

Comment



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Why we need post-secondary French education

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By Yolande Grisé

On March 2, SFU President Michael Stevenson officially opened the new premises of the office of Francophone and Francophile affairs (OFFA). Nearly 100 people attended the event and the reception that followed in the new Cornerstone building. Faculty members instrumental in the creation of OFFA mingled with representatives of the various community organizations that had supported the initiative and participated in its conception and planning.

This inaugural ribbon cutting ceremony was the culmination of efforts by SFU faculty and staff, working with Francophone and Francophile organizations, to develop SFU's leadership role in French language education.

Which invites the question, why is a post-secondary French language education a good thing here in B.C.? My starting point in answering is that the world always changes, and so has the role of French, both in Canada and internationally. Over the nearly 40 years since the Dunton-Laurendeau commission on biculturalism and bilingualism began reporting its findings, Canadian language policies have changed significantly. Canada has been an officially bilingual country at the federal level for a generation now.

Changing demographics have made B.C. more important within Canada. Its

population is more diverse, and therefore new needs have arisen. The strong attachment to French immersion schools provides evidence of a growing interest in what French education has to offer to British Columbians. Explanations for this would include an obvious desire among parents to see a high quality educational experience as the best guarantee for preparing for the future in a world of increasing technological complexity, and where frontiers in all areas are shrinking.

All Canadians share in the richness of our other official language. The intellectual rigor and cultural attributes of the enlightenment tradition are well represented in French language education. Democratic values prepare students to live together. Respect for the common good, a sense of social responsibility, encouragement of independent thinking, sharing, and even *la joie de vivre* are an integral part of the heritage Canada has received. Important knowledge has been transmitted through the French language, its cultural works, and its scientific and educational materials from at least the time of the Declaration of the *Droits de l'homme et du citoyen* of Aug. 26, 1789.

The role of French in the world makes it an important part of post-secondary education. The United Nations may have six official languages, but its two working languages are English and French. Canadians abroad are widely understood to come from a country that is multicultural and bilingual. Other countries, such as Spain, for example, study our language policies.

With a major turnover about to occur, as baby boomers retire from public service, British Columbians want to be prepared to play a role commensurate with the growing importance of their province within Canada. As the provinces interact more frequently, knowledge of both English and French is a great asset in provincial administrations as well.

All are aware that B.C. is inviting the world to come and visit for the winter Olympics in 2010. Having a capacity to extend a welcome in French is part of what goes with hosting an event of this magnitude.

At one time, it was common to think that B.C. was at the far end of Canada. The unstated message was that it was distant from the centre. Today, with the emergence of China, Japan, and India as major economic players, B.C. looks more to be situated in the centre of the action, with Europe lying in one direction, and Asia in the other.

French is a cornerstone on which to build our future as Canadians in the

world. The creation of OFFA is another way in which SFU helps British Columbians to participate fully in the building of Canada, and the betterment of B.C. For SFU students ready to build a world equal to their aspirations, French language studies add an important benefit to their education.

SFU is known for its success in providing high quality post secondary education for British Columbians, serving all of Canada at the same time, and making Canada better known to the world. OFFA has much to offer in these respects. OFFA promotes and coordinates the new French language undergraduate program in the faculty of arts and social sciences as well as new program initiatives in the faculty of education. Funding sources include major participation from Heritage Canada and with both the B.C. ministry of advanced education and the ministry of education.

As of September 2004 the faculty of arts and social sciences opened its doors to the first group of students to enroll in the new French language bachelor of arts program in public administration and community services. The program includes a major in political science, with the majority of courses offered in French, and an extended minor in French.

In September as well, the faculty of education, taking the lead in preparing the future of the very popular French immersion programs offered in many B.C. schools, created 16 new places for students in the French teacher education program, bringing up to 48 the total number of places available to future immersion and French language teachers. A new master of education is now offered off campus and initiatives in field programs are currently under way, all aimed to increase access for students from B.C. and elsewhere to French language programs at SFU.

French has been an integral part of Simon Fraser since the inception of the university. Now in addition to its dynamic French department, and the French language component of the faculty of education, OFFA is officially a member of the SFU community.

The opening ceremony featured a warm welcome from that community for all those who had put their expertise and wisdom together to make the day possible. Associate VP-academic Bill Krane, who is responsible for OFFA within the university, singled out for praise those who had worked with him with perseverance and vision to make the new initiative a reality.

Much is made of the fact that we live in a global age, or as Marshall McLuhan said, in a global village. Simon Fraser joins others in arguing that

the best way for a country to prepare the future is through ensuring the best possible education for its citizens. Making investment in post-secondary education a priority throughout Canada makes as much sense today as it ever has before.

If it is true in the words of the African proverb that “it takes a village to educate a child” it is equally the case that it takes a country to develop its citizenship. By asserting a leadership role in French language education Simon Fraser is saying that French language minorities are an important part of the Canadian reality. Also, as educators, we are doing our part to ensure that a full range of opportunities is available to each young citizen that passes through our doors.

Yolande Grisé is the newly appointed director of OFFA. A native of Montreal, she joins SFU from the University of Ottawa where she was a professor in the French department.