else.

We are also grateful that the most affluent Quebecers have supported our French–language universities.

I’m reminded of it every day at Université de Montréal. Starting in the 1970s, Quebec’s student population surged. We had to build to accommodate them. The buildings that were added on our campus bear the names of the generous philanthropists and foundations who answered the call: Bronfman, Bombardier, Coutu, Lassonde, DeSève, Goodman, Desmarais.

Today, this generosity is no longer limited to infrastructure. It extends to scholarships, research grants and all aspects of university life, as demonstrated by the contributions of the Trottier, Lévesque, Azrieli and Cole foundations, and a host of other friends of the university who are with us today.

But even more significantly, the donations are growing in size. In the space of five years, our university has received three remarkable donations that should dispel any myths.

First was a \$15 million bequest from Guy Joron, a former minister in René Lévesque’s government.

Then Québecor and the Fondation Chopin–Péladeau contributed \$40 million to establish an entrepreneurship program and an innovation centre to be named after Pierre Péladeau.

And finally, the Courtois Foundation made a \$159 million donation, the largest ever to the natural sciences in Canadian history! Counting other recent donations, the Courtois Foundation has given a grand total of more than \$200 million. This is the largest contribution ever in the history of university philanthropy in Quebec. And it went to Université de Montréal.

But we don't need to look to million-dollar gifts to debunk the myth. At the other end of the spectrum, Université de Montréal has hundreds of dedicated small donors who want to make a difference, according to their means.

For example, there are our champions of perseverance, Carolyn Cronk, Pierre Auger and Évelyne Lapierre-Adamcyk, three alumni and retired professors who have been giving to the university for more than 50 years. There are our 25.893 student donors, whose modest \$40 gifts per semester allow the university to spend more than \$2 million on student life every year.

It bears repeating: Quebec is not, and has never been, a laggard in philanthropy.

However, it is true that "giving culture" manifests itself differently here. Quebecers are deeply generous but express it in another way.

Studies consistently show that the generosity of Quebecers tends to be restorative, more akin to charity and social solidarity than to philanthropy. Quebecers want to eliminate disease, suffering and poverty, but they don't fund good ideas as much. They respond to distress. They're less likely to seek out the causes of distress.

Giving is more spontaneous, less structured in Quebec; it springs more from the emotion of the moment than a long-term commitment. Quebecers will support the Christmas food drive. They'll put money into the donation box at the supermarket checkout. They are less likely to make a planned gift in their will, to make a charitable donation with a tax receipt.

This distinctive philanthropic culture has consequences for Quebec's French-language universities. Simply put, on an individual level, we give less. Half of what we see in the rest of Canada, in fact. And fewer of us give.

When I graduated from Harvard, they made it clear at the graduation ceremony that they expected us to donate 1% of our net income each year to the university. It's not subtle, but it works.

Everywhere else in North America, alumni generate a significant share of universities' philanthropic revenues. In English-speaking Canada, they account for 40 to 50 per cent of all donations. By contrast, our alumni account for less than 8 per cent of the donations we receive. The rest comes from foundations and the business community.

I know what many of you are thinking. "It's up to the government to fund our universities. It's a societal choice." It's true that the government is doing its part. I'd like it to do more, I'd like us all to do more, as Quebec universities are underfunded by more than a billion dollars annually.

But with the current state of public finances, we have to question the premise that the welfare state and private giving are incompatible. In reality, taxes aren't the only way to support the community. We see this in the response to the hospitals' major fundraising drives and in the support for Centraide.

I'd like people to think the same way about university budgets. We cannot advance knowledge, conduct research and educate tomorrow's professionals with government funding alone. Government funding enables universities to function, but not to grow, not to reinvent programs, ramp up research or train the next generation of entrepreneurs. Philanthropy is what lets us go farther and do better.

To fulfil their missions, universities must rely not just on government funding, but also on significant annual donations and endowments.

Harvard has a US\$50 billion endowment fund, a scale we can't even aspire to. The University of Toronto has a \$3 billion endowment fund. Here in Quebec, McGill has an endowment of more than \$2 billion to support development and innovation. In all, some 15 Canadian universities have endowments of more than \$500 million. Not one French-language university figures among this group.

And yet, Laval and Université de Montréal are among Canada's top research universities. In fact, UdeM ranks fourth in Canada in terms of research activity. When it comes to financial resources, however, these two flagships of higher education in Quebec are at the back of the pack. For now, I can live with the fact that we trail behind the University of Toronto, UBC and even McGill. But behind the University of Manitoba, Dalhousie University, the University of Waterloo? This is not acceptable. But it can be changed.

Taking philanthropy to the next level will require a shift in the discourse on philanthropy in the Francophone community, and particularly what is said about university philanthropy.

We're going to have to start looking at why people give.

So, why do people give?

Psychologists, sociologists, economists and experts in the science of giving have formulated all sorts of hypotheses to explain the motivations of philanthropists, about the wellsprings of generosity.

For my part, I look to the three drivers of academic philanthropy: gratitude, hope and pride.

First, gratitude. Because we have received so much. Every one of us gathered here today has a story of personal development and self-transformation. Those who have had the great privilege of going to university—and it is indeed a great privilege—know that it is a pivotal experience in one's life.

Let me tell you about myself. Like many of you, I am a product of the public school system and comprehensive high schools, of a home where there were few books but an abundance of curiosity, of a family that valued education although no one had completed post-secondary studies.

Université de Montréal opened so many doors for me: the doors to Harvard, to the world of ideas, to the legal profession and to a long, successful academic career. I am who I am today thanks to the guidance of exceptional teachers in a caring, stimulating and accessible environment.

My debt to Université de Montréal is immense. And my story is also yours; we all owe some of our success to our alma mater.

Hope is the second driver of academic philanthropy. Our universities need a new philanthropic impetus as Quebec faces new historic challenges.

Our trajectory over the coming decades will be defined by our success in navigating the energy transition and the digital revolution. And by our ability to strengthen the vitality of the French language, combat disinformation, revamp healthcare and the schools, and leave no one behind.

The challenges are great, and we find ourselves at a critical juncture. But our universities are already working on each of these challenges. Universities are like the hub of a wheel, a gathering place circled by experts, community stakeholders, the three levels of government and entrepreneurs. A place where we can take a problem—like homelessness or dropout rates—bring all the players together and take action. No other social institution has this ability to act.

Universities embody our longing for truth and science to prevail. They slake our endless thirst to understand the world around us, from the infinitely small to the vast, far reaches of the universe. Universities nurture our highest aspirations.

I've spoken about gratitude and hope. I turn now to the third driver of academic philanthropy: pride.

I don't want to send anyone into a post-pandemic funk, but we can see that great social narratives are gradually fading away and our society is becoming more fragmented. We desperately need to rebuild the bridges between us, to unite around something. In this environment, the power of universities to change the world ought to inspire an extraordinary collective pride. But we're not there yet.

Quebec is proud of its internationally recognized artists, entrepreneurs and athletes. We applaud Charlotte Cardin, we celebrate Robert Lepage and we cheer on Leylah Fernandez, yet few of us have the same depth of feeling for our major French-language universities. We still assign them the utilitarian function of training our workforce.

In my wildest dreams, I'd like them to be seen as part of our identity and our national narrative. I think recognition for our major universities is the unfinished business, the unwritten chapter in the emancipation of French-speaking Quebec.

Yet there's no shortage of reasons to be proud.

Université de Montréal is one of the world's great French-language universities.

Université de Montréal is the scientific core and the professionals of the future for the CHUM, Sainte-Justine Hospital and affiliated hospitals that are recognized as among the best in the world. It is the beating heart of healthcare services for Quebecers.

Université de Montréal is Mila and IVADO, the cradle of artificial intelligence and quantum computing. It is the centre of Canada's astrophysics sector. It is 13 faculties and schools with some of the most cited experts in the world.

Université de Montréal is the home of Marie-Victorin, Hubert Reeves, Guy Rocher and Yoshua Bengio, the alma mater of Jean Coutu, Louise Arbour, Kim Thuy, Fabienne Larouche and other towering figures in modern Quebec.

It is the home turf where the Carabins score their big wins.

Across North America, alumni don their university's jerseys—and not only because college sports are an invitation to party. It goes beyond that, to our human desire to be a part of something big, something beautiful, something that resonates, sets us dreaming and restores our faith in human nature.

So let's show our team spirit. Let's make our universities the drivers of our greatest hopes. And let's give them the means to achieve our ambitions for Quebec and for our children.

Yes, it is time to give. Give a little, give a lot, give from the heart. But give. Université de Montréal will soon launch the largest fundraising drive in its history, with a target that is unprecedented in the French-speaking world. I am counting on you.

Thank you.