Earlier in the month I posted an update on the outlook for Fall term, noting that optimism is building for a post-pandemic world. More vaccines are being approved, manufactured and distributed, and people in Saskatchewan are now being vaccinated in increasing numbers. USask’s VIDO lab has a vaccine candidate in human trials, and Merlis Belsher Place is being readied as a mass immunization clinic. A recovered post-pandemic world is now in sight. With this growing optimism, our focus at USask has turned to planning for the Fall term.

As we announced in January, the Spring and Summer terms (May through August) will remain primarily remote, but I am confident we will see a significant increase in in-person, on-campus instruction for Fall 2021. Due to current uncertainties around vaccine roll-out in this province and beyond, we cannot at this stage say exactly what the proportion of face-to-face versus remote program delivery will be in the Fall term. However, the increasing number of vaccinations, combined with continued health and safety measures in the province such as mask wearing, physical distancing, and restrictions on the size of gatherings, will enable a graduated return to our campuses beginning in September for many students, faculty, and staff. We anticipate having more of our student residences open by the fall and many of our other university services and facilities operating to the fullest extent possible.

The Pandemic Response and Recovery Team will work closely with university colleagues and provincial health officials to ensure this return -- and the safety of the USask community. Program delivery details and other aspects of opening our campuses for Fall 2021 will be announced in May -- well in advance of the Fall registration period - - once the vaccine roll-out timeline is clearer. And while there is much planning and logistical work to be done, I am confident that the Fall term will begin our transition back to a completely operational university campus, with full face-to-face program delivery likely at the start of 2022. At the same time, we will work to meet the needs, where possible, of students unable to join us on campus with continued remote learning options. Similar analysis is underway to determine the options available for staff returning to work on campus or continuing with remote working arrangements.

My deepest thanks to everyone for their continued patience and responsiveness during these challenging times. A year into the COVID-19 crisis, we are closer to the end of this pandemic, but we haven’t finished with it, or it with us, quite yet. Continued flexibility may be required of all of us, as COVID-19 has proven to be unpredictable and a planning challenge. Let us all work together to do everything we can to accelerate the end of the pandemic, including continuing to follow all provincial COVID-19 guidelines and getting vaccinated when able to do so. This will ensure we are collectively headed in the direction of being back together again before too long.
USask welcomes two new members to senior leadership team

On February 1st, I had the pleasure of officially welcoming Dr. Airini, our new Provost and VP Academic; and Dr. Baljit Singh, our new VP Research, to USask. Both highly acclaimed researchers and accomplished administrators, Dr. Airini and Dr. Singh bring extensive experience to their new roles and will add value to the USask campus community through improved educational experience, and research and innovation opportunities.

In the role of provost and VP academic, Dr. Airini with be the senior academic, planning and budget officer at USask. Working with colleges and schools, Dr. Airini will lead the development of an academic agenda that is connected to the university’s financial realities in order to give students an outstanding experience at USask.

As USask VP research, Dr. Singh will assume a critical role for both USask and the province in driving outstanding research and innovation as one of Canada’s top 15 research universities. Dr. Singh is also well-acquainted with USask, having spent 17 years here previously with the Western College of Veterinary Medicine.

I am proud to have Dr. Airini and Dr. Singh join our senior leadership team, as they aim to move USask forward on its commitment to be the university the world needs. Please join me in welcoming them.

VIDO receives provincial and municipal support for becoming a ‘Centre for Pandemic Research’

In late February, VIDO received a provincial commitment of $15 million to support the USask VIDO federal proposal to become a Canadian Centre for Pandemic Research, along with a $250,000 commitment from the city. The funding will contribute to upgrading and expanding VIDO’s containment infrastructure and to supporting its role in Canada’s response to emerging infectious diseases. Scientific training will also be a fundamental aspect of the centre.

VIDO has been at the forefront of Canada’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic — this includes being the first in Canada to isolate SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, the first to develop an animal model of disease, and the first university organization to have a COVID-19 vaccine in clinical trials.

Elder and USask Indigenous Advisor receives appointment as Parliamentary Poet Laureate

I would like to congratulate Elder Louise Halfe - Sky Dancer, on the tremendous achievement of being appointed Canada’s next Parliamentary Poet Laureate. Born on the Saddle Lake Reserve in Two Hills, Alberta; Elder Halfe is a highly renowned USask advisor, mentor, writer and honorary degree recipient. She will be the ninth poet to hold the position and the first to hail from an Indigenous community.

Appointed for a two–year term, Elder Halfe’s duties as Parliamentary Poet Laureate include writing compositions for special occasions, sponsoring readings, advising the Parliamentary Librarian and performing related duties at the request of the Speaker of the Senate or the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Having served as an Elder for the Gordon Oakes Red Bear Student Centre since 2016, Elder Halfe provides support to USask students, staff and faculty, and provided guidance and knowledge towards the creation of USask’s Indigenous Strategy. In 2001, she became the first Indigenous poet to have her work included in a standard
Canadian poetry anthology, and now, according to one of her nominators, it would be “unthinkable” for her work not to be included in any general anthology of Indigenous writing in Canada. Elder Halfe has participated as an instructor in university courses, and as a speaker and reader at numerous conferences, workshops and literary festivals in Canada and abroad. In 2019, Elder Halfe received an Honorary Doctorate from USask, the highest honour the university can bestow.

Indigenous Achievement Week 2021

USask recently celebrated Indigenous Achievement Week, an annual event that celebrates the successes and contributions of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students, faculty, staff and alumni. One of the highlights of the week is the Indigenous Student Achievement Awards ceremony, where students are honored for their academic achievement, leadership, research, resiliency and community engagement. I was pleased to once again be a part of this important ceremony and extend my congratulations to each of the 2021 Indigenous student award winners.

USask awarded $6.76M to help revive North American bison population, strengthen Canadian cattle industry

USask has been awarded $6.76 million from the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) to help conserve bison and other threatened animal species and address challenges facing the beef cattle industry, including antimicrobial resistance which poses a global threat to animals and humans. The wide-ranging research program, made possible through the CFI Innovation Fund, includes working with Indigenous communities to develop the world’s first bison genome biobank at the university’s Livestock and Forage Centre of Excellence (LFCE). Team leader Dr. Gregg Adams is a specialist in reproductive biology at USask’s Western College of Veterinary Medicine (WCVM) and notes that a genome biobank provides one of the best opportunities to revitalize the bison species and will serve as an excellent model that can be applied to other threatened Canadian species, such as caribou.