

“Our Time Will Come Again”:
Tracing the story of the
Technical University of
British Columbia

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Abstract

The Technical University of British Columbia (TechBC) was announced in 1995, established in 1997, and enrolled its first students in 1999. Less than three years later, the provincial government announced that TechBC would be closed, and its programs and students transferred to Simon Fraser University.

This paper examines the circumstances surrounding TechBC's demise in the context of the interrelationships between the institution, its programs, and its campus. Each of these elements is examined, with particular emphasis on the role of the campus in shaping the university's programs and its ultimate demise. This is augmented by an analysis of the government's rationale for its decision and an evaluation of the seven proposals submitted by other post-secondary institutions to assume TechBC's students and programs.

The story of TechBC yields numerous lessons for the post-secondary environment, including questions about the wisdom of small 'niche' institutions, the influence of and relationship to the local community, the nature of innovation within specialized institutions, the political dimensions underlying the establishment of universities, the need for appropriate marketing, the role of the private sector, the influence of alternative governance structures, the importance of buildings, and the role of the state in post-secondary management and financing.

This paper is based on documentary sources, personal interviews, and surveys of the student population. It is intended to provide a comprehensive look at the story of TechBC and also to stimulate further research on the topic.

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Preface to the Third Revision

In the several short months that have elapsed since the first revisions of this paper, I have become more cognisant of its limitations. “Our Time...” is fundamentally a story of the shutdown of a university and its merger with another institution. In that respect, it is a story about buildings and budgets, about planning and politics. Although I included some material to provide a flavour of what TechBC was *about*, this paper is not a history of the institution or a celebration of its academic achievements.

Moreover, this paper does not trace the integration of TechBC into SFU beyond September 2002. As this revision was prepared in September 2003, SFU was announcing major changes to the Surrey programs, including the elimination of TechBC’s Information Technology program, which would leave Interactive Arts as the sole academic remnant of a university that had existed barely a year before. There is undoubtedly much that can be learned from the process of integrating one university into another, but those events will have to be chronicled at another time.

This paper is a first step. It is not a comprehensive history of TechBC, although history does inform its analysis. It is not an exposé, although some events are revealed for the first time. It is not a synthesis of everything discussed in over four months of interviews, although the voices of those who spoke with me are clearly present. Nor is this the last word on the TechBC story; if anything, this project has raised more questions than it has answered.

There are, undoubtedly, those who are unhappy with what is written here. The sad truth of the matter is that nothing I say will revive TechBC, and my job is neither to glorify (or denounce) the dreams of its pioneers nor justify (or vilify) the government’s decision to end them prematurely. In research such as this it is easy for participants (and researchers) to nostalgize, and I have applied the

cold torrent of scepticism where necessary. I am fundamentally interested in understanding *what happened*, and I am happy to receive any evidence that might question or contradict my findings. I urge the relevant people to come forward.

In preparing this paper I am mindful of the many people whose gifts of time, reflection, and knowledge have made it possible. Whether associated with TechBC, SFU, the provincial government, or elsewhere, all of them demonstrated a commitment to learning and a willingness to share their views and experiences with me. For many, this was an unexpectedly painful process, and tears were shed on more than one occasion. My hope in writing this paper is to do justice to the stories of so many people who have taken the time to speak with me. My goal in making it available is to inspire further research into what is, in my view, a fascinating story and also a cautionary tale.

The first revision of this paper was written in fulfilment of the requirements for an Interdisciplinary Research Project in Canadian Studies. Subsequent revisions have been aimed primarily at correcting errors and filling informational gaps in the original. While this paper is presented as the culmination of a four-month undergraduate research project, it in fact only begins to document the story of TechBC. Both the story of TechBC/SFU and our understanding of it continue to evolve. I hope that other researchers will choose to explore this topic, and I would be happy to provide what assistance I can.

For the record, I was never a student at TechBC, although I did once apply (unsuccessfully) for a job there. Also in 2001, I applied for admission to the Management and Technology program, but chose instead to attend the Canadian Studies program at Simon Fraser University.

A Note on Sources

There is very little published material on TechBC. The bulk of this paper is gleaned from personal interviews and documents obtained from public sources, university and government archives, under the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, and from helpful individuals.

In cases where documents are in the public domain or the appropriate permissions have been obtained, I have made primary documents available on the project Web site at <http://www.techbcproject.com>. They are available in searchable PDF format, meaning that the original image is shown for viewing and printing, while a computer-readable ‘soft copy’ allows the documents to be searched. Anybody seeking the source of specific information is encouraged to contact the author.

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the SFU policy, *Ethics Review of Research Involving Human Subjects*. Authorization was granted by the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board at meetings held on 17 February and 28 April 2003.¹ The original tape recordings and transcripts remain in the custody of this author for purposes relating to the study.

An electronic survey of SFU Surrey students who had attended TechBC was conducted in March 2003, under authorization granted by the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board and with the consent of the Director of the Surrey Campus. A summary report and data tables are available at www.techbcproject.com.

Any questions on sources should be directed to the author.

¹ Hal Weinberg, letter to author, 16 April 2003; Hal Weinberg, letter to author, 1 May 2003.

Acknowledgements

This paper is the product of human and documentary sources. In total, almost two dozen people generously provided over 30 hours of tape-recorded interviews, some for attribution and many more on a confidential basis. I am grateful to all of them for giving of themselves so that their story may be told.

Joanne Curry and her staff at SFU Surrey did not hesitate to welcome me into their community, and also provided invaluable advice and assistance with the administration of the student survey. SFU Surrey is a community still very much in transition, and yet they accepted the presence of a researcher dredging up the past without question.

The SFU Archives were tasked in early 2002 with recovering and cataloguing the records of TechBC upon its demise. This formidable task yielded over 400 boxes of records which have yet to be processed. I am grateful to Frances Fournier and Paul Hebbard for their efforts to expedite the review process and make many of these records available for this project. Their foresight will enable future generations of scholars to examine the history of TechBC for themselves. Many other documents were made available for the first time under the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. Craig Neelands at SFU and Katherine Carlson at the Ministry of Advanced Education were instrumental in making these records available in a timely fashion.

Dr. Jane Fee went out of her way to help me access TechBC's collective institutional memory. She helped contact key people and locate important documents, and provided a helpful sounding board as the project continued.

This initial paper was undertaken in fulfilment of the requirements of Canadian Studies 360, an independent interdisciplinary research course. My supervisor, the Director of Canadian Studies

Dr. Allen Seager, provided both the encouragement and the freedom necessary to pursue this project. In addition, I am grateful for the numerous anonymous reviewers who agreed to provide comments on the draft manuscript.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge Jude Brown, who had been a student board member at TechBC and was transferred into SFU, for piquing my interest and getting me involved in this project initially. We met in a Canadian Studies course (on Technology and Society, of all things!) and it is to his encouragement that I owe this paper.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the 97 students who bravely began an incredible journey on August 30, 1999. Forty-seven of these graduated with SFU-comma-TechBC degrees on June 5, 2003.² They represent the clearest reflection of what might have been.

² This figure includes Tammy Mooney, who graduates with a Bachelor of Commerce.

Chapter 1: Introduction: The Spirit of TechBC

“It was the friendliest picket line I’ve ever crossed.”

Thus observed a former TechBC administrator, who had come to Surrey Place Mall one evening in April 2003 to view the fourth-year projects on display. It was Simon Fraser University’s first labour disruption since it took over the Technical University of British Columbia, and the Canadian Union of Public Employees decided that its members would picket an open house being held at SFU’s Surrey Campus.

A year before, this campus – a former Zellers store in Surrey Place Mall – was a shambles. The first ‘wave’ of layoffs had just happened, and TechBC’s students and faculty were struggling to finish the final academic year of the new institution’s short life. Everyone was exhausted from the fight to save their university, which was cut short on 7 February 2002 when the Minister of Advanced Education announced that Canada’s newest university would be closed and merged with Simon Fraser. The support staff knew that their days were numbered, and that only a handful of them would be picked up by SFU. Most were feverishly applying to other places, while some held out hope of a job in the new regime that was soon to take over. They knew it wouldn’t be the same, though, and many agonized over whether it would be worth continuing on. SFU’s start-up team had made a positive first impression, but they knew that it was only a matter of time before TechBC’s unique spirit would be subsumed into the huge behemoth that they perceived SFU to be.

TechBC had controversially operated with no senate, no tenure, and no unions. None of these things were prohibited: certainly the staff could unionize if they so chose, and faculty tenure remained a possibility for the future. But the fact was that people didn’t come to TechBC if they wanted to work in a conventional university setting: they applied to TechBC to do something

different. The whole concept of undergraduate education was being rethought with an eye to being ‘learner-centred,’ which came to mean an unparalleled focus on pedagogy and teaching, and support services designed around the needs of learners rather than the administrative convenience of the staff. It was a concept that could only be realised when building an institution from the ground up, and those who worked there were determined to make the most of the opportunity.

A year later, those TechBC staff who remained found themselves members of CUPE, a necessary condition of accepting employment with SFU. They felt little fraternity with their union brothers and sisters, however, and many privately expressed disgust at the union’s decision to picket the Surrey open house. “It’s only hurting the students,” one picketer told me. “They’ve worked so hard to get their projects ready for tonight. And these [high] school groups [who didn’t cross the picket lines] won’t get to see what goes on here.”

“That was really the problem, you know. Nobody knew what was going on here.”

* * *

“They should have gotten rid of the orange. The orange! It’s the NDP colour. Symbols are important, you know. They wanted to shut us down because we were an NDP project.”

This sentiment, that the university had been maligned and mistreated by the government for political reasons having little to do with the facts on the ground, was expressed by virtually everyone I spoke to for this project. Universities are potent political symbols: to have a university is a sign of achievement and maturity for a community. For a government, the creation of a university symbolizes a commitment to education and progress. Many saw the creation of TechBC and the construction of its landmark urban campus in north Surrey as political monument-building by the New Democratic Party government, which ruled the province for a decade before an electoral debacle in 2001 that left the party with two seats – neither of them in university communities.

Paradoxically, TechBC was the most ‘right-wing’ university in the country, as its former president liked to say, and it was created by an NDP government. The irony of the story is that it took a right-wing government to shut it down and merge it with the sixties-era leftist SFU, itself a monument of sorts to former Social Credit premier W.A.C. Bennett. Instantly, TechBC gained all the things that right-wing governments love to hate about universities: public-sector unions, tenured professors, and faculty control of curriculum.

How does one evaluate the claim that TechBC was shut down entirely for partisan political reasons? The fact that this view is widely held does not make it provable through academic means. It also tends to obscure the many other challenges the fledgling university faced: high start-up costs occasioned by a front-end-loaded delivery model, a much-delayed and controversial urban campus in an often-maligned neighbourhood, and the almost total lack of appropriate public relations to garner support for such an unorthodox concept. Some say the university was going too far, too fast, leaving potential supporters in other universities and business behind. Maybe the choice of orange as the university’s colour didn’t help matters, either.

* * *

“I always joked that I got a degree *and* an education.”

If it is possible for a human being to exist in numerical form, it happens in universities. The average undergraduate spends four years as a small cog in a very large machine that is the modern university. Canadian undergraduate education is based on a delivery model that requires large classes and limited personal attention. Those that become ‘involved’ in university affairs are a small and deviant subset of today’s student population. For most, attending university is a transaction: the exchange of fees, time and work in return for a credential that certifies knowledge in a particular field.

TechBC’s students took a risk when entering a totally new university, but none of them expected to be fighting for the survival of that institution. The process of doing so taught skills rarely articulated in the classroom: lobbying, media relations, letter-writing, and the development of a school spirit rarely found in large institutions. The ultimate failure of their efforts has left many disillusioned with the political process. Yet, most of them would never give up the time they spent at TechBC.³ They certainly will not lose all the *other* things they learned.

* * *

“We have an expression in French: ‘Ce n’est que partie remise’ – difficult to translate but basically saying, ‘Our time will come again.’ The spiritoftechbc.ca is alive. Let’s keep it that way.”

With these words, TechBC president Jean Watters said goodbye to the university community he led for barely eight months. Soon afterwards, TechBC’s remaining staff would close the doors, hand over the keys to SFU, and move on to other things. Some of them now work for SFU, while others have moved to other institutions and some have left the province. SFU still occupies TechBC’s temporary campus at Surrey Place Mall, and continues to negotiate for the permanent space that TechBC was to occupy. To visit the converted Zellers store is to experience a campus environment unlike any other. It remains a world apart from SFU’s Burnaby Mountain campus, which is referred to with a certain disdain as “up the hill.”

Many of the people who were TechBC remain in ‘betaspace,’ each adapting to change in their own way. For some, the amalgamation with SFU represents a tremendous opportunity to expand their horizons within the context of a large and respected comprehensive institution. For

³ Over 60% of TechBC students surveyed for this project disagreed that “if I had known what was going to happen, I would not have chosen to attend TechBC.” See John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the

others, each day is a struggle to preserve the unique spirit of TechBC that infused its programs and its people. Occasionally they recall the challenge given by Dr. Watters to the TechBC community:

We will ensure that a ‘new generation’ has the opportunity to pursue the vision of a learner-centered university, where people matter, learning and free thinking are a way of life, research is invigorating, and soft skills and results are more valued than process, rules, regulations and tradition. ... TechBC is being ‘amalgamated.’ However, its spirit will be kept alive by all of us, a dedicated group of TechBCers who are determined to continue to build, in our own way, the university of the 21st century.⁴

This paper explores the story of TechBC in terms of the interrelation of institutions, programs and buildings as key components of a university. A complex organization such as TechBC is more than the sum of its parts, though. The pages that follow both tell a story and analyze a policy scenario using facts, figures, business plans, historical documents, and “multivariate detailed decision support models.”⁵ There is, however, an intangible quality about how people discuss TechBC that eludes scholarly methodologies. Many people spoke of the ‘spirit’ of TechBC. A search for this elusive concept yielded an online survey that attempted to discern the “Spirit of TechBC” and concluded that it was a toss-up between rum and vodka.⁶ Perhaps that’s as good an explanation as any.

TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey.” Available at <http://www.techbcproject.com>.

⁴ Jean Watters, “Jean’s Message.” <http://www.spiritoftechbc.ca/jeanmsg.phtml>.

⁵ This last term is from TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 28.

⁶ SpiritofTechBC.ca. <http://www.spiritoftechbc.ca/forums/viewtopic.php?t=50>

Chapter 2: The Institution

The long road to the creation of the Technical University of British Columbia and its ultimate demise did not begin as an educational corollary to the burgeoning high-tech economy of the late 1990s. On the contrary, its roots were far more practical and municipal, and the institution’s emergence as “tomorrow’s university today” proved to be far more than its founders initially envisioned.

“My fundamental priority was access to university education for students in the Fraser Valley,” says Sharon Shilliday unequivocally.⁷ The Surrey school teacher had been the founding Vice President of the Fraser Valley University Society, formed in 1991 to lobby for a free-standing university to serve the Surrey, Langley, and Abbotsford communities.⁸ For the next five years, the Society “raised collective awareness, organized public responses, galvanized individuals and groups and held politicians accountable for the delivery of post-secondary education in the Valley.”⁹ Shilliday and others had lobbied Simon Fraser University president William Saywell to establish a campus in the Fraser Valley,¹⁰ and SFU had submitted a proposal to the government for a Valley site along the lines as its new downtown Vancouver campus at Harbour Centre.¹¹ Saywell spoke at the inaugural meeting of the FVUS and declared his support for a free-standing university in the area.¹²

⁷ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

⁸ Louise Robert, “History of the Technical University of British Columbia,” 31 October 1997, p. 36.

⁹ Louise Robert, “History of the Technical University of British Columbia,” 31 October 1997, p. 23.

¹⁰ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

¹¹ Louise Robert, “History of the Technical University of British Columbia,” 31 October 1997, p. 35.

¹² Louise Robert, “History of the Technical University of British Columbia,” 31 October 1997, p. 36.

Public activism for a new university involves argument on an emotional and a policy level.¹³ The emotional arguments include a desire for better jobs and a brighter future that universities provide to their students and also to the surrounding community. Despite the strained relationships that many universities have with their host municipalities,¹⁴ nobody seriously disputes the spin-off benefits of universities to the local community.

Those advocating for a full-fledged university in the Fraser Valley also presented strong policy arguments. It had become clear in the late 1980s that the provincial rate of post-secondary participation was considerably below the national average. B.C. stood ninth out of ten provinces in terms of the percentage of the population attending post-secondary institutions, and also in the per-capita rate of acquired degrees.¹⁵ Moreover, it was argued that the provincial rate could not be improved without a dramatic change in the Fraser Valley's participation rates, which were themselves substantially below the provincial average.¹⁶

How did the movement for a Fraser Valley university evolve into a specialized technical institution? “The government would only fund technical learning,” concluded Sharon Shilliday later.¹⁷ It was perhaps motivated by public opinion data, which indicated that

insofar as the public was concerned, education ought to be linked to vocational and technical training in some way, shape or form, and while there was nothing wrong with an SFU regional campus, it first wanted a

¹³ For a good discussion of these factors in another context, see Charles J. McCaffray, *UNBC, a northern crusade: the how and who of B.C.'s northern U*, (Duncan: C.J. McCaffray, 1995). He reviews in detail both the Prince George community's political campaign and the parallel policy arguments made in support of an interior university.

¹⁴ For example, Simon Fraser University historically had a relatively poor relationship with the City of Burnaby, until a 1995 agreement settled their competing claims to Burnaby Mountain.

¹⁵ British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, “Access to Advanced Education and Job Training in British Columbia: Report of the Provincial Access Committee,” (Victoria: The Ministry, 1988).

¹⁶ Fraser Valley College, Kwantlen College, Douglas College, and Simon Fraser University, “Findings of the Fraser Valley Access Committee,” (1990), p. 2.

¹⁷ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

BCIT-type of educational facility or program made available in the region.¹⁸

This assertion was disputed by Fraser Valley College, which was at the time seeking degree-granting status of its own.¹⁹ Institutions in the technical/vocational sector argued that non-academic education had been neglected in recent initiatives – especially the establishment of university-colleges and the University of Northern British Columbia²⁰ – in a proportion of five to one.²¹ The Harcourt NDP government, elected in 1991, brought a considerable policy shift toward trades and vocational training as opposed to formal academic education. This was most evident in the high-profile “Skills Now” initiative of 1994. One former cabinet minister familiar with the policy recalls that Harcourt

saw the European model of education, in which skills were given greater emphasis and valued more, as something we should move towards – particularly with a skills shortage that was clearly emerging in society. So despite his own background, which was more professional class, he in fact valued a priority on skills and a model in which there was a shift in emphasis and value placed on skills training to bring them more into the mainstream, hence Skills Now.²²

This approach was consistent with the views of NDP-affiliated craft and building trade unions, who had long argued that trades education was devalued, in favour of more academic programs.

The establishment of the new institution as a Technical University thus became part of a series of initiatives that linked education policy directly to economic diversification and labour

¹⁸ Louise Robert, “History of the Technical University of British Columbia,” 31 October 1997, p. 11.

¹⁹ Fraser Valley College, “Comments on ‘After High School – What??’,” 16 March 1991. Qtd. In Louise Robert, “History of the Technical University of British Columbia,” 31 October 1997, p. 11.

²⁰ Advanced Education Council of British Columbia, Access Task Force, “Access for Equity and Opportunity in the British Columbia College/Institute/Agency System: The Need for a Long Term Commitment as an Investment in the Present and Future,” (August 1992).

²¹ Margaret Neylan, “Report of the Fraser Valley Committee on Post-Secondary Education,” (June 1993).

²² Confidential interview.

market needs. This concept was articulated most clearly in the Fraser Valley’s context in the “Neylan Report,”²³ which

made the case that educational strategies had to take a broad view of the future and have the courage to try new approaches in all facets of education and of educational deliveries... New types of students, new skills, new attitudes, new industries, and a different marketplace made up the challenges that only a new institution could meet. If there existed a founding document to the concept of TechBC, [the Neylan Report] was it.²⁴

Even after the university was announced, debate continued about the wisdom of establishing a new institution rather than expanding existing colleges or opening a satellite campus of SFU or BCIT. This debate is revisited in chapter 7 in the context of TechBC’s demise. Interim Planning Council member Jack Finnbogason, who taught at Kwantlen College, the existing Surrey post-secondary institution, had been a “reluctant convert” to the notion of a full-fledged university. He explained later how he came to support the concept:

What I began to understand was given that BCIT had in my view blown it, and never developed graduate technical degrees, and had barely developed technical degrees period; and given that the universities were not really too interested in cutting the continuum, cutting away from past practice, starting fresh; that it did make sense to do something new, and go the expensive route of doing it as a university.

I suppose I had originally said ‘what’s wrong with a hybrid, that’s both college and university, why do we want the pure university?’ But I came over to that, if only for the fact that universities historically are funded so much more generously than colleges. And for the fact that there had to be a significant graduate degree component... and it’d be hard to [add that later]. ...

I think it was also fair to say that we didn’t want the place to be the conventional university. That was probably the other major influence. So we were trying hard to say, ‘how will this not be a university like the universities already here?’²⁵

Similar sentiments were expressed by a former cabinet minister:

²³ Margaret Neylan, “Report of the Fraser Valley Committee on Post-Secondary Education,” (June 1993).

²⁴ Louise Robert, “History of the Technical University of British Columbia,” 31 October 1997, p. 14.

²⁵ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

There's no question that the front-end costs of doing this [TechBC] were higher than they would [have been], had [TechBC's programs] been attached to an existing institution. Of course, the whole model of the institution was designed to be quite different than a traditional university. *It was designed to be an engine for economic development as much as for education. It was designed to attract a professoriate that was not necessarily as steeped in traditional research priorities...* it was designed ultimately to try to become an institution in which... there would be a base for partnerships and synergies with high-tech companies where there would actually be collaborative research and the like. Things that probably wouldn't sit well with a traditional university... but this was designed to be what the institution was about.²⁶

The institution's economic mandate was seen as crucial from its earliest days. It was perhaps the most unique structural feature, and one that would have been difficult to achieve within an existing institution. These needs included a focus on applied degrees granted by a full-scale university that would include an applied research component. Perhaps most novel was the explicit economic mandate that would be assigned to the new university. In a remarkably foresighted paper, SFU's William Leiss recognized that an institution with such a mandate would require unique administrative structures that protected the ability of the university to become and remain flexible and innovative,²⁷ that allowed close collaboration with industry, and that engendered adaptability and change rather than impeding it.²⁸

On 2 February 1995, Premier Harcourt and Skills, Training and Labour Minister Dan Miller announced the creation of a free-standing technical university, to be located on a \$100 million campus in Cloverdale.²⁹ On 1 May, the Minister appointed an Interim Planning Council, comprised

²⁶ Confidential interview. Emphasis added.

²⁷ Louise Robert, "History of the Technical University of British Columbia," 31 October 1997, p. 31.

²⁸ William Leiss, "The Technical University of British Columbia: A Proposal for the New University to be located in the Fraser Valley," (Burnaby: Simon Fraser University, Centre for Policy Research on Science and Technology, October 1991).

²⁹ Bernard Sheehan, "Historical Milestones," 1 August 2001.

of representatives of other post-secondary institutions, the Ministry, and the public.³⁰ Several individuals from the Council, including Chair Ron Dickson, Vice-Chair Nicole Sung, Secretary Sharon Shilliday, and Jack Finnbogason, would eventually be appointed to TechBC’s Board of Governors.

The Council was charged with developing a report to the Minister on the name, mission and mandate, educational plan, campus plan, governance model, budget model, and implementation plan for the new university.³¹ The Council’s options in these areas were guided by a “Statement of Government Purpose,” dated 8 May 1995, which specified that the university would offer certificate, diploma and degree level programs that “provide students with exposure to the most advanced technologies and skills in order to ensure graduates can function effectively in the labour force of the 21st century.”³² Industry was to be directly involved with instruction and also participate in joint research ventures with the university, as well as advise on program and curriculum development. The university would have an applied research mandate, which would be funded mainly by industry and other levels of government. Finally, the technical university was to “develop an outcome based client centered approach to providing educational services,” using “a clear set of performance based criteria against which all services will be evaluated... The resulting governance

³⁰ British Columbia, Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, “Interim Planning Council Terms of Reference for a new Technical University in the Fraser Valley,” (as amended 17 February 1996). In Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. A.III:1.

³¹ British Columbia, Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, “Interim Planning Council Terms of Reference for a new Technical University in the Fraser Valley,” (as amended 17 February 1996). In Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. A.III:2-3.

³² British Columbia, Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, “Statement of Government Purpose,” (8 May 1995). In Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. A.I:1.

structure and accountability mechanisms at this university may well be unique within the post-secondary system.”³³

This was undoubtedly a daunting task, but obviously necessary bring form to the Fraser Valley’s ambitions for university status. The Council gained corporate status with the registration of the Technical University Society of British Columbia on 10 August 1995,³⁴ which allowed it to manage funds and hire staff. Its first task was to develop a mission statement for the university, which stated that the

Technical University of British Columbia will excel in the flexible and innovative delivery of degree, diploma and certificate programs of an applied and technological nature as well as in conducting applied research and development. It will accomplish its mission in partnership with the community (especially regional industries and businesses) and in cooperation with other educational institutions.³⁵

The Council realised early that it would be necessary to secure the services of an experienced academic administrator to provide leadership and credibility to the new institution. A search was undertaken in the fall of 1995 for a founding President and Chief Executive Officer. “We wanted somebody who could share the vision,” Jack Finnbogason recalls. “We wanted somebody who was as comfortable in the business as in the academic world. We wanted a builder, which is not always the same as a maintainer, and you look for different kinds of skills, because we were starting from scratch.”³⁶ The Council advertised worldwide and received 74 applicants, nine of whom were interviewed.³⁷ In the end the Council decided upon Dr. Bernard Sheehan, an experienced academic

³³ British Columbia, Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, “Statement of Government Purpose,” (8 May 1995). In Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. A.I:3.

³⁴ Bernard Sheehan, “Historical Milestones,” 1 August 2001.

³⁵ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. 1.

³⁶ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

³⁷ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. A.IV:3.

planner who had most recently been Associate Vice President, Computing and Communications at the University of British Columbia.³⁸ The initial planning secretariat came to include former SFU Vice President Administration Bill De Vries, who coordinated initial campus planning, former Ministry official Scott MacInnis, an academic planner, and Graham Rodwell, who coordinated program delivery issues, along with a number of consultants.³⁹

The Interim Planning Council’s report, delivered to the Minister on 6 June 1996, addressed a host of issues related to TechBC’s programs and delivery models (which are discussed in detail in the following chapter), facilities, governance, and other issues. The Council had also articulated its wishes for a legislative framework for the new university to a Ministry consultant in November 1995,⁴⁰ but the resulting legislation was not introduced in the legislature until 9 June 1997. The delay was apparently occasioned by the 1996 election and the ensuing freeze on capital projects, including the new university.⁴¹ In the meantime, Education, Skills and Training Minister Moe Sihota replaced the Interim Planning Council with a five-member Interim Governing Board, consisting of President Sheehan and Council members Dickson, Finnbogason, Shilliday and Sung.⁴² It was a community-focussed board, one that did not include significant representation from major players in BC’s high-tech industries, nor did it include individuals with experience in university administration, except for President Sheehan. Shilliday would later comment on her frustrations obtaining further Board

³⁸ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. D.2.

³⁹ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. D.11-12.

⁴⁰ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. 56.

⁴¹ Technical University of British Columbia, “University Planning Continues Despite Government Freeze,” (press release, 2 July 1996).

⁴² Technical University of British Columbia, “University Announces Interim Governing Board,” (press release, 10 October 1996). These five people became the inaugural members of the TechBC Board of Governors when the legislation was proclaimed in late 1997.

appointments from the Ministry, something she attributes to tepid support from the NDP government.⁴³

Bill 30, the *Technical University of British Columbia Act*, had several unique features that varied from the *University Act* that governed UBC, SFU, and UVic. Full authority for both administrative and program matters was vested in the Board of Governors, which otherwise had the same composition as *University Act* boards.⁴⁴ Unlike the other institutions, there was no provision for an academic Senate; there was, however, a smaller University Council to “consult” with the President on educational and research plans, admission requirements, and the establishment and discontinuance of program areas; the council also had the power to monitor the quality of programs, courses, and student performance.⁴⁵ The Act also mandated program advisory committees for each program area, a majority of whose members were to be drawn from business, labour, professional associations and educational institutions.⁴⁶

The TechBC legislation caused great consternation among members of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and the Confederation of University Faculty Associations of B.C. (CUFA/BC). It was not as extreme as the 1995 *Royal Roads University Act*, which gave its President the power – without any Board action – to set admission and academic standards, curriculum content, and criteria for the awarding of certificates, diplomas and degrees.⁴⁷ The bill as introduced in the house had been revised somewhat from its original form, apparently at the behest

⁴³ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

⁴⁴ *University Act* boards of governors have fifteen members, eight of whom are appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. The remaining members are the Chancellor, the President, two faculty members, two students, and one employee.

⁴⁵ *Technical University of British Columbia Act*, S.B.C. 1997, c. 54, s. 12.

⁴⁶ *Technical University of British Columbia Act*, S.B.C. 1997, c. 54, s. 13.

⁴⁷ *Royal Roads University Act*, R.S.B.C. 1996, c. 409, s. 12.

of CUFA/BC who had reviewed a draft in early 1996.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, both organizations protested the lack of a legislated Senate, and the Minister’s statement that the new university would not offer tenure to its professors. Threatening an “international boycott,” the two organizations charged that “the legislation allows for political control and interference in the operation of the new university unlike the other universities in the province... It has been designed by arrogant interests unwilling to consult with the academic staff who are the key to the operations of any internationally competitive university.”⁴⁹ The boycott began on 30 July 1997, when Bill 30 received third reading.

The first task of Dr. Jane Fee, who had been hired in the summer of 1997 as “Academic Assistant to the President” to help develop academic policies in anticipation of the eventual hiring of Vice Presidents and faculty, was to manage the boycott issue on behalf of President Sheehan. She recalls considerable concern among TechBC staff that the legislation might never be proclaimed. “The real time of jeopardy was between [July 30] and December 5, 1997... and I think [CUFA/BC and CAUT] didn’t understand that they probably could have gotten the legislation unhinged in that time.”⁵⁰ A very public media campaign raged during the fall, but the new university waited until after the TechBC Act was proclaimed on 5 December 1997 before taking any overt action. Discussions with the two organizations began shortly afterward. “I think the thing that we made them realise is that a university is much more than six pages of text,” Fee recalls. “It’s all about who’s there and how they feel about how universities should be run. I think once they met the players and once they realised that we weren’t going to build a university and run it off of sessionals, they actually got quite interested and we had lots of contact with [them].”⁵¹

⁴⁸ See Bruce E. More, letter to Shell Harvey, 15 February 1996.

⁴⁹ CUFA/BC, “University Professors Announce Plans to Boycott New Technical University,” (press release, 28 July 1997).

⁵⁰ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

⁵¹ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

The primary issue was the lack of a Senate, which turned out to be somewhat of a red herring in the end. Dr. Fee’s research revealed that even the University of Toronto did not have a Senate in its legislation, yet had ways to ensure faculty control of academic matters. As Fee points out, a board can always exert control by refusing to fund programs approved by senate.⁵² A potentially more difficult area was tenure. The Act did not prohibit the development of tenure, but the Board had been explicit from the beginning that it wanted to explore ways of running an institution without tenure, although it was equally clear that faculty were to have academic freedom and job protection.⁵³ “We certainly made it clear that we would suffer blacklist if we had to in order to gain the principle that we were arguing for,” Jack Finnbogason recalls.⁵⁴

The eventual settlement with CUFA/BC and CAUT involved relatively minor changes to the university’s governance structure, all of which was achieved without legislative amendments. TechBC’s Board of Governors agreed to establish an Academic Planning Board as a subcommittee, comprised of the President and the members of the University Council established in the Act. The Board directed the President to make recommendations relating to academic matters only with the concurrence of the Academic Planning Board, and committed itself to make decisions on academic matters only on the recommendation of the President.⁵⁵ The Board adopted an academic freedom policy⁵⁶ that Fee had adapted from a model policy on CAUT’s Web site, with modifications to include students and Board members. The tenure issue was resolved with a Board declaration that “faculty and others engaged in academic areas and certain academic support areas will be hired, some on continuing appointments, some on term appointments, some seconded from other

⁵² Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

⁵³ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

⁵⁴ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

⁵⁵ Technical University of British Columbia, Motion of the Board of Governors re: Academic Planning Board, 19 March 1998.

⁵⁶ Technical University of British Columbia, Policy Ad6: Statement on Academic Freedom, 19 March 1998.

organizations, some under other contractual arrangements, and some associated with the University without compensation as part of their own or their firm’s public service contribution.” It also acknowledged the right of its employees to unionize under the *Labour Relations Code*.⁵⁷ Finally, the Board committed itself to open communication with CAUT and CUFA/BC.⁵⁸ The boycott was formally lifted on 2 May 1998 when the agreement was ratified by CAUT Council.

Many of the concerns expressed by CAUT and CUFA/BC turned out to be unfounded. Instead of hiring only part-time and contract faculty, TechBC’s teaching complement was almost entirely full-time. “We needed people so desperately to do this massive amount of work that everyone who came on board was at least fully employed,” Fee explained.⁵⁹ The boycott had generated considerable publicity, most of it negative. Fee speculates that “in terms of hiring faculty, it probably gave us fewer faculty to choose from, but on the other hand it also meant that the faculty we got were very committed to the purposes of TechBC. They knew full well what they were getting into.”⁶⁰

With the boycott lifted, TechBC pressed ahead in anticipation of a September 1999 opening. The new university scored a significant coup by attracting Dr. Tom Calvert, a highly regarded SFU professor who had helped establish its School of Computing Science in the late 1980s, as Vice President of Research and External Affairs. Calvert’s presence helped ease some of the early recruitment problems the young institution was having. “We attracted Tom Calvert, a unique personality with lots of *gravitas*, but it’s a hard go for an institution to get people with a hundred refereed publications, with more than a million dollars of funded research, that’s tough,” recalled

⁵⁷ Technical University of British Columbia, Motion of the Board of Governors re: Human Resources Development Pertaining to Faculty, 19 March 1998.

⁵⁸ Technical University of British Columbia, Motion of the Board of Governors re: Statement on Co-operation, 19 March 1998.

⁵⁹ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

one professor.⁶¹ One tremendous asset Calvert brought was his connections with industry. As the professor explained, “he knew everyone! So he could pick up the phone and he had all kinds of connections: he could phone Germany, he could phone California, he could phone Michigan, he could phone the senior CEOs, and they knew Tom. And some of his people worked in those areas. There’s not too many of those people around.”⁶² When the university decided in 1999 to incorporate an applied research commercialisation subsidiary, TechBC Corporation, Calvert was appointed as its President and CEO.

The choice of a Vice President Academic was a novel one in two respects. Professor Alice Mansell was President of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, as well as an established artist. The appointment of a candidate without a PhD to such a senior position raised eyebrows in some circles, but the choice did not bother the Board. Finnbogason explains that “we didn’t want just the technical expertise. We were very much aware that there were other fields hugely influenced by technology, and ones that were not traditionally thought of, because when you say ‘techie,’ people see computers and... they forget you can’t watch a cartoon on Saturday afternoon that doesn’t depend on a computer, or they can’t go to a film that doesn’t today depend to some degree on a computer and computer applications and so on.”⁶³ Mansell emerged as the ‘champion’ of the university’s Interactive Arts program, which had been suggested but never clearly defined by the Interim Planning Council.⁶⁴

While curriculum development and faculty hiring continued, TechBC offered its first classes in September 1998 – an electronic commerce program from the University of New Brunswick and a

⁶⁰ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

⁶¹ Confidential interview.

⁶² Confidential interview.

⁶³ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

software professionals diploma program from University of Waterloo – in leased space at Surrey Place Mall. A year later, the first 97 students entered TechOne, the university’s common first-year program. Faculty, staff, and administrative structures continued to evolve as the university began piloting its curriculum, but the long process of creating a new university in the Fraser Valley had finally come to fruition.

⁶⁴ See Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. 29.

Chapter 3: The Programs

Although TechBC’s legislation established its specialized mandate, the university was relatively free to define itself by the programs it would offer and the means by which they would be delivered. The three undergraduate programs were the product of TechBC’s early mission and symbolized its uniqueness from other institutions. Moreover, they are TechBC’s major legacy now that it has been shut down and merged with SFU. The evaluation of these programs is a task best handled by those who specialize in the study of teaching and learning, and it is not my intention to pre-empt that work here. For the moment, it is worth noting several innovative aspects that distinguished TechBC’s programming: its use of online delivery models, its modularized program structure, the team-based environment in which curriculum was developed, and the substantive content of the programs themselves.

The “Statement of Government Purpose,” which articulated the government’s commitment to establish a technical university in the Fraser Valley, was vague on the types of programs that institution might offer. It specified that “all programs will provide students with exposure to the most advanced technologies and skills in order to ensure graduates can function effectively in the labour force of the 21st century.”⁶⁵ No other substantive details were prescribed, but a skills orientation was described that would resurface as a strong thread through all of TechBC’s programming:

programs will emphasize the development of key competencies which extend beyond basic numeracy and literacy skills to include: computer literacy, strong analytical and problem solving skills, an ability to work

⁶⁵ Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, “Statement of Government Purpose” (8 May 1995). In Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. A.I:1.

effectively in a team environment, adaptability to rapid technological changes, [and] effective communication skills.⁶⁶

Some guidance was also provided to the Interim Planning Council about the delivery strategies for these programs. “Open learning techniques” were to be used “where possible” to complement face-to-face instruction. Programs were to use “the most current instructional methods and technologies” including co-op education, “modularized courses,” “electronic information sources” and “computer based learning.” It is important to remember that many of these concepts were in their infancy in 1995, and the development of TechBC would parallel the rise of other online learning technologies such as WebCT, which was then under development at UBC.

It was up to the Interim Planning Council and its small team of staff and consultants to flesh out the academic programming vision for the new university, which was still without any formal status. Its June 1996 *Preliminary Report* indicated enthusiasm for the use of educational technologies but cautioned that “the challenge facing TechBC is to develop ways of using the technologies which promote access for all student groups, improve the quality of the content, and are cost effective.”⁶⁷ In this brief phrase, the Council prophetically summarized the major challenge of online learning, which persists to this day. In order to be a genuine advantage to students, online learning must improve the quality of the educational experience, not just reduce delivery costs. In addition, the chosen technologies must be sufficiently accessible that they facilitate rather than impede learning. Finally, the cost of delivering this new kind of education must be comparable with more traditional approaches.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, “Statement of Government Purpose,” p. A.I:1.

⁶⁷ In Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. 15.

The TechBC planning team opened a prototype lab to design ‘course delivery models’ for the ‘integrated learning’⁶⁸ concept it was developing. In order to understand what TechBC was creating, it is useful to review how learning happens in a more traditional university context. Most comprehensive universities employ several delivery models depending on the discipline, faculty preference, and logistical situation. These include lecture only, lecture/tutorial, lecture/lab, lab only, seminar, correspondence, and independent study. With the exception of correspondence and independent study, these models involve the heavy use of instructional time. In order to overcome the significant expense of face-to-face time with professors, many classes are very large – a situation that is often moderated by the use of smaller tutorials or labs with lower-cost TAs or lab instructors. It is important to note that these models are not chosen because of their pedagogical value, but rather because they are accepted in conventional use and fit within the budgetary constraints of universities.

As a completely new institution, TechBC was in a position to rethink these approaches. In fact, none of the seven delivery models initially conceived used the traditional lecture,⁶⁹ although many used various forms of Web-based presentations in its place. Not everything was successful: the university found that students had great difficulty learning math over the Web. “We don’t yet have good tools for discussing mathematical equations on the Web,” one professor said.⁷⁰ “It’s really hard to teach calculus online... you need to work through the whole equation from start to finish, and if you don’t get that, you get lost,” according to one student.⁷¹ TechBC eventually

⁶⁸ Integrated learning became the major term used to describe TechBC’s combination of on-line and face-to-face instruction.

⁶⁹ The seven models are outlined in TechBC, *Draft Academic Plan Information*, p. 31-32.

⁷⁰ Confidential interview.

⁷¹ Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

established a forum called SIC/LOG⁷² for students to provide feedback on courses to instructors and the ETL team.

Although those associated with TechBC do not appear to have had any particular qualms with the extensive use of online learning techniques, their academic colleagues in more traditional institutions were – and often still are – sceptical. One of the most passionate critics of online learning is David Noble, a history professor at York University in Toronto. He sees the shift towards online learning as part of a process of ‘commodification’ of higher education in which the personalized process of teaching is regimented in a quasi-Fordist approach. He compares the move towards online learning with the correspondence school movement in the 1920s, which he argues was designed primarily to save money by paying poorly-qualified ‘readers’ a piece-rate to grade student papers. His major concerns surround the pedagogic weakness of standard distance-education models which deny students the ability to learn from their peers, the corporate involvement and control of professors’ intellectual property, and the labour management issues surrounding the reformation of university teaching.⁷³

Most TechBC people interviewed for this project were dismissive of Noble and similar critics, although much of TechBC’s development work – consciously or otherwise – was oriented toward addressing the problems that Noble identifies. Indeed, TechBC’s first academic plan tacitly acknowledged that

although far more flexible, [the correspondence course] delivery model is widely believed to be inferior to the face-to-face situation. The learning

⁷² This TechBCism meant “student instructor collaboration/learner ombudsperson group.”

⁷³ David F. Noble, *Digital diploma mills: the automation of higher education* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002). Ironically, Noble has had his own ongoing dispute with Simon Fraser University, in which he alleges that administrators intervened to block his appointment on the grounds of his views on distance and online learning.

materials are often well designed, but limited and difficult to keep up to date. There is often little interaction between students.⁷⁴

The important difference appears to be that TechBC’s delivery models were not designed to save money,⁷⁵ unlike distance education offerings at many other institutions, where they are used to compensate for insufficient student spaces, inadequate facilities or low faculty numbers. Indeed, well more than half of SFU’s distance education students live within easy commuting distance of its Burnaby campus.⁷⁶ On the other hand, TechBC’s delivery models were not (by the time of its closure) sufficiently developed to allow students to actually learn at a significant distance. Initially, the university decided to aim for a 1:1 ratio of on-line and face-to-face learning activities.⁷⁷ One senior TechBC official argued that

when you make comparisons you should be making them with a classic lecture course with a hundred to three hundred to five hundred students. When you make those comparisons, the kind of rich discussions you can have in on-line conferencing are really impressive. It doesn’t particularly save money, [since] you need as much instructor time and you need high-quality instructors who can engage in the discussion in the same way you do when it’s face-to-face. But it allows the flexibility of people not having to be in the same place at the same time.⁷⁸

It was also observed that many students, particularly in high-tech programs, felt more comfortable communicating in an on-line discussion than in a classroom setting.⁷⁹

In addition, courses were structured in one-credit modules rather than the usual three-credit semester system. The idea was that learning could be more customized and flexible, and that students could take only the modules they needed. The downside, which became evident during

⁷⁴ Technical University of British Columbia, *Draft Academic Plan Information* (4 August 1998), p. 30.

⁷⁵ TechBC’s final business plan, in December 2001, proposed cutting costs by reducing the amount of face-to-face instruction in favour of additional online learning. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

⁷⁶ Confidential interview.

⁷⁷ Technical University of British Columbia, *Draft Academic Plan Information* (4 August 1998), p. 31.

⁷⁸ Confidential interview.

⁷⁹ Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

the first few years, was that learning progressed at a substantially accelerated pace, often too quickly for some learners. The small number of students limited the number of different modules that could be offered at the same time, and transfer credit proved almost impossible to arrange. Finally, many learners complained that five-week courses led to ‘over-assessment’ since each module needed at least one form of assessment in order to justify the grades assigned to students; thus, taking fifteen modules per semester rather than five courses often resulted in almost three times the workload for students.⁸⁰ In addition, since many modules only had one form of assessment, doing poorly on a single assignment meant that a student would fail the entire module, whereas in a three-credit semester course there would be other opportunities, such as exams or participation marks, to mitigate the impact of a single failure.⁸¹ SFU is now converting the first-year TechBC curriculum into the three-credit semester system used by the rest of the university. “I don’t think there was any pedagogical difference [with the module system], there didn’t have to be,” says one professor. “I don’t really buy the argument that you can’t learn in five-week segments, but it’s not what people are used to... the end result, the big thing was over-assessment: too many quizzes, homeworks, and exams. And if you get behind in a five-week course, you’re dead.”⁸² Student opinion on the change appears to be mixed; while many hope the conversion to a three-credit semester system will reduce over-assessment, others fear the change is being made only for the administrative convenience of SFU rather than the needs of students.⁸³

TechBC’s academic program was distinguished not only by unique delivery models in the university context, but also the highly unusual way in which it was put together. Rarely do academics have the opportunity to develop an entire program from scratch. Even new institutions

⁸⁰ Brittney Bogyo, personal interview, 10 February 2003.

⁸¹ Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

⁸² Confidential interview.

⁸³ Comments from the TechBC Learner Survey, conducted by the author.

are usually constrained by norms and expectations within the discipline; in British Columbia the pressure for an integrated post-secondary transfer credit system further limits the possible degree of innovation, and changes tend to be driven by the established ‘receiving institution’ universities, to which ‘sending institutions’ much conform. As a result, programs and courses are often developed in a piece-meal fashion directly by the professor(s) responsible for teaching the course. TechBC’s development paradigm was much more akin to that used for distance education courses. In the traditional distance education model, the course supervisor (a professor) works with a distance education program director who may (but not necessarily will) be a specialist in learning design. A team of distance education staff including editors, graphic designers, and intellectual property specialists support the development process, but the professor is essentially in charge. TechBC, in contrast, utilized a ‘team’ model, one in which administrators, faculty and staff worked collaboratively to develop courses. Professors were selected with expertise in learning design, but were supplemented with staff who specialised in multimedia production, intellectual property, and other facets of the process. Draft components would proceed through “quality circles,” in which peers critiqued each others’ work; this also facilitated the exchange of ideas among different courses and program streams. Academic freedom was encouraged and protected, but academic *autonomy* was not.

The programs themselves evolved from six possibilities outlined in the June 1996 report of the Interim Planning Council. The Council proposed that the university open⁸⁴ with six faculties: Information Technology, Management, Applied Arts, Food Design and Technology, Medical and Health Technology, and Industrial Design and Engineering. The first three eventually became undergraduate degree programs in Information Technology, Management & Technology, and

⁸⁴ At this stage, the expectation was that TechBC would have a permanent facility in Cloverdale shortly after opening in September 1999.

Interactive Arts respectively, although their focus would be much narrower than that envisioned by the Council. Of these, the program in Information Technology was most fully articulated,⁸⁵ while others were little more than a few words. The Food Design program would likely have involved the use of technology in the development of innovative food and beverage products, building on the agricultural base of the Fraser Valley. The Medical and Health Technology program might have included rehabilitation, medical devices, health informatics, assistive device technology, and perhaps also training in dental technology, optometry and pharmaceuticals. The Industrial Design and Engineering program would have focussed on the computer-assisted design of products and high-technology products; parts of this were integrated into the Interactive Arts program.⁸⁶

After the appointment of Andrew Petter to the restructured portfolio of Advanced Education, Training and Technology, there was “a course correction away from a vision of TechBC which was more sort of trades-based skills training to technology, high-tech skills training... Over time it morphed into a proposal to do higher end university-type skills, computer skills, high-tech, part of the new high-tech economy kind of initiative,” according to one official.⁸⁷ By August 1998, the university had identified three program streams “based on a careful review of industry and education demands in the region, and attention to the rising tide of data and opinion about what the Technologies Industries in BC need for current and future growth and prosperity.”⁸⁸

Undergraduate and graduate program streams in Information Technology, Management and Technology, and Multimedia Studies (later Interactive Arts) would be supported by a common foundation year called TechOne. In addition to providing an introduction to the three program

⁸⁵ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. 27-28.

⁸⁶ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. 29.

⁸⁷ Confidential interview.

⁸⁸ Technical University of British Columbia, *Draft Academic Plan Information* (4 August 1998), p. 12.

areas and ensuring appropriate foundational skills in computer science and math, TechOne came to include ‘process elements’: courses in effective communications, team dynamics, and learning, writing and research skills, which were all seen to be vital to student success. “If you talk to employers of any university graduate, their one complaint is ‘they can’t write!’,” says one TechBC official.⁸⁹

The Information Technology program evolved into a hybrid of traditional engineering and computer science programs. One TechBC official who worked on program development recalls the advice of employers, which was “that we try to find an information technology area that was a mixture of engineering and computer science. SFU Burnaby had an excellent computer science program, an excellent engineering science program, industry loves the graduates, but they said the engineers didn’t know enough about software and the computer scientists don’t know enough about hardware systems. It’d be really valuable to have something that combined the two.”⁹⁰

The Interactive Arts program, meanwhile, focussed on the use of computers and technology in the development of art, design, and ‘new media.’ The intention was to provide courses in Web development, digital imaging, video, audio and interactive production, in the context of high computer and aesthetic literacy. It was a program that was notoriously difficult to explain in words, but often provided fascinating ‘visuals’ to campus visitors. It was perhaps also TechBC’s most unique program, described by one SFU professor as showing “a level of theoretical and technical sophistication well beyond what would be required of projects produced in a traditional BA/BFA

⁸⁹ Confidential interview.

⁹⁰ Confidential interview.

program, often incorporating current research topics in computer graphics and human-computer interface (e.g. experience design, novel interaction methods, tangible interfaces, etc.).”⁹¹

The Management and Technology program was initially designed to offer a Bachelor of Commerce (later changed to a B.Sc.) that integrated traditional undergraduate business curriculum with content specific to the management of high-technology industries and also the technical skills required for work in that field. The planning documents explained that “the integration of multimedia and information technology course content within the commerce program offers a unique opportunity for students to gain an understanding of the systems and content and product potential of the high technology world in which they aspire to create and manage businesses.”⁹²

These three programs were chosen not only for their appeal to students but also for the interdisciplinary opportunities and cross-fertilization they offered to each other. While students would choose a particular program stream after first year, the intention was that professors be appointed to the university as a whole, rather than a school or faculty, and work together on project and research teams that integrated skills and knowledge.⁹³ The university itself was not structured around program areas but rather functionally, with a Dean of Academic Planning and a Dean of Academic Operations, a model that probably worked better on paper than in practice.⁹⁴

When the Minister of Advanced Education announced that TechBC would be closed and its students and programs transferred to SFU, she was careful to point out that the government had “never suggested that Tech B.C. does not offer quality programs for students. As a matter of fact, the type of programs are innovative, they are certainly beneficial to students, and so the educational

⁹¹ Martin Knowles, qtd. in Simon Fraser University, *Final Report: SFU at Surrey Short Term Academic Planning Committee*, (5 June 2002), p. 8.

⁹² Technical University of British Columbia, *Draft Academic Plan Information* (4 August 1998), p. 21.

⁹³ Technical University of British Columbia, *Draft Academic Plan Information* (4 August 1998), p. 13.

component is an important part of what we considered as we looked to what we should do with the challenges that we were faced with.”⁹⁵ For many people involved with TechBC, these three programs (and their associated graduate programs) defined the institution. Unfortunately, much of the rest of the world tends to equate universities with their buildings, and this became greatly problematic for TechBC as it worked to establish itself in BC’s post-secondary education community.

⁹⁴ Confidential interviews.

⁹⁵ British Columbia, Executive Council, “Transcript of the Open Cabinet Meeting: Thursday, February 7, 2002.”

Chapter 4: The Campus

The question of physical facilities for the new university was both integral and irrelevant to TechBC’s development. While, on the one hand, TechBC’s work in the area of online learning and its small initial size should have rendered the need for a physical presence unimportant, political realities necessitated a visible campus. In the end, that campus would have a significant impact on the development of the school and its programs, and a pivotal role in its demise.

How important were TechBC’s physical accommodations? One school of thought was that the university could exist almost anywhere and that an immediate physical presence was at best unnecessary and at worst would constrain the university’s development. Board member Jack Finnbogason had spent half his teaching life in temporary accommodations at Douglas and Kwantlen Colleges. “It was clear to me that you could have a post-secondary place that could be quite successful with a substandard building. I think I personally probably didn’t give enough weight to buildings, but they mattered not at all to me,” he says in retrospect.⁹⁶ The initial 1995 Statement of Government Purpose supported this view, suggesting somewhat naively that “there will be a reduced reliance on physical infrastructure to deliver programs in comparison to existing post-secondary institutions... computer instruction and interactive video will allow considerable course offerings to remote sites as well as at home instruction.”⁹⁷

In its earliest days, TechBC leased space in Station Tower at Gateway SkyTrain station on 108th Avenue in Surrey. From there it branched out to the Fraser Valley Real Estate Board and the

⁹⁶ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

Boundary Health Clinic, both on 104th Avenue, before consolidating staff operations in leased space at Commerce Court in Guildford. Meanwhile, preparations were made for the announcement of a permanent site. While many TechBC insiders were satisfied with the flexibility afforded by leased space, the question of campus location is very different for politicians or the public. To many, a university *is* its physical location. This is evidenced in British Columbia most spectacularly with the Erickson/Massey design for Simon Fraser University, unveiled to the world before the university had faculty, students, or programs, but which left a lasting image that shaped public perceptions of the new university. SFU’s second campus, at Harbour Centre in downtown Vancouver, is an equally striking landmark, complete with an observation tower and revolving restaurant.

University campuses are potent political symbols, and bring both symbolic and tangible benefits to the communities where they are situated. A large university attracts educated and relatively affluent faculty and staff, as well as a large contingent of upwardly-mobile students. This can be a significant economic boon for the surrounding area; for example, Simon Fraser University claims that its Burnaby location generates a direct economic impact⁹⁸ of over \$228 million in the Greater Vancouver Regional District,⁹⁹ while UBC claims \$750.4 million in the same area.¹⁰⁰ Universities also have the potential to provide significant cultural advantages for the surrounding area; for example, the theatre department at UVic produces plays for local audiences, and the athletic facilities at SFU are used extensively by outside sports teams. The benefits go beyond the tangible to include such things as the prestige of having a university nearby, the long-term benefits

⁹⁷ Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, “Statement of Government Purpose” (8 May 1995). In Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training* (6 June 1996), p. A.I:3.

⁹⁸ Measured as SFU expenditures on goods and services, and expenditures by faculty, staff, students and visitors.

⁹⁹ Simon Fraser University, “Economic Impact Study, Executive Summary,” (undated). Retrieved 26 March 2003 from <http://www.sfu.ca/analytical-studies/econimpact/exec.html>.

of an educated workforce and citizenry, the potential development of university-industry technological ‘clusters,’ inflated property values, and, in Canada especially, the ‘big city’ status resulting from a general policy of placing universities in larger centres rather than ‘university towns.’

TechBC itself was the product of citizen demand for many of these attributes. The communities of Surrey, Delta, Langley and Abbotsford were undoubtedly the largest population centre in the province without a full-fledged university. As outlined in Chapter 2, the university was the result of sustained pressure from the local community and only later took form as a ‘technical’ institution; there was, therefore, never any doubt that the new university would be located in the South Fraser region, most likely in Surrey. At a pre-election sign unveiling on 16 April 1996, the location was officially announced: a plot of farm land in Cloverdale, a rural community in south-east Surrey, which was then owned by Kwantlen University College.

The Cloverdale site appears to have been chosen because it was vacant land already owned by the government. It was far from an ideal site, however. At 29 hectares, it could barely accommodate the first phases of university development,¹⁰¹ especially given the three-storey building height limitation in the area.¹⁰² Much was made in the media of the ‘cow pasture’ site, seen as an inauspicious beginning for the new institution.¹⁰³ More serious was the lack of public transportation in the area, a point made vigorously by BC Transit and the Greater Vancouver

¹⁰⁰ University of British Columbia, “The Economic Impact of the University of British Columbia,” (November 2002). Retrieved 26 March 2003 from http://www.pair.ubc.ca/studies/ei_nov2002.htm.

¹⁰¹ Compared to TechBC’s 29 hectares, UBC had 402, SFU 510, UVic 160, and UNBC 350. See Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training*, 6 June 1996, p. 39.

¹⁰² Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training*, 6 June 1996, p. 54.

¹⁰³ See, for example, Glenn Bohn, “Politicians chip away at cow-pasture site for new university,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 May 1995, B5.

Regional District. The latter also noted that the Liveable Region Strategic Plan, then under development, called for the concentration of development in regional centres including Whalley, a north-west Surrey neighbourhood recently linked to Vancouver by SkyTrain, the region’s mass transit system. Despite Mayor Bob Bose’s support for a Whalley location, Surrey City Council voted in October 1995 to ignore the regional plan and support the Cloverdale site.¹⁰⁴

“We weren’t thrilled [about Cloverdale], because it was overlooking some pretty obvious things, not the least of which was where the [SkyTrain] line terminated,” says Jack Finnbogason.¹⁰⁵ The *Surrey/North Delta News Leader* editorialized that the Cloverdale location “makes painfully little sense.”¹⁰⁶ Interim Planning Council chair Ron Dickson indicated a willingness to examine other sites, as long as they could be developed within the \$100 million budget announced by the province and be ready to open by 1999.¹⁰⁷ Debate raged in the local media, with Cloverdale residents fighting to retain the benefits of a substantial new university, while others argued that Whalley was a much better location, and urged governments not to repeat the mistakes of UBC, SFU and UVic, all of which are located far from city centres. “The university is designed to serve the needs of the Lower and Central Fraser Valley citizens, not Vancouver or Burnaby. They already have universities and technical schools,” wrote Surrey-Cloverdale Liberal MLA Bonnie McKinnon, who suggested that Cloverdale’s failure to re-elect an NDP MLA had caused the government to consider other locations while Cloverdale residents were “getting our fingers slapped.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Harold Munro, “Surrey rejects GVRD’s site for university: Cloverdale campus backed,” *Vancouver Sun*, 26 October 1995.

¹⁰⁵ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

¹⁰⁶ “City centre the logical university site,” *Surrey/North Delta News Leader*, 27 November 1996.

¹⁰⁷ David Marsh, “Battle begins over university location,” *Surrey/North Delta Leader*, 25 October 1995.

¹⁰⁸ Bonnie McKinnon, “Technical University: Relocation idea is distressing,” *Surrey Now*, 4 December 1996.

The Interim Planning Council undertook considerable initial planning for the Cloverdale site, on the premise that it would have to be a wholly self-contained traditional ‘greenfield’ campus, given the lack of local services. Thus, space for recreation, food services, health and even a campus bookstore was required. TechBC’s expected space needs totalled over 30,000 square feet – eventually discounted by 25% to reflect partial online and distance delivery¹⁰⁹ – while the \$100 million budget was expected to provide only 20,310 square feet of space.¹¹⁰ The site would also need to accommodate over 1,100 parking stalls, given the lack of public transportation in the area, at a cost of almost \$3 million.¹¹¹ About \$6 million was estimated to bring water, sewer, gas and hydro to the former cow pasture.¹¹² The whole endeavour was based on the availability of capital funds by 1 January 1997 in order to ensure occupancy by 7 August 2000, the beginning of the university’s planned second year of operation. Planning documents warned that this was “a rather tight schedule for a project of this size and complexity... any delays in the provision of capital funds beyond Jan. 1, 1997 will put a Sep. 1, 2000 operational date in jeopardy.”¹¹³

Meanwhile, the Council examined a number of other sites through a committee chaired by Sharon Shilliday. The former Canadian Forces base in Chilliwack, recently closed by the federal government, was considered – it even had a brand-new 76,000 square foot education building with 27 classrooms¹¹⁴ – but was rejected as being too far from Greater Vancouver population centres.¹¹⁵ A

¹⁰⁹ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training*, 6 June 1996, p. 45.

¹¹⁰ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training*, 6 June 1996, p. 42.

¹¹¹ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training*, 6 June 1996, p. 46-47.

¹¹² Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training*, 6 June 1996, p. 47.

¹¹³ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training*, 6 June 1996, p. 48.

¹¹⁴ Sandra Thomas, “Base on Tech U’s possible site list,” *Chilliwack Progress*, 1 March 1998.

¹¹⁵ Kevin Griffin, “Technical university won’t leave Cloverdale,” *Vancouver Sun*, 19 September 1995.

site favoured by Shilliday was the Green Timbers Urban Forest at 140 Street and 90 Avenue in North Surrey. Within the forest was a substantial cleared area with pre-existing huts, which could be secured, wired and used for technical programs until a permanent facility was completed. The committee even went so far as to suggest a short extension of the SkyTrain line from its terminus at King George Highway to accommodate the university.¹¹⁶ The concept never took off politically, however. “Trees there have to fall naturally, let me put it that way,” quipped Jack Finnbogason,¹¹⁷ reflecting on environmentalists’ antipathy to any development within a protected forest.

The final impetus for a move to Whalley – announced on 20 July 1998¹¹⁸ – was the City of Surrey’s offer of a 12 acre parcel of land adjacent to Surrey Place Mall and the Surrey Central SkyTrain Station. The offer was reportedly conditional on the location of a planned trades campus of Kwantlen College – which would get degree-granting status – at the abandoned Cloverdale site.¹¹⁹ A stand-alone TechBC facility at the new location was still expected to be completed by 2000,¹²⁰ and the land donation was contingent on the province meeting a series of deadlines, which called for additional development phases in 2006, 2012, and 2018. Completion of these future phases would likely have involved replacing the North Surrey Recreation Centre, which sat on the city-owned site, at TechBC’s expense.¹²¹

Ultimately the move to Whalley was seen by many Liberals as a political decision to favour NDP Surrey-Whalley MLA Joan Smallwood while punishing Cloverdale. Surrey-Cloverdale Liberal MLA Bonnie McKinnon lamented that “the Cloverdale Town Centre suffers to the extent that it is

¹¹⁶ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

¹¹⁷ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

¹¹⁸ Bernard Sheehan, “Historical Milestones,” 1 August 2001.

¹¹⁹ Kevin Diakiw, “Offer made to land TechBC,” *Surrey/North Delta Leader*, 7 June 1998, A3. At the time of writing, this campus has not yet begun construction.

¹²⁰ Malcolm Curtis, “New university takes high-tech approach,” *Victoria Times-Colonist*, 28 July 1998.

beginning to resemble a prairie town from the depression era. ... A political decision, not a practical decision has been made and sold out Cloverdale.”¹²² Chilliwack Liberal MLA Barry Penner had similar sentiments when the Canadian Forces base site was rejected.¹²³ Regardless of the motive, the move did little to endear the university to members of the party that would eventually form the next government.

Some planning work was done for the Whalley site, including an artist’s conception that bore a remarkable similarity to the tower that was eventually built.¹²⁴ The University issued a tender for architects when a stop work order was placed on the project by the Minister of Finance. The reason for the halt quickly became clear. The Insurance Corporation of British Columbia, the state-run auto insurance monopoly, was looking at purchasing Surrey Place Mall. The mall was adjacent to the planned Whalley site, and a potential partnership was rumoured almost immediately. *Surrey Leader* columnist Frank Bucholtz pronounced that “ICBC and the technical university are both wards of the provincial government, which often makes investment decisions for political rather than business reasons. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing in this case.”¹²⁵ The negotiations for the mall were essentially an open secret in the summer of 1998 and led to considerable public debate on the appropriate role of the public auto insurance corporation. At that time, ICBC had a \$5.3 billion investment portfolio, which earned \$387 million in 1998 and reportedly saved the average motorist \$155 a year on insurance premiums.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, some experts argued that real estate was overly risky for insurance companies dealing in property and casualty

¹²¹ Kevin Diakiw, “Tech U site chosen: Whalley will be home to new post-secondary facility,” *Langley Times*, 24 July 1998.

¹²² Bonnie McKinnon, “Cloverdale ‘betrayed,’” *Surrey Leader*, 17 June 1998.

¹²³ “Penner critical of decision not to use base,” *Chilliwack Times*, 17 July 1998.

¹²⁴ Harold Munro, “Province wants firms to share cost of Tech U,” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 July 1998, A5.

¹²⁵ Frank Bucholtz, “ICBC’s mall buy will boost City Centre,” *Surrey Leader*, 21 August 1998.

¹²⁶ Kevin Diakiw, “ICBC’s bid to buy mall disturbing, says expert,” *Surrey/North Delta Leader*, 19 August 1998, A5..

coverage. Superintendent of Financial Institutions Bob Hobart – who would re-emerge in 2002 as the public administrator appointed to wind down TechBC’s affairs – commented in 1998 that “it’s unusual for that type of insurance company to do that. Life [insurance] companies do that all the time, but they have a different pattern of liabilities.”¹²⁷

Behind the scenes, recently-appointed ICBC chair Bob Williams had been encouraged to reposition the public auto insurance corporation to maximize potential social and other spin-off benefits. As one former cabinet minister explained,

When ICBC was first set up, it was set up with a number of objectives in mind, some of which have sort of atrophied or languished. And one of those was the objective of using the capital that ICBC had accumulated to use back into BC. [Public auto insurance is] not just a matter of keeping rates down or ensuring equity and fairness for drivers, but ensuring that this huge pool of capital which previously had been going out of the province to New York or Toronto was kept in BC and utilized, to some extent, responsibly, for BC economic development.¹²⁸

With this in mind, and influenced by his own background as an urban planner, Williams formed ICBC Properties Ltd. as an investment subsidiary of the corporation. The purchase and development of Surrey Place Mall was to be its first major project. The concept, developed by Williams and noted architect Bing Thom, was to use the mall and TechBC’s Whalley location as catalysts for the redevelopment of North Surrey. According to a government source,

the idea [was] that there was an opportunity with this university to draw down some of that capital to create a relationship with ICBC that could create something larger and more useful, combined with the notion of having this university become a sort of anchor for a new town centre in Surrey that could help to rehabilitate and enliven and project Whalley into a much more liveable and productive community socially as well as economically.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Kevin Diakiw, “ICBC’s bid to buy mall disturbing, says expert,” *Surrey/North Delta Leader*, 19 August 1998, A5.

¹²⁸ Confidential interview.

¹²⁹ Confidential interview.

The final project as built, termed “Central City,” involved a three-storey ‘galleria’ constructed above the existing mall, a five-storey podium incorporating a new public plaza and north entrance to the mall, and a twenty-storey landmark office tower. TechBC would occupy the galleria and a portion of the podium, ICBC would move its corporate offices to the tower and the bottom two floors of the podium, and some remaining space would be available for retail and high-tech businesses. It was an extraordinarily ambitious scheme, which came to be the largest construction project in western Canada in 2001.

The story of how TechBC came to be involved in the project is a convoluted one. The final arrangement was negotiated over a period of almost two years between the university, the Ministry of Advanced Education, the Ministry of Finance, the City of Surrey, ICBC, and ICBC Properties.¹³⁰ Jane Fee, who handled many building-related issues for President Sheehan, recalls that

Lots of parts of the deal were really kind of hammered out in Victoria in the legislature and we’d get told about them afterwards. Certainly as far as I was concerned, and I voiced this quite loudly at the time, I didn’t ever feel it was much of a negotiation... We didn’t have anything – in a token way we could say we had the land, but we didn’t even have the land yet¹³¹ ... and we also had no money. The only money that was going to go towards this development was actually coming from the government. It wasn’t money that TechBC already had in its coffers.¹³²

From the government’s perspective, one advantage of the ICBC scheme was that it would keep the university’s large capital costs off the government’s books. ICBC would fund the construction costs from its invested assets, and rent the space to TechBC. The Ministry would then provide operating funding over a 25-year period to meet TechBC’s lease obligations to ICBC. The Ministry would also be responsible for funding ‘tenant improvements,’ which turned out to be almost everything required to make the building shell provided by ICBC suitable for occupancy, at a

¹³⁰ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

¹³¹ Twelve acres had been pledged by the city but not yet transferred to TechBC. The Surrey Place mall site, now owned by ICBC, was more than twice that size, at 29.5 acres.

cost that eventually approached \$32 million.¹³³ One former cabinet minister familiar with the project recalls that it was initially unclear whether this device would be successful. “We never had a clear understanding at the front end that we would be able to get those costs off-book. We certainly pushed hard to make them off-book, but I don’t think we were ever clear that that would be the goal, and I don’t think that was the whole motivating force of it. It was more the synergy and benefit that would come from the relationship” between ICBC and TechBC, the minister said later.¹³⁴

Jack Finnbogason recalls hesitation among members of the TechBC Board, although a majority of members eventually supported the project:

From our standpoint on the board, we now absolutely owed our potential for a building and our physical life to another entity... We had been promised [in 1995] a hundred million dollars for a building and we slowly realised that we weren’t going to get any money [from the government] to build a building... And as they started drawing up the papers, we could see that we were going to get hosed, in a way, with the lease.¹³⁵

The final lease arrangement saw TechBC paying \$426,000 a month to ICBC for the galleria space, which totalled over \$178 million over the 25-year term after additional charges were included.¹³⁶

“These were not lease rates that anyone would have been paying at the time. These were lease rates in a hypothetical North Surrey... They were never a subject of negotiation. They were set by ICBC in the beginning based on the return that they needed to see in order to proceed with this project,” says Fee.¹³⁷ While the Ministry pledged to make the necessary operating funds available, it meant that the university would be forever dependent on continuing government funding not only for its operating costs, but for its facilities as well. Also, in what would turn out to be a critical error, the

¹³² Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

¹³³ Confidential source.

¹³⁴ Confidential interview.

¹³⁵ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

¹³⁶ Kevin Diakiw, “TechBC pressured to accept ICBC lease,” *Surrey Leader*, 30 November 2001.

¹³⁷ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

lease costs would inflate TechBC’s operating expenses and skew comparisons with other institutions, all of which had pre-existing ‘gifted’ capital assets and buildings. “It’s much more secure to get the money up front, and own the building, right?,” Finnbogason observed later.¹³⁸

Both presidents also had concerns about the scheme. President Sheehan, in an email that was later leaked to the media, wrote that “once we received the documents, the pressure began again to force us to sign... this technique is not appropriate, in my view, when the objective is to enter into a long-term relationship where success depends on the success of the university.”¹³⁹

President Watters was even more direct when he arrived in August 2001. According to one faculty member,

it was obvious to Jean [Watters], the day he saw the budget, that he knew this was not the way to fund a university. One of the first things he said was that ‘universities lease their equipment and own their buildings; we own our equipment and lease our buildings – hold on.’ ... Which simply meant that the Ministry of [Advanced] Education had a capital expense in its operating budget, which made the place permanently vulnerable.¹⁴⁰

Why did TechBC proceed with a lease that clearly was going to lead to problems over the long term? Some board members saw benefits to the project. “We did have a need to be physically in existence,” says Finnbogason. “Because you can rent all the K-Marts you want, but it’s not quite the same to students as to come to a place that’s called TechBC. And a place that was going to be magnificent, it really was. It was going to be the most interesting accomplishment in the north of Surrey. And, in fact, it is, even though it’s now empty.”¹⁴¹ For others, it became apparent that the university’s future depended on going ahead with the project. “I think we all realised, although it was never explicitly stated, that it was the Central City facility or nothing. That was to be our

¹³⁸ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

¹³⁹ Kevin Diakiw, “TechBC costs kept ‘off book’,” *Surrey Leader*, 5 December 2001.

¹⁴⁰ Confidential interview.

¹⁴¹ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

future, if there was one,” recalls Fee.¹⁴² Sharon Shilliday, who would later chair the Board, agrees. “We felt that we were completely without an alternative in terms of getting any space... I didn’t think the university should be in the business of developing Whalley, but we had no choice.”¹⁴³ She felt that ICBC was ‘manipulating’ the situation to take advantage of TechBC’s vulnerability. “How can a public corporation like that interfere with the planning of a university?,” she asked later.¹⁴⁴

These concerns seemed to be of little interest to the Ministry. “This was not an independent free-standing university; this was a university in the making,” said one unrepentant former cabinet minister. “So to a very considerable extent, I think, the government encouraged the board of TechBC to look at a partnership with ICBC... there was pressure or inducement put on all the parties to see beyond their own narrow self-interest and to see the larger interest.”¹⁴⁵

The building would end up as a major factor in TechBC’s demise for three reasons. First, its association with Bob Williams, NDP megaprojects, fast ferries, and so forth would make it a distasteful landmark for any incoming Liberal administration, to say nothing of the local bitterness that remained after the move from Cloverdale. Additionally, the Liberals were committed to allow as much private-sector involvement in the auto insurance industry as possible, and would retain ICBC only if it was politically necessary; the Liberals were not interested in the *dirigiste* potential of ICBC’s real estate or other investments. As Jane Fee observed later, “governments change and clearly the new Liberal government felt completely differently [than the NDP] about the building. And the new Liberal government didn’t say anything that TechBC hadn’t been saying for several

¹⁴² Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

¹⁴³ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

¹⁴⁴ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

¹⁴⁵ Confidential interview.

years.”¹⁴⁶ The fact remained, however, that TechBC was attached to a building that fell into political controversy.

The second problem with the building was perhaps more significant, because issues of space came to drive TechBC’s academic and institutional planning. The ICBC development would not be ready until 2003 at the earliest, and TechBC would have significant difficulty housing students in the meantime. As it geared up to open, the university rented office space in a three-storey office building in Guildford, about fifteen blocks east of the Whalley site. However, city zoning bylaws prohibited the teaching of classes in office space. Students “could come and visit, but they couldn’t gather. So no classroom” was allowed, explains Fee. “Many language schools struggle with this and many are set up illegally.”¹⁴⁷ The decision was eventually made to rent vacant office and storefront space at Surrey Place Mall while development of the permanent facility proceeded. TechBC administrators were frustrated with the temporary space situation. Fee recalls that she

had real concerns about growing in leased space in the mall, mainly because of the fact that the landlord was the same landlord that we were negotiating with on our permanent facility: ICBC. They already owned the mall, and it’s not much of a negotiation once they kind of figure they had you as a captive audience. We didn’t think we were getting a particularly good deal on lease rates in the interim space. And it was leased space, so every penny you put into renovations is lost money.¹⁴⁸

TechBC explored the purchase of the vacant Revy Hardware building near Scott Road SkyTrain station in North Surrey as temporary space, and its twelve-acre site could have been redeveloped for a permanent facility if the ICBC project did not proceed. However, the government refused the necessary authorization and funding for the acquisition, and TechBC had to work within the space and costs available at the mall. The situation improved considerably in 2001, when a former Zellers store, with approximately 70,000 square feet, became available. This allowed the university to

¹⁴⁶ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

consolidate all its staff and students at Surrey Place, ending two difficult years in which classes were offered in the mall with administrative and faculty offices twenty minutes away. The Zellers store, known as ‘betaspace’,¹⁴⁹ also provided a useful testbed in anticipation of a permanent facility.

Architectura, the firm chosen to design TechBC’s interiors within the ICBC facility, was commissioned to create a “cheap and yet edgy, nice interesting space.”¹⁵⁰ The flexibility offered in betaspace helped address a major planning challenge, which Fee describes as “how to design space around curriculum that is not yet a finished product.”¹⁵¹ The Ministry of Advanced Education provided \$2.2 million per year to cover lease costs for the three years that TechBC was to occupy betaspace (2001/02 through 2003/04) plus over \$1 million for furniture, equipment, and laboratory costs in the temporary space.¹⁵²

While temporary facilities allowed TechBC to meet the government’s expectation that students be admitted in September 1999, the small amount of available leased space meant that TechBC would not come close to meeting its original first-year enrolment target of 1,320 students.¹⁵³ The August 1998 academic plan, submitted to the Ministry only two weeks after the official announcement of the Whalley site, was premised on the construction of a stand-alone TechBC facility adjacent to the mall, to be completed in 2000.¹⁵⁴ That plan envisioned an intake of 100 students in leased facilities in 1999/2000, with a sharp increase to 406 in 2000/2001, 969 in 2001/02,

¹⁴⁷ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

¹⁴⁸ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

¹⁴⁹ TechBC’s office space in Guildford was called “the cradle” and its initial mall storefront locations were termed “alphaspace.”

¹⁵⁰ Confidential interview.

¹⁵¹ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

¹⁵² Gloria Back, letter to Bernard Sheehan, 5 April 2001.

¹⁵³ Technical University of British Columbia, Interim Planning Council, *Preliminary Report to Ministry of Education, Skills and Training*, June 1996, p. 32.

¹⁵⁴ Technical University of British Columbia, *Academic Plan Information*, 4 August 1998, p. 37.

and 1762 in 2002/03 as permanent facilities became available.¹⁵⁵ The delay of the permanent facility to 2003, occasioned by the ICBC development, made even those targets too high for leased space. The Ministry of Advanced Education commissioned a consultant to update TechBC’s academic plans,¹⁵⁶ resulting in enrolment targets of 100 for 1999/2000, 200 for 2000/2001,¹⁵⁷ and 470 for 2001/02.¹⁵⁸

The major problem was that TechBC’s program delivery model was premised on a substantial up-front development cost for curriculum development and start-up issues. The incremental per-student operating cost would be lower because on-line elements, once developed, accounted for approximately 40% of the normal course instructional time. Curriculum was being developed, faculty hired, and programs designed based on a rapid expansion in student numbers, and many of these developmental costs remained even if only a handful of students could be admitted because of space considerations. This was clearly understood by the Ministry, says one government official. “In terms of cranking out the number of student FTE spaces, I guess part of the price of going with [the ICBC development] was that in its early phases, it would have lower student FTEs and therefore the per-unit costs would be higher, even though the total operating costs might be lower,” he said.¹⁵⁹

Many TechBC staff and students interviewed for this project expressed dismay when the new Liberal government began comparing TechBC’s per-FTE cost (crudely calculated by dividing the total government grant by the number of students) with other institutions, since TechBC’s operating grant included items such as lease costs that would have been considered capital if the

¹⁵⁵ Technical University of British Columbia, *Academic Plan Information*, 4 August 1998, p. 68.

¹⁵⁶ Jane Fee, personal communication.

¹⁵⁷ Bernard Sheehan, *TechBC Historical Milestones*, 1 August 2001.

¹⁵⁸ Gloria Back, letter to Bernard Sheehan, 5 April 2001. These latter targets were not met; see chapter 6.

¹⁵⁹ Confidential interview.

university owned its own facility. Learner Association president Tammy Mooney explained at the time, “our low enrolment is due to the constrictions of our building. You can’t grow without room.”¹⁶⁰ Many felt that the situation with the building allowed the government to portray TechBC unfairly, and justify its demise by suggesting that the high per-student cost was the result of inept management rather than decisions forced upon the university by the government. One faculty member angrily described these calculations as

Absolute nonsense. They were cooked figures. That when you start a new university, as BC experienced when it started UNBC, there are huge up-front costs. Any attempt to put those into any model that represents them as operating costs for a stage of a university is just an egregious lie, and [Finance Minister] Gary Collins and [Advanced Education Minister] Shirley Bond were just being dishonest. Dishonest to the point of, I think, calling into question their trustworthiness as elected officials.¹⁶¹

In retrospect, a number of TechBC staff wonder how the space problem might have been better handled. One difficulty was the lack of rentable office space in Surrey. “I thought on many occasions that we should simply give up on Surrey, or at least spread out from Surrey, because our problem was a real local one. There was no office space in north Surrey to be had, and Surrey wasn’t willing to help us with the zoning issues,” recalls Fee. “Part of the problem was that Surrey had been told from the beginning, from the Cloverdale days, that they had TechBC. So they’d never had to work very hard at wooing us.”¹⁶² Indeed, Simon Fraser University’s founding Chancellor Gordon Shrum had anticipated this problem when situating the SFU campus, the ‘instant university’ fully funded and built in advance of its 1965 opening. Even though the Macdonald report had clearly favoured Burnaby,¹⁶³ Shrum “purposely misled several cities and towns into thinking that he

¹⁶⁰ Ted Colley, “TechBC too small for demand,” *Surrey Now*, 1 December 2001.

¹⁶¹ Confidential interview.

¹⁶² Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

¹⁶³ John B. Macdonald, *Higher education in British Columbia and a plan for the future* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1962), p. 66.

was seriously considering them.”¹⁶⁴ When Burnaby refused to offer more land for the university, Shrum told the press that he was close to making a deal with Guildford. As he wrote later, “the search involved a lot of poker playing with nearby municipalities.”¹⁶⁵ In retrospect, it seems plausible to speculate that “if [TechBC had] had the ability to go off and talk to a number of different municipalities and had been coming to the table with something, I think would have gotten a lot farther faster,” says Fee.¹⁶⁶

A final issue with the building became more obvious with hindsight: the lack of a permanent facility for the university’s opening impaired the credibility of the university. A university without a campus does not inspire confidence among students, their parents, or potential faculty. Finnbogason observed later that “it was clear that it was kind of a double whammy to not have a brand that students could recognize, and also not have a building. And our attempt to use temporary quarters had that deficit, because we were trying very hard to get seen by students as a viable option, and when students go to a trailer, they just don’t think that this institution is here for long.”¹⁶⁷ And, in fact, it was not.

The concept of an urban campus, by itself, was not wholly unconventional, and if it had been ready for the university’s opening in September 1999 many of the problems that led to TechBC’s demise might have been averted. However, at the time the government announced the closure of TechBC, it remained a university in a former Zellers store, next door to an incomplete landmark of a discredited government and saddled with lease costs for decades to come. Reflecting back on the situation, Jane Fee remarked, “One of the things you discover when you are a university that doesn’t

¹⁶⁴ Gene Waddell, “The design for Simon Fraser University and the problems accompanying excellence,” (unpublished manuscript, 5 February 1998), p. 33.

¹⁶⁵ Gordon M. Shrum with Peter Stursberg, *Gordon Shrum: an autobiography*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986), p. 99.

¹⁶⁶ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

have a permanent facility is how closely those things are tied together in the public’s mind. The actual organization is pretty much indistinguishable from the building.”¹⁶⁸ If a university campus is, indeed, a potent political symbol, TechBC’s campus was sending all the wrong signals.

¹⁶⁷ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

¹⁶⁸ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

Chapter 5: Demise and Amalgamation

TechBC’s final year began with two important but unrelated events. The first was the election of a BC Liberal government in an election held 16 May 2001. The Liberals had shot ahead in the polls almost immediately after the 1996 election and remained in the lead throughout; there was little doubt that they would form the next government. Public sector leaders across the province combed through their 36-page platform, *A New Era for British Columbia*,¹⁶⁹ to see where they stood in the new regime. At first glance, TechBC seemed tailor-made for a number of the Liberals’ education promises, including those to “increase investment in technology research and post-secondary skills training,”¹⁷⁰ to “double the annual number of graduates in computer science, and electrical and computer engineering, within five years,”¹⁷¹ to “strengthen our network of... on-line learning throughout the province,”¹⁷² and to “increase funding for colleges, universities and institutes.”¹⁷³ After the election, these promises quickly found themselves within a fiscal framework that was extraordinarily tight: the province faced a 2001/02 budget deficit of over \$1.2 billion,¹⁷⁴ largely as a result of income tax cuts made by the Liberals on their first day in office. By the fall of 2001, the broad strokes of the coming budget were clear: health, education and advanced education would be frozen for at least three years, while every other Ministry would face cuts of between 10 and 40 percent in order to achieve a 10% cut of government expenditures overall and balance the budget by 2004/05. In addition, the government undertook a ‘Core Services Review,’ which was designed to

¹⁶⁹ BC Liberal Party, *A New Era for British Columbia: A Vision for Hope & Prosperity for the next decade and beyond* (undated).

¹⁷⁰ BC Liberal Party, *A New Era*, p. 15.

¹⁷¹ BC Liberal Party, *A New Era*, p. 15. This became known as the “Double the Opportunity” initiative.

¹⁷² BC Liberal Party, *A New Era*, p. 17.

¹⁷³ BC Liberal Party, *A New Era*, p. 17.

determine whether government services “are still relevant in today’s modern economy and to the families it serves” and to examine “whether critical services can be delivered more efficiently, effectively, and economically.”¹⁷⁵ This review came to dominate policy-making for the Campbell government’s first two years in office. Key areas of interest to new Advanced Education minister Shirley Bond included TechBC, the Open Learning Agency, and the Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission, all of which were slated for elimination in the review. Other policy changes included the deregulation of tuition fees, and freezes on college construction – even those projects already underway – pending a review.

The summer of 2001 also brought the arrival of TechBC’s second president. Bernie Sheehan had apparently been seeking to retire for some time,¹⁷⁶ and his request was eventually granted in the fall of 2000. Privately, he expressed doubts about the university’s future under a Liberal government.¹⁷⁷ A search committee was appointed on 13 September 2000¹⁷⁸ but not announced until 17 January 2001.¹⁷⁹ The announcement indicated that individuals would be considered “either from the public sector or industry,”¹⁸⁰ although in the end the Board chose an experienced academic administrator who had had some private sector consulting experience.

Dr. Jean Watters was not known as a teacher or an academic, but was regarded as a successful university president and “perhaps one of the more talented salesmen in all of

¹⁷⁴ British Columbia, Office of the Comptroller General, *Public Accounts for the Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 2002*, 11 July 2002, p. 10.

¹⁷⁵ British Columbia, *Annual Report 2001-2002: A New Era Update*, 11 July 2002, p. 3.

¹⁷⁶ Jude Brown, “Critical Reactive: The TechBC Takeover” (unpublished paper), p. 12.

¹⁷⁷ Confidential interview.

¹⁷⁸ TechBC, Board of Governors, Minutes of a meeting held Wednesday, September 13, 2000.

¹⁷⁹ TechBC, “TechBC Launches Search for New President to Lead Expansion” (press release), 17 January 2001.

¹⁸⁰ TechBC, “TechBC Launches Search for New President to Lead Expansion” (press release), 17 January 2001.

academia.”¹⁸¹ While he held appropriate credentials – a B.Ed. and M.Ed. in Communications from the University of Calgary, and a Ph.D. in Andragogy (adult education) from the Faculty of Education at *Université de Montréal* – he was best known for his successful tenures as President of Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario and founding President of College Boreal, Ontario’s first French-language college, also in Sudbury. An editorial on his departure from Sudbury praised “his innovative approach to higher education not to mention his gregarious personality and outspoken community spirit.”¹⁸² His personality could not have been more different from his predecessor. Learner association president Tammy Mooney observed: “Oh, like you’ve got grandpa, I don’t mean that because [Dr. Sheehan was] old, it’s just like he’s the teddy bear grandpa figure, right? And then Jean Watters is so vibrant and so full of energy and life, and the reason they hired him... [was] we wanted somebody who could propel the university forward.”¹⁸³ Most of all, he inspired confidence in his leadership, a quality that would be critical in the months ahead.

The choice of Watters appears not to have been a rejection of President Sheehan’s leadership style quite so much as it was a recognition that the planning phase, for which Sheehan was uniquely talented, was winding down and it was necessary to “grow the vision,” as board member Jack Finnbogason put it.¹⁸⁴ The pending change in government was undoubtedly in the minds of board members when Watters’ appointment was announced on 20 April 2001,¹⁸⁵ two days after the provincial election call. Watters came with the personal recommendation of Ontario Premier Mike Harris, whose ideological leanings closely paralleled those of BC Liberal leader Gordon Campbell.

¹⁸¹ Jude Brown, “Critical Reactive: The TechBC Takeover” (unpublished paper), p. 12.

¹⁸² “Thriving College Boreal and repositioned Laurentian University owe him huge thanks: The Legacy of Jean Watters,” *The Sudbury Star*, 24 June 2001.

¹⁸³ Tammy Mooney, personal interview, 11 February 2003.

¹⁸⁴ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

¹⁸⁵ TechBC, “TechBC Appoints New President to Lead Expansion Phase,” press release, 20 April 2001.

“Take good care of him or I will take him back,” Harris is quoted as saying to Campbell. “I know, I will,” Campbell replied.¹⁸⁶ Those words would come back to haunt both Campbell and Watters.

Almost immediately on arrival, Watters encountered the public relations albatross that plagued the university and would contribute to its downfall. In an early President’s Message he observed that “as a newcomer to British Columbia, I have quickly realized that TechBC is little known outside its own walls and is often confused with BCIT. To use a cliché, we are the best kept secret in town. It is a shame, especially at a time when good notoriety could be a definite asset.”¹⁸⁷ Before the week was out, notoriety had come to TechBC.

President Sheehan had generally pursued a low-key style of publicity that suited both his personality and his vision of the appropriate role of a start-up university. There had been a number of marketing campaigns to recruit students, with mixed results; only one campaign, cleverly titled “The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth,” met with widespread approval. Besides student marketing, the public’s perception of the university was shaped largely by two high-profile controversies: the CAUT/CUFA-BC boycott, and the ongoing question of the campus’ location and construction. It had been clear for some time that this needed to change and, indeed, the process of remaking TechBC’s public image began months earlier in anticipation of Watters’ arrival. Janet Benjamin, an experienced marketing expert who had helped establish Power Smart as a household name,¹⁸⁸ was brought on board the same week that Dr. Watters arrived. In the ensuing months, she and her staff would attempt to “rebrand” the university in the public’s mind. Gone were references to “high tech,” which was seen as “geekish” and alienating to many, especially women. Instead, TechBC

¹⁸⁶ Jean Watters, “A very productive evening,” extract from TechBC web site, 7 August 2001. Also quoted by Vaughn Palmer, “Innovation and a dollop of schmoozing,” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 September 2001, p. 14.

¹⁸⁷ Jean Watters, “History always repeats itself,” extract from TechBC web site, 10 September 2001.

¹⁸⁸ Power Smart is the highly successful demand-management (energy conservation) campaign run by BC Hydro.

would become known as “Tomorrow’s University Today,” a short and catchy phrase that also conveniently advanced the fact that TechBC was a full-scale university and not a technical institute or computer college. The new advertisements, including television spots that never aired, were designed to engender a “sophisticated, you can have confidence in us,” feeling, according to one source familiar with the campaign.¹⁸⁹ Some even went so far as to suggest changing the institution’s name, perhaps to “The University of Technology, British Columbia” (UTBC) to emphasize the university’s status.¹⁹⁰ In addition to the political benefits occasioned by an enhanced public presence, the university continued to be under pressure to meet student enrolment targets, an issue that would be a major criticism by the government.

In retrospect, it appears that TechBC was in a tenuous political state even before the election. Former Board member and longtime NDP member Jack Finnbogason was convinced that “the Liberals had already prepared, when they thought they were going to win [the 1996 election], a bill to kill TechBC... I knew that the Liberals would kill us, if they could, as soon as they came in.”¹⁹¹ TechBC Learner Association president Tammy Mooney says that rumours swirled within the university around election time about its possible demise under the Liberals. “But nobody closes down a university. This is needed, right?”¹⁹² Certainly, the controversies and political battles over the campus location, the boycott, as well as lobbying by more established institutions left the incoming government sceptical about TechBC and its future. Many people interviewed for this project believed strongly that the BC Liberals came to power intent on closing TechBC as soon as possible. There is no evidence that directly supports this contention. However, the university’s

¹⁸⁹ Confidential interview.

¹⁹⁰ Matthew Grant, “Undergraduate Learner Recruitment Report/Plan: September 2002,” 9 November 2001, p. 11-12. See also Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

¹⁹¹ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003. Later in the interview, however, Mr. Finnbogason acknowledged that he had interpreted the initial government statements in September 2001 as pressure for TechBC to rewrite its business plan, rather than a clear intention to close the university.

history, current performance, and plans for the future would all come under intense scrutiny in the coming month. Knowing this, President Watters engaged the services of Norman Stowe, a well-connected Liberal consultant and lobbyist, at a cost reported to be in the tens of thousands of dollars. The cost was justified to TechBC’s board on the basis “that we were starting from zero. We needed him to get us out there,” according to one TechBC official.¹⁹³

President Watters’ first meetings with government had apparently been positive, but when he returned from a meeting of The University Presidents’ Council in early September 2001, he alerted senior staff that “something was afoot.”¹⁹⁴ The university’s future was first questioned publicly shortly after Finance Minister Gary Collins released the province’s quarterly financial report on 13 September, when most of the world was reeling from the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.¹⁹⁵ While the report did not specifically mention TechBC,¹⁹⁶ the *Vancouver Sun* reported the next day that the only difference between TechBC’s new campus and the NDP’s scandal-plagued fast ferries “is that this one doesn’t move,” according to Finance Minister Collins.¹⁹⁷ Similar articles appeared in local community newspapers.¹⁹⁸ Despite the initial focus on the building, Collins hinted that the broader future of the university was in doubt. “We’re reviewing all the options that are available to see that we can train these students,” Collins is quoted as saying. “If TechBC can do it in a way that is cost-effective, then we’ll be happy. If they can’t, then we have to

¹⁹² Tammy Mooney, personal interview, 11 February 2003.

¹⁹³ Confidential interview.

¹⁹⁴ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

¹⁹⁵ British Columbia, Ministry of Finance, “World’s Slowing Economy Affects B.C.,” (news release), 13 September 2001.

¹⁹⁶ The report did, however, mention that the 2001/02 deficit would be almost \$500 million higher than Collins had predicted only six weeks earlier. Collins’ remarks about TechBC and its building overshadowed this news in many media.

¹⁹⁷ Jim Beatty, “‘Financial disaster’ threatens TechBC: Cost overruns, mismanagement claimed over Surrey project,” *Vancouver Sun*, 14 September 2001, B1.

¹⁹⁸ See, for example, Ted Colley, “Campus Facing Collapse,” *Surrey NOW*, 20 September 2001. Retrieved from <http://www.thenownewspaper.com/093101/news/093101nn3.html>.

try and do something else.” For the first time it was revealed that “the advanced education ministry [was] considering various options, including eliminating TechBC and dividing its programs between more established universities.”¹⁹⁹ Officials in the Ministry of Advanced Education began to lay the groundwork for alternatives, should TechBC be shut down. In early September during a meeting in Prince George, Deputy Minister Gerry Armstrong asked Simon Fraser University President Michael Stevenson how his university might absorb TechBC’s students, should the university be closed.²⁰⁰ President Watters clearly knew his institution was on the line: “You’ve got a gem in this university,” he said. “My biggest challenge in the next couple of months – maybe I don’t have a couple of months – is to make sure the world knows about it.”²⁰¹

Throughout September and October the senior management of TechBC had little idea what the Ministry’s concerns about TechBC really were. “The difficulty was that we really couldn’t get much of an answer about what the concerns were, aside from the building,” recalled Jane Fee, by then a Vice President, later. “Really what happened, I think, that Fall was that we were really shut off from communication with the Ministry. It was pulling teeth to get anyone to talk to you about anything.”²⁰² There was some speculation that the whole exercise was an elaborate bluff designed to pressure the university into revising its business plans.²⁰³ Ministry staff inquired early in the fall whether TechBC was willing to consider a merger of some sort with an existing institution. After some discussion, TechBC’s senior management decided to begin work on a new business plan to remain independent, rather than entertain merger possibilities. “We made a decision as an executive group, that I think was well backed up by the rest of the TechBC community, that we

¹⁹⁹ Beatty, “‘Financial disaster’ threatens TechBC,” B2.

²⁰⁰ Michael Stevenson, letter to Gerry Armstrong, 21 September 2001, p. 1.

²⁰¹ Beatty, “‘Financial disaster’ threatens TechBC.” This quote appears in the online edition (Canadian Newsstand) but does not appear in the print edition.

²⁰² Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

would continue as long as we could with remaining as an independent institution,” recalled Fee.²⁰⁴ President Watters did, however, initiate discussions with Kwantlen University College about possible partnerships,²⁰⁵ as well as with Royal Roads University about sharing administrative systems.²⁰⁶

Remaining independent meant rethinking its business plan, and TechBC’s first attempt was submitted in October 2001. This was essentially a revision of the five-year plan prepared in October 2000 by Peter Adams, a consultant employed by the Ministry of Advanced Education. Adams had examined TechBC’s performance over its first year of program delivery and recommended a certain reduction in its enrolment targets and a funding increase.²⁰⁷ These changes reflected TechBC’s continuation in leased space until the completion of the ICBC development in 2003, as well as other challenges including program approval from the Ministry and student recruitment difficulties;²⁰⁸ based on this plan, the university had received five-year funding approval from the provincial Treasury Board.²⁰⁹ The Adams report called for TechBC’s budget to increase each year as student numbers expanded, and TechBC prepared the October 2001 plan assuming that this revenue would be available. “We assumed that the funding would still be there as per the Adams report, and all we tried to do was uplift the FTEs,” said one official familiar with the plan.²¹⁰

The first business plan was, in retrospect, an obvious blunder. It quickly became clear that the Ministry felt no commitment to provide the funding set out in the Adams report. Many TechBC

²⁰³ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003. This sentiment was also expressed by Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003, and in confidential interviews.

²⁰⁴ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

²⁰⁵ Kevin Diakiw, “TechBC dealing with Kwantlen,” *Surrey Leader*, 23 September 2001.

²⁰⁶ Confidential source.

²⁰⁷ Gloria Back, letter to Bernard Sheehan, 5 April 2001, p. 3.

²⁰⁸ Confidential interview.

²⁰⁹ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

²¹⁰ Confidential interview.

administrators felt they were working in the dark as far as the Ministry was concerned. “Normally you’re used to understanding what are the parameters you have to work with,” said one TechBC administrator later. “It would have been nice for someone from the Ministry to say, ‘Look folks, here’s the issue we have: in fact, don’t even think about frozen funding, we need to find savings in the system and the savings need to be in this amount.’ ... It would have been nice to have had those kind of parameters to develop a plan around.”²¹¹

TechBC was not the only institution preparing plans that Fall. On 21 September, SFU President Michael Stevenson followed up on his earlier conversation with Deputy Minister Armstrong. After making it clear that “SFU has no predatory ambitions toward its sister institution,”²¹² he proceeded to lay out the “academic congruities” between the two institutions, including ‘integration’ across disciplines, commitment to online learning, cooperative ties to industry, and strong and lucrative continuing education offerings.²¹³ Stevenson asserted that any arrangements regarding TechBC must be “separate, sufficient and supplemental to the resources required to support SFU’s existing growth plans.” He did, however, indicate an openness to “unique organizational relationships” in the short term, a willingness that would make a transition much easier (and SFU’s option more attractive to the Ministry) if students and faculty were to be uprooted in the middle of their programs.²¹⁴ There was little response to this initial proposal, but SFU administrators continued to work on alternatives. “We actually had a number of proposals that were formulated over the course of maybe three or four months, depending on how the winds

²¹¹ Confidential interview.

²¹² Michael Stevenson, letter to Gerry Armstrong, 21 September 2001, p. 1.

²¹³ Stevenson to Armstrong, 21 September 2001, p. 2-3.

²¹⁴ Stevenson to Armstrong, 21 September 2001, p. 1.

shifted at any particular point,” recalled Associate Vice President Academic Bill Krane, who oversaw the process on behalf of the university.²¹⁵

Former Dean of Applied Science Ron Marteniuk was named “Special Adviser” to SFU Vice President Academic John Waterhouse,²¹⁶ and proceeded to draw up a relatively detailed proposal for integrating TechBC’s operations into SFU. An early draft proposed to continue TechBC’s programs for students then in second and third year so that they could graduate, and possibly to integrate then first-year students (who entered in September 2001) into existing programs.²¹⁷ This document first suggested the appointment of Joanne Curry, who was eventually hired to manage the transition, and Tom Calvert, the former SFU professor who was still TechBC’s Vice President for Research and External Affairs.²¹⁸ At this stage, Marteniuk expected SFU to assume TechBC’s total planned expansion to 2800 FTEs and also to continue the Management and Technology program. The plan also sketched out the transformation of TechBC’s Educational Technology and Learning group into what would become eLINC, the eLearning Innovation Centre.²¹⁹ Curiously, it was widely believed within the TechBC community that SFU was not submitting a proposal,²²⁰ although the evidence clearly shows that this was the case.

Kwantlen University College was also working on a three-page proposal, which it submitted on 17 September 2001 to Gordon Hogg, Minister of Children and Family Development and MLA for Surrey-White Rock, with copies to the other Surrey MLAs.²²¹ In addition, the Emily Carr Institute of

²¹⁵ Bill Krane, personal interview, 13 February 2003.

²¹⁶ Stevenson to Armstrong, 21 September 2001, p. 2.

²¹⁷ Ron Marteniuk, “A Proposal re TechBC,” 27 November 2001, p. 2.

²¹⁸ Marteniuk, 27 November 2001, p. 3.

²¹⁹ Marteniuk, 27 November 2001, p. 4-5.

²²⁰ Jude Brown, “Critical Reactive: The TechBC Takeover” (unpublished paper), p. 13; Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003; Tammy Mooney, personal interview, 11 February 2003.

²²¹ Kwantlen University College intervened with the Ministry of Advanced Education to prevent release of any part of its 17 September proposal, asserting s. 17 of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of*

Art and Design was working on a joint proposal with the British Columbia Institute of Technology, which culminated in a meeting held 26 October 2001 between Ron Burnett, President of ECIAD, and Advanced Education Minister Shirley Bond, Deputy Minister Gerry Armstrong, ADM Lyn Tait, and others.²²² This eventually developed into a tripartite proposal from Emily Carr, BCIT, and Kwantlen.

Although the Ministry provided little official feedback to SFU officials, it was clearly taking the proposal seriously. At a meeting in late October 2001, Minister Bond and Deputy Minister Armstrong reportedly pressured President Watters to accept a merger with Simon Fraser University. He refused, pledging that TechBC would prepare a new plan to respond to the Ministry’s concerns with the October version. “He felt he couldn’t let the team down by selling us out to SFU,” one TechBC staffer recalled.²²³ Around the same time SFU officials approached other members of the senior administration for their assistance.²²⁴

Determined to survive, and feeling an increasing level of desperation, TechBC’s senior management worked on a new, radical business plan. What began as an exercise in revising TechBC’s status-quo strategy morphed into what would become one of the most aggressive and unconventional academic plans in Canadian university history. TechBC administrators knew that their proposals would be compared with scepticism to those solicited from other post-secondary institutions. The challenge for TechBC was to prepare a plan that was as cost-competitive as

Privacy Act, which allows the exception of information, “the disclosure of which could reasonably be expected to harm the financial or economic interests of a public body.” According to the Ministry, Kwantlen’s proposal contains information related to Kwantlen’s “current negotiations to purchase property as well as financial information that would harm negotiations with a union.” See Mark Grady, letter to author, 17 April 2003.

²²² Bill Parker, “British Columbia Institute of Technology/Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design Proposal Re: TechBC,” 3 December 2001.

²²³ Confidential interview.

²²⁴ Confidential interviews.

possible, while remaining true to the university’s core values and maintaining credibility with the Ministry. It was a Herculean feat made marginally easier by the greater-than-usual influence of administrators and the flexibility allowed by the institution’s governance structure.

The broad outline of the new business plan was discussed at regular ‘town hall meetings,’ run by President Watters and open to the entire university community. “There was concern about saying too much about the details of the business plan that was going to make us an absolutely lean, mean machine,” recalled Vice President Fee. “Because we knew that in order to do that, there were going to be people who might end up losing their jobs; although... there was enough public discussion about what was happening at TechBC that people began looking at the writing on the wall and began to leave. We certainly could have done whatever staff cuts were required simply by not replacing people.”²²⁵

The ‘lean, mean machine’ characterized by Dr. Fee had several major components: (i) the provincial government grant would be reduced to \$17.9 million annually from \$24.6 million and be frozen for four years;²²⁶ (ii) TechBC abandoned all hope of a permanent facility²²⁷ and would continue leasing space in Surrey Place Mall;²²⁸ (iii) the university’s costs would be drastically reduced, largely through a reduction in the percentage of face-to-face (versus online) course delivery from 62% to 48%;²²⁹ and (iv) rapid expansion of student enrolment, from 392 FTEs in 2001/02 to 2,353 by 2005/06.²³⁰ The overriding objective was to demonstrate how TechBC would lower its ‘cost per FTE,’ a crude measure that the Minister of Advanced Education had adopted to illustrate what, she argued, were TechBC’s high costs. TechBC administrators had argued that this measure was

²²⁵ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

²²⁶ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 12.

²²⁷ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

²²⁸ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 12.

²²⁹ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 14.

unfair, because it included capital costs such as leases for temporary and permanent space as well as substantial start-up costs for the new university. TechBC’s use of this figure in its business plan was a tacit acknowledgement that they would be measured by it, fair or not. By this calculation, the plan meant a reduction from a government grant of \$62,750 per learner in 2001/02 to \$7,607 per learner in 2005/06,²³¹ a figure that was substantially below the provincial average and, indeed, below the grant provided to SFU to assume TechBC’s students when the government decided to shut it down.²³² The overall grant was reduced 27.2% from 2001/02 and frozen there for four years.²³³ The figure was the result of intense strategizing among the university’s senior executive team and Norman Stowe, the government-relations consultant. As one administrator explained,

we were hearing back [from the government] that the only thing that would really catch their attention was something dramatic like that. And so that’s kind of where we set the bar, we said ‘OK, let’s take a look at it and see if we can do with 25% less.’ So we kind of had an end target number, and then worked our way from there to see if it was do-able.²³⁴

It was a plan that, Fee admits, “would have stretched us to our absolute limit... it would have been very difficult for us to operate.”²³⁵

The viability of TechBC’s final business plan has become a key issue in the debate over the provincial government’s decision to shut it down. TechBC’s senior administrators remain resolutely supportive of the plan, and some have suggested that its rejection is proof that the shutdown decision was ultimately a triumph of partisanship over policy.²³⁶ At the very least, the plan provided a short reprieve. “I think, even if [the government] had a predisposition about what they

²³⁰ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 13.

²³¹ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 13.

²³² In 2001/02, the average per-FTE grant of students in technical programs and students in arts programs was \$10,500; the proposed per-FTE grant for new positions under the ‘Double the Opportunity’ program was \$13,000. Information from Michael Stevenson, letter to Gerry Armstrong, 1 February 2002.

²³³ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 9.

²³⁴ Confidential interview.

²³⁵ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

were going to do, the plan gave them pause and made them take another look at things,” commented one administrator familiar with the process.²³⁷ On the other hand, the plan did have weaknesses: it called for almost one million dollars annually in private-sector contracts, although TechBC had little track record in that area; it called for cost reductions far below anything that had ever been achieved in high-tech university programs in British Columbia; and it anticipated an increase in student numbers significantly beyond that which TechBC had ever accommodated previously. One senior administrator commented later that,

To be honest with you, when the decision was made by the government, I breathed a sigh of relief, because I think it would have been a huge challenge trying to operationalize that plan as considered on paper. Quite frankly, I had my doubts as to whether or not we would have been able to pull it off. So to a degree I was kind of happy that we didn't have to try and pull it off. Having said that, TechBC was capable of some pretty amazing stuff, and they may have surprised me.²³⁸

It was also a plan that involved some compromise of TechBC's core ideals. For the first time, TechBC would favour online learning for its potential cost savings rather than its pedagogical value. Some argued that this was a natural evolution: the program's delivery model was often characterized as “front-end loaded,”²³⁹ meaning that the development of online courses requires substantial up-front investment but tends to have lower ongoing delivery costs over time. TechBC's final business plan relied on the availability of these cost savings. “We had to maintain quality, because if you don't maintain quality you're dead,” observed one former administrator. “We looked at really aggressive ways to handle more students with relatively small increases in the number of [staff].”²⁴⁰ Much of this work ended up being of benefit to SFU when it took over TechBC's programs. As SFU Associate Vice-President Academic Bill Krane explained, “we were getting the

²³⁶ Confidential interview.

²³⁷ Confidential interview.

²³⁸ Confidential interview.

²³⁹ This term was used by President Watters in a letter published in the *Surrey Now*, 15 December 2001.

²⁴⁰ Confidential interview.

benefit of the investment that they had already made. So it's like they did the development and paid the cost of that; we were taking that over and were the beneficiaries of that, and all we had to worry about were the operating costs afterwards.”²⁴¹

The plan was not universally well-received within the TechBC community. Despite widespread discussion in President Watters' 'town hall meetings,' many speculated whether its aims could be achieved. TechBC's figures “were just as cooked” as the numbers used by the Ministry, said one professor, noting an air of defeatism among the more experienced faculty. “The more you could read the patterns... the experienced people knew at the time it was going down, and didn't make a fuss about it. They were certainly making a fuss about the university going down, but it wasn't going down on the basis of its model. It was going down on the basis that the Liberal government wanted it to go down.”²⁴² Learners had concerns as well. “I was really leery about the new business plan,” said then third-year student Ian Buckley. “The emphasis was going to be way too much on on-line learning... not building more classrooms, not putting in any more computers, but growing exponentially.”²⁴³ “The programs just weren't scalable at that rate,” said another student.²⁴⁴

The evidence suggests that Ministry officials indeed took a serious look at TechBC's new business plan. One TechBC official recalls that

they did take the plan very seriously, because all of their questions were very detailed, trying to understand what was there. ... There was nothing there that indicated to me that they had anything but a genuine interest in trying to understand whether this was a do-able plan... On the flip-side of that ... if they had a predisposed notion about what they were going to do with the university, they certainly needed to do their due diligence because the plan was so detailed and so radical, that if it

²⁴¹ Bill Krane, personal interview, 13 February 2003.

²⁴² Confidential interview.

²⁴³ Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

²⁴⁴ Confidential interview.

had been released... they would have come under heavy criticism as to why they didn't give the plan a serious look.²⁴⁵

Ultimately, TechBC's final business plan had three major weaknesses. Firstly, it was the third new business plan prepared for the government in fifteen months, leaving a significant credibility problem in the minds of some public servants. “They kept changing the plan. And if they could do this one, then why didn't they propose this all along?,” observed one official familiar with the process.²⁴⁶ The Ministry also hired Peter Adams, who had conducted the financial review in October 2000, to critique the new plan. Adams was reportedly critical of the plan, and questioned how TechBC would achieve targets that it had dismissed as unattainable only a year earlier.²⁴⁷

Secondly, the plan projected student enrolment targets that were probably too ambitious, partly because of the decline of high-tech industries by late 2001, and partly because TechBC's own track record for student recruitment was weak. Most TechBC staff interviewed for this project vehemently disputed the Minister's assertion that TechBC was not meeting its enrolment targets, arguing that those targets were invalid because they assumed a finished building rather than the still-under-construction ICBC project. The reality is somewhat more complex. The Ministry did revise its enrolment targets downward on account of the building issue and limitations of temporary space: the Adams report (October 2000) called for a target of 470 FTEs for 2001/02.²⁴⁸ In reality, TechBC only achieved 392 FTEs in that year, or 83% of its target.²⁴⁹ A number of explanations for this fact have been offered, including the difficulties associated with recruiting for a university without ‘name brand recognition,’ the lack of any arrangements to transfer into or out of the TechBC programs, and the lack of a campus to show to potential students. In addition, TechBC management

²⁴⁵ Confidential interview.

²⁴⁶ Confidential interview.

²⁴⁷ Confidential interview.

²⁴⁸ Gloria Back, letter to Bernard Sheehan, 5 April 2001, p. 3.

were very concerned about having enough space and faculty to educate large numbers of students, and tended to “cautiously undershoot” enrolment targets.²⁵⁰ The Ministry had apparently condoned this practice, and agreed to treat student headcount as if it were FTEs, even though many students were attending on a part-time basis.²⁵¹ Given this history, expanding to 1075 FTEs in only a few months would have been an extraordinarily difficult challenge, especially after having the university’s future called into question so publicly. “My biggest doubt about the plan was the recruitment numbers and getting those,” one TechBC administrator said later. “While we were now more publicly known, we were publicly known for the wrong reasons. ... You can’t have a scare on your product and then have people flock and buy your product.”²⁵²

The third problem with the business plan was that it did not address the question of the building. The plan foresaw operating only in ‘betaspace,’ (the converted Zellers store), and included a sophisticated space allocation model that demonstrated that this could be achieved with the planned reduction in face-to-face instructional time and increased evening and weekend utilization of the premises.²⁵³ While this aspect of the plan extracted TechBC from the politically difficult ICBC project, it did not address how TechBC would escape its legal commitment to rent the facility when completed. A TechBC administrator recalls that

the pitch we were going to go for would be that ‘well listen, the lease was done with three parties, all three are government entities, and can’t the one with the biggest stick, which was the government itself, place the parties together to come to a new lease arrangement.’ ... Not addressing the building made sense from a sanity standpoint, but I think it was our downfall ultimately because we didn’t have an adequate solution for it.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 13.

²⁵⁰ Confidential source.

²⁵¹ Confidential source.

²⁵² Confidential interview.

²⁵³ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 14.

²⁵⁴ Confidential interview.

TechBC staff did investigate a number of solutions to the building issue, including the purchase of the university’s portion of the building, financed through a commercial mortgage. Considering the low interest rates at the time, this arrangement would have been advantageous to the university if the Ministry’s funding for lease costs could be applied against the mortgage. Although ICBC was reportedly supportive of the idea, there would still be difficulty negotiating a sale price, since ICBC was striving to recover its construction costs while TechBC sought the actual market value of the facility.²⁵⁵

The Ministry’s key concerns with the business plan echoed this assessment, and were delivered in a letter from Deputy Minister Armstrong on 5 December 2001.²⁵⁶ TechBC was asked to address four specific issues: (i) TechBC’s ability to achieve enrolment growth targets far in excess of past student recruitment levels, (ii) TechBC’s accommodation of approximately 2400 FTEs in a space that would typically contain approximately 800 FTEs, (iii) the “questionable viability of the current mall space as an academic institution on an ongoing basis,” and (iv) TechBC’s ability to maintain quality, attract faculty, and pursue third party partnerships on a limited budget.²⁵⁷ The university offered spirited responses to these questions in the final draft of its business plan, submitted on 11 December 2001. TechBC had made its policy case; whether it would succeed on the political level was yet to be seen.

On the same day that Deputy Minister Armstrong probed TechBC’s final business plan, he formally sought alternatives from other post-secondary institutions. The Ministry had already made informal contacts with a number of institutions and several proposals had been developed in varying degrees of detail. On 5 December 2001 this process was formalized in letters to the

²⁵⁵ Confidential interview.

²⁵⁶ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 18.

²⁵⁷ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 18-20.

presidents of UBC, SFU, BCIT, Emily Carr, and Kwantlen University College. “While a decision regarding the future of TechBC has not been made yet, the government is committed to making a careful and thoughtful decision regarding the future of educational programming at TechBC by considering all the options,” the Deputy Minister advised. “The education of students currently registered at TechBC will be a top priority in any decision taken by the government,” he wrote.²⁵⁸ A 17-page brief outlining TechBC’s academic programs and financial situation was included, and institutions were asked to submit proposals by December 14.

Five proposals were submitted in response to the Deputy Minister’s letter: (i) the SFU proposal that was eventually chosen, (ii) a joint UBC-SFU proposal, (iii) a proposal from UVic regarding the IT program, (iv) a proposal from Kwantlen University College, and (v) a three-party proposal from BCIT, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, and Kwantlen. Two unsolicited proposals also arrived from private sector institutions, the University of Phoenix and Kingston Education Group. These proposals were reviewed by Ministry officials against several criteria: location, academic program and fit with existing TechBC programs, student considerations, faculty considerations, financial analysis, ‘new era contribution,’²⁵⁹ legislative implications, private sector partnerships, and transition plans.²⁶⁰ The proposals are compared in the following chapter.

While the development and review of business cases for the university continued, so did the public debate about the university’s future. Most anxious about these developments were TechBC’s students, who had all taken a significant gamble on an institution with no history, no campus, and

²⁵⁸ Gerry Armstrong, letter to Martha Piper, 5 December 2001. The letters to Presidents Stevenson, Knowles, Burnett, and Triplett were identical.

²⁵⁹ This was largely a review of whether and how the proposals addressed the government’s commitment to double the number of graduates in computer science and electrical and computer engineering.

²⁶⁰ Ministry officials provided advice on the “overall assessment” and “long-term viability” of each proposal. This information was severed from the documents provided to the author under s. 13 of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.

no graduates. At first, President Watters had asked students to stay quiet while the university proceeded through the normal channels to work with the Ministry. “We trusted the leadership of Jean Watters,” says then first year student Brittney Bogyo, “and he said ‘no, we don’t want to do that,’ and we said ‘OK, we won’t.’ We listened to him.”²⁶¹

At some point in the Fall, however, it became clear that the quiet approach was unlikely to be successful. TechBC officials began to beat back the finance minister’s allegations, leaking details of the ICBC development agreement²⁶² and feverishly orchestrating media events to showcase the university’s students and programs. Some feared that being too active would hasten the university’s demise rather than ensure its success, but ultimately it became clear that there was little left to lose.²⁶³ Students began organizing their own campaigns, sometimes with the covert support of TechBC staff.²⁶⁴ Surrey newspapers were flooded with stories about the fledgling university and its students, and opinion pages were filled with letters debating the pros and cons of TechBC, its building and costs. Students organized a campaign called ‘Name One Good Thing,’ highlighting the value of a university to the Surrey community and pointedly questioning whether TechBC would be in jeopardy if it were located in downtown Vancouver.²⁶⁵ As time wore on, the rhetoric became more heated, to the point where President Watters accused the government of “political posturing” based on “short-sighted misinformation,” and attacking Surrey MLAs, whose “flawed logic and selective use of statistics would never warrant a passing grade at our university.”²⁶⁶ Things were not looking good.

²⁶¹ Brittney Bogyo, personal interview, 10 February 2003.

²⁶² See, for example, Kevin Diakiw, “TechBC pressured to accept ICBC lease,” *Surrey Leader*, 30 November 2001; and Kevin Diakiw, “TechBC costs kept ‘off book’,” *Surrey Leader*, 5 December 2001.

²⁶³ Confidential interview.

²⁶⁴ Tammy Mooney, personal interview, 11 February 2003.

²⁶⁵ Paula Carlson, “Surrey the Good: Technically, we’re there,” *Surrey Leader*, 30 November 2001.

²⁶⁶ David Marsh, “TechBC battle rages, as school president blasts MLAs,” *Surrey Leader*, 9 December 2001, A4.

TechBC learners were (and still are) fiercely loyal to their school.²⁶⁷ A survey taken fifteen months later found 91% of students agreeing (71% strongly) that “TechBC was a viable educational institution.”²⁶⁸ Yet, they were concerned with the direction the new business plan would lead. It gradually became clear to most student leaders that TechBC’s end was near, regardless of the merits of the new plan. The students’ campaign shifted, therefore, from one to ‘save TechBC’ toward working to ensure that TechBC’s learners would be able to complete their degrees. “At this point, I had lost complete faith in the administration,” recalls Learner Association President Tammy Mooney.²⁶⁹ “We were annoyed, but we knew our fate. So we said OK: we were very much for mitigation of effects,” said Brittney Bogyo, then a first-year student, later.²⁷⁰ Ian Buckley, then a third-year student, recalls that

we started realising that, yeah, there’s a good chance we’re going to lose the school. So, our mandate ended up being ‘university access for the Fraser Valley’: save our program. It didn’t become ‘Save TechBC,’ from the students’ perspective. It became university access, don’t take our classes away. And that was a tough decision to make, because we all did believe in TechBC, we wanted to save TechBC, but we also realised we’re here for a degree, we’re not here for the university. And so, that’s the route we decided to take.²⁷¹

How important was this shift in student attitude to the fate of TechBC? On the one hand, it legitimized the process that was already underway at the Ministry, which was seriously considering a merger. However, the students’ acquiescence to this process likely gave them more influence over the outcome than would otherwise have been the case. Throughout this period, Learner Association President Tammy Mooney kept in contact with Minister Bond and her senior officials. From

²⁶⁷ For a good example, see Paula Carlson, “True to their school: TechBC students are smart, savvy and fiercely loyal to a university they say is light years ahead of other post-secondary institutions,” *Surrey Leader*, 5 December 2001, A25.

²⁶⁸ John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” p. 2. Available at <http://www.techbcproject.com>.

²⁶⁹ Tammy Mooney, personal interview, 11 February 2003.

²⁷⁰ Brittney Bogyo, personal interview, 10 February 2003.

²⁷¹ Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

Mooney’s perspective, if the university was going to be shut down, she was determined that students not be trampled in the process.

The public campaign continued, partly in hopes that TechBC might somehow be saved, and partly to keep the pressure on the government to find a satisfactory solution for TechBC’s students. About 250 students “delivered an impassioned plea”²⁷² to Surrey City Council on 26 November, resulting in a sharp rebuke of the provincial government by Surrey Mayor Doug McCallum. “This is unthinkable,” said McCallum, who slammed Surrey’s seven Liberal MLAs, all but one of whom “have not come forward to keep TechBC alive and in Surrey.”²⁷³ The lone holdout, Surrey-Newton MLA Tony Bhullar, was eventually expelled from the Liberal caucus in a move that many say was punishment for his support of TechBC.²⁷⁴

After considerable pressure and shaming from the TechBC Learner Association, Advanced Education Minister Shirley Bond agreed to visit TechBC’s ‘betaspace’ campus in Surrey Place Mall and meet with students, her first-ever visit there. The meeting took place on 27 November. “That meeting didn’t actually go very well,” recalls then third-year student Ian Buckley:

She came down, she met with us... it was a very heated discussion. Questions that were thrown at her were quite heated as well, and probably some better questions could have been asked... A couple of the students got a little impassioned; which was great, good for them, but I think what happened was because she didn’t have an answer for us and couldn’t commit to saving the university, she kept saying ‘your degrees will be safe, your degrees will be safe, but I can’t guarantee the future of the school.’ That inflamed students even more, because they loved TechBC or they’d been told that there’s no other place like TechBC.

²⁷² Kevin Diakiw, “TechBC: The Heat is On: Hundreds of students and Surrey MLA speak out against university closure,” *Surrey Leader*, 28 November 2001, p. A1.

²⁷³ Kevin Diakiw, “TechBC: The Heat is On: Hundreds of students and Surrey MLA speak out against university closure,” *Surrey Leader*, 28 November 2001, p. A1.

²⁷⁴ Brittney Bogoyo, personal interview, 10 February 2003; Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003;

When you rally around a school, you're afraid that you can't survive anywhere else. So I think a lot of students felt that.²⁷⁵

Then first-year student Brittney Bogyo shared students' annoyance with the Minster's visit. "You know politicians read a script, she was very good at memorizing the answers to her script, and whenever we asked a question, she didn't answer the question that we were asking, and that annoyed us a great deal," she recalls.²⁷⁶

When did President Watters conclude that the campaign to save TechBC had been lost? Nobody knows for certain, and Dr. Watters declined to be interviewed for this paper, citing a non-disclosure clause in his contract. Contact with the Ministry dried up after the Christmas holidays, when all the questions about the new business plan had been answered. "By mid-January there was just a cloak of secrecy," recalls one TechBC official. "We had no idea... Jean was trying to plumb all the contacts he had in the Ministry and outside the Ministry to see how the plan was being received, and there was nothing. We couldn't hear a thing. Which in itself was problematic and of huge concern, obviously, to everybody. We weren't hearing anything positive, and we weren't hearing anything negative."²⁷⁷

It is clear in retrospect that by mid-January the Ministry had decided to proceed with the SFU proposal. Associate Vice President Bill Krane recalls that

once we had a response from the Ministry saying 'we're interested in pursuing this,' then things happened very quickly after that. We got into a situation where there were literally some back-of-the-envelope calculations as part of a preliminary business plan, just for discussions with the Ministry, and then there were more formal kinds of discussions around what kind of budget would be required, what level of support on the part of the provincial government through FTEs would be required,

²⁷⁵ Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

²⁷⁶ Brittney Bogyo, personal interview, 10 February 2003.

²⁷⁷ Confidential interview.

and that eventually culminated in a written agreement between the Ministry and ourselves.²⁷⁸

The other key decision made by the Ministry in mid-January was that only a fraction of TechBC’s projected enrolment would be funded. Whereas TechBC’s final business plan foresaw 2050 full-time equivalent students in 2004/05,²⁷⁹ the ultimate arrangement with SFU would see only 860 students by that date.²⁸⁰ It was that reduction in student spaces, coupled with the economies of scale afforded by SFU’s existing operation on Burnaby Mountain, that ultimately made the SFU proposal most attractive to the Ministry. The overall cost in the first year was about half what TechBC proposed: \$8,770,000 compared with \$17,900,000. By the third year (2004/05), the SFU plan would cost \$13,540,000 compared with TechBC’s still-frozen \$17,900,000 grant.²⁸¹ Curiously, however, if one uses the Minister’s efficiency index of the total government grant divided by student FTEs, TechBC compares favourably to the SFU option. In the first year (2002/03), assuming TechBC met its enrolment target (see discussion of this issue above), its final business plan would have cost \$16,651 per FTE²⁸² compared with SFU’s cost of \$19,931 per FTE.²⁸³ The difference is even more dramatic for the third year,²⁸⁴ with TechBC projected to cost \$8,732 per FTE²⁸⁵ and SFU \$15,744 per FTE.²⁸⁶ It is also interesting to note that TechBC’s final business plan was prepared before the tuition freeze was lifted, and the university could perhaps have further reduced its government grant and per-FTE cost by increasing student tuition fees.

²⁷⁸ Bill Krane, personal interview, 13 February 2003.

²⁷⁹ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 13.

²⁸⁰ Post Secondary Finance Branch, Ministry of Advanced Education, “SFU Surrey Campus: Total Provincial Operating Funding,” 16 September 2002.

²⁸¹ Post Secondary Finance Branch, Ministry of Advanced Education, “SFU Surrey Campus: Total Provincial Operating Funding,” 16 September 2002.

²⁸² TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 13.

²⁸³ Calculated from Ministry documents, based on a \$8,770,000 grant in 2002/03 divided by 440 FTEs. This number would have been even higher if the facilities rent costs were not pro-rated to July 1, 2002.

²⁸⁴ The agreement between the Ministry of Advanced Education and SFU only covers the 2002/03, 2003/04 and 2004/05 academic years. Future increases are “to be negotiated.”

²⁸⁵ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 13.

This analysis of the numbers indicates that the Ministry’s decision was not motivated only by cost considerations. However, it is impossible to discern from the available evidence the degree to which the government was determined to shut down TechBC for partisan political reasons (to “embarrass the NDP,” as several TechBCers have asserted), and to what extent the Ministry doubted the ability of TechBC to carry out the ambitious agenda it had set for itself in the final business plan. SFU’s proposal, in contrast, was very ‘safe’: it applied the usual per-FTE grant formula to smaller, achievable student numbers and made use of the significant existing resources at SFU’s Burnaby Campus. Indeed, the TechBC amalgamation imposed a considerable burden on many SFU departments, a cost that was not covered by the Ministry.²⁸⁷ TechBC Vice President Fee provides a pragmatic assessment of the final decision:

I suspect that what happened was the Ministry had, let’s say, lost confidence in the management of TechBC at that point, and decided that the way to go was to go with an existing institution that they had good relationships with, that they felt would do the best job of protecting the innovation that was a part of TechBC.²⁸⁸

The alternate perspective was well-articulated by board member Jack Finnbogason:

In my view, I think ideologically the Liberals were not going to let anything high-profile that they saw as indissolubly associated with the NDP survive. ... The one part that did give them pause [was] what the students did. There was five hundred or four hundred, and they said ‘what are you going to do with us?’ So that’s why they had to have somebody come in and take them on, because the optics of just cancelling TechBC and leaving the smoking ruins with the students wandering around and saying ‘wait a minute, I started here and paid good money,’ – they couldn’t do that. So they needed a bailout and Simon Fraser gave them the bailout. ... But no, they were going to always kill us.²⁸⁹

After weeks of silence, the news came in a television report on BCTV on 6 February 2003. The TechBC senior executive team was called back from a management retreat to respond to the

²⁸⁶ Calculated from Ministry documents, based on a \$13,540,000 grant in 2004/05 divided by 860 FTEs

²⁸⁷ Confidential interview.

²⁸⁸ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

news that TechBC was to be closed and its students transferred to Kwantlen University College.

“We were horrified,” recalls Jane Fee. “Pretty much everything that we heard, in particular from the students, but also from the faculty, was that they simply were not going to accept any solution that involved an institution that was not a true university, like Kwantlen.”²⁹⁰ One professor gave an even more damning appraisal of that possibility:

Had that happened, the faculty would have just walked away. ... Take it from the point of view of a senior person, who can hold his head up at any university anywhere in the world. There are several people around TechBC who are like that, and have left better universities than TechBC... They ask: can Kwantlen offer me the intellectual environment I need to sustain my career? And even if Kwantlen could, people wouldn't even give them the chance. They have no graduate program, no PhD program, no history of research, where's the library? Sorry! So the very fact that the government entertained that... and I kind of see why they had to, politically... but there were no assurances given by the government that they weren't serious about Kwantlen.²⁹¹

Ian Buckley reports the student reaction to the Kwantlen news:

We were, like, ‘anything but Kwantlen!’ We were all devastated. None of us wanted to be part of Kwantlen. It's a college. It's a university-college, but it devalues your degree. We didn't pay for three years of a university ... I mean there's nothing wrong with Kwantlen... but it's not a university degree. We went to school to be at a university, we didn't go to school to be at a college or a university-college.²⁹²

The Kwantlen news turned out to be false, and it was never revealed where BCTV obtained its information, although some have speculated that it was a deliberate leak to turn the next day's announcement into a ‘good news’ story.²⁹³ Kwantlen President Skip Triplett was as horrified as the students, because the university college had received essentially no response to its proposal and was not prepared for a transition. That evening, President Watters learned the truth from the Minister, on the condition that nothing be revealed until a half-hour before the announcement. He emailed

²⁸⁹ Jack Finnbogason, personal interview, 7 February 2003.

²⁹⁰ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

²⁹¹ Confidential interview.

²⁹² Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

the TechBC community indicating that the Kwantlen report was incorrect, and that an announcement would be made the next morning.²⁹⁴

The university's fate was announced on 7 February 2002, at a televised “open cabinet” press conference in Victoria. As promised, President Watters announced the news to students that morning: TechBC would be closed at the end of the academic year, and its students and programs transferred to Simon Fraser University, which had pledged to maintain a continuing operation in Surrey. No other information was available. Virtually the entire TechBC student body gathered in betaspace to watch the announcement, which was streamed live over the Internet and projected on large screens in the classrooms. Minister Bond's presentation largely involved a comparison of TechBC's current situation with the original August 1998 academic plan. To TechBC students, staff, and faculty, this presentation was blatantly unfair considering the many changes to that plan forced by the Ministry as a result of the ICBC building project and other issues. “We were all quite discouraged at the actual content of the announcement,” recalls Jane Fee, “because we'd tried so hard in the previous months to talk to the MLAs and try and convince them that some of the media reports that were coming out of the Ministry were very unfair.”²⁹⁵ There was generally a sigh of relief that SFU had been chosen over Kwantlen, but it was not good news. As one administrator recalled, “to hear someone actually saying it, and portraying it as great success: It wasn't a great success! When I say SFU was by far the best second choice, it wasn't the first.”²⁹⁶

President Watters thanked everybody for their hard work and dedication to the university, and impressed upon them the importance of ensuring a smooth, professional transition. Recalls Fee, “Jean Watters made it clear to the staff at TechBC that although this wasn't necessarily something

²⁹³ Confidential interviews.

²⁹⁴ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

²⁹⁵ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

that any of us liked, it was now a new phase and we were going to enter into it cooperatively or not at all. And the not at all was pretty clear: if you don't like it, then you probably just don't belong here any more.”²⁹⁷ Dr. Watters also indicated that he looked forward to working with SFU President Michael Stevenson, who had been a colleague in Ontario.²⁹⁸

Work on the transition began the following Monday, 11 February. SFU President Michael Stevenson, accompanied by senior administrators, welcomed students to SFU, and distributed Simon Fraser University sweatshirts to the assembled students. One faculty member recalls the meeting:

He walked into the hornet's nest. And he did an extraordinary job. You can imagine, everybody's been fired, or knows they're about to get fired. ... So people were just catatonic, and then Stevenson comes in, and he does this tough/tender thing, which was really interesting. He came there to express just the warmest personal welcome he could, in his warm personal style. At the same time he was making it very very clear that TechBC was over and it was SFU now.²⁹⁹

Stevenson's feathers were ruffled only once, when a student protested the move to a “traditional” university. “Simon Fraser is *not* a traditional university,” Stevenson said indignantly, as if he had been genuinely wounded.³⁰⁰ Anxious students barraged SFU administrators with questions about programs, degree requirements, academic standing, and a host of other issues. All of these were deflected. “We haven't made any decisions yet,” Stevenson said.³⁰¹ This was not entirely true: Ron Marteniuk had prepared a thorough short and long-term vision paper for the Surrey campus, although none of it had been approved by SFU's Senate or Board of Governors. He had, however, decided that TechBC's Management and Technology program “is not popular with the current

²⁹⁶ Confidential interview.

²⁹⁷ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

²⁹⁸ TechBC, “TechBC Decision Provides Opportunities for Future,” press release, 7 February 2002.

²⁹⁹ Confidential interview.

³⁰⁰ Anne Brennan, personal interview, 10 April 2003.

students and is the least well developed of the three programs.”³⁰² SFU’s intention to discontinue the M&T program was made clear to the Ministry as early as 21 January 2002,³⁰³ although it did not form part of the Minister’s announcement on 7 February. Those students would eventually be told that they would have to transfer to SFU’s business faculty in Burnaby if they wished to complete their degrees. Each M&T student was individually articulated into the Business program, and were given a bursary to compensate for additional classes that would be required in order to graduate.³⁰⁴

SFU assembled a “SWAT team”³⁰⁵ to immediately begin work on a transition, led by Joanne Curry, a private consultant who had been CEO of TeleLearning Solutions Inc. and the SFU University/Industry Liaison Office. K.C. Bell, from the SFU Registrar’s office, was assigned to handle student services, and SFU tapped the services of TechBC Vice President Research Tom Calvert – who was still ‘on leave’ from his SFU professorship – to act as academic program director for the IA and IT programs as soon as his obligation to TechBC would allow.

President Watters pressed the staff to co-operate with the transition, but did not see himself as the right person to manage it. Without any realistic possibility of employment at SFU and realising that the remaining work was mainly financial and administrative in nature, he agreed to leave on 20 March and received \$360,000 in severance.³⁰⁶ Vice President Mansell was terminated the same day; she received severance of \$212,000.³⁰⁷ Liberal bloodletting, here as elsewhere, was costly to taxpayers.

³⁰¹ Brittney Bogyo, personal interview, 10 February 2003; Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

³⁰² Ron Marteniuk, “Proposal for Integrating TechBC’s Activities into SFU,” 16 January 2002, p. 4.

³⁰³ John Waterhouse, fax to Lyn Tait, 21 January 2002.

³⁰⁴ Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003; Confidential source .

³⁰⁵ Bill Krane, personal interview, 13 February 2003.

³⁰⁶ Theresa Lalonde, “TechBC Closure Costs Millions,” (CBC Radio News, 5 June 2002).

³⁰⁷ Theresa Lalonde, “TechBC Closure Costs Millions,” (CBC Radio News, 5 June 2002).

Vice President Business and Finance Tony Baena was appointed Acting President by the Board of Governors, whose Order-in-Council members were replaced with senior public servants in the Ministry of Advanced Education.³⁰⁸ Along with Robart Hobart, who was appointed ‘transition administrator’ to represent the Ministry in the process, he engineered the shutdown of TechBC. In order to minimize severance costs, the lay-offs were divided into three waves, the first of which was dismissed on 21 March 2002, while classes were still in session. The second wave took place two months later and included all the faculty, most of whom had been retained by SFU. “We were able to get approximately forty faculty hired without really any attrition – with a couple of exceptions – was, I think, really remarkable, because the process that we go through in hiring faculty can take upwards of a year, and we did it in about ten days,” recalls Bill Krane.³⁰⁹ Not all of those faculty felt well-treated in the transition, however. One professor says bluntly, “you do *not* bring professional people from around the world and treat them that way. ... They felt no obligation beyond the letter of the contract, and that’s not the way you handle highly-qualified people that you want to keep in the country.”³¹⁰ On the other hand, some faculty members – particularly younger ones – benefited financially from the move.

Meanwhile, SFU faced transition challenges on two fronts: planning and logistics. Its proposal for TechBC had been prepared by administrators, submitted to the government and announced to the public, all without the necessary approval from its Senate and Board of Governors. On 4 March 2002, SFU Vice President Academic John Waterhouse faced the Senate to seek approval for “a program which will provide existing undergraduate students at the Technical University of

³⁰⁸ British Columbia, OIC 100, Approved and Ordered 11 February 2003.

³⁰⁹ Bill Krane, personal interview, 13 February 2003.

³¹⁰ Confidential interview.

British Columbia the opportunity to complete an appropriate SFU degree.”³¹¹ Considerable debate ensued over the consequences to SFU’s existing programs of the TechBC amalgamation, whether SFU should accept those students who TechBC had admitted for September 2002, and whether TechBC’s three program streams were properly grouped under one faculty. This latter question would re-emerge over the coming months, with pressure from some sectors to merge the Interactive Arts program with SFU’s School of Contemporary Arts and the Information Technology Program with the School of Computing Science. At the time of writing, the SFU Senate and Board had approved the creation of a School of Interactive Arts and Technology within the Faculty of Applied Science, which officially opened on 30 May 2003.³¹²

The debates at Senate suggest something that is widely believed among TechBC students and faculty interviewed for this project: that SFU had little understanding of what it was getting when it acquired TechBC’s programs and students. Associate VP Krane disagreed with that statement, but admitted that “initially, I would say that we knew very little, but we learned very quickly.”³¹³ The lack of understanding was perhaps reflected most clearly in the events surrounding the SFU Surrey Short-Term Planning Committee’s review of the ‘academic merit’ of TechBC programs. Committee members were asked to determine whether TechBC’s programs “meet Bachelor Degree level requirements,”³¹⁴ and to recommend degree names. The major issue, which caused considerable consternation for TechBC students, was the level of math required in the two programs, especially IA. The admission requirements (only Math 11 was required) were viewed as

³¹¹ Simon Fraser University, “Minutes of a meeting of the Senate of Simon Fraser University held on Monday, March 4, 2002 at 7pm in Room 3120 West Mall Centre.” There were also motions regarding the admission of graduate students and the development of a long-term planning process.

³¹² “School of Interactive Arts and Technology Opens,” *Connect*, 30 May 2003.
http://www.surrey.sfu.ca/student/Connect/vol3/3_03.htm

³¹³ Bill Krane, personal interview, 13 February 2003.

³¹⁴ Simon Fraser University, *Final Report: SFU at Surrey Short Term Academic Planning Committee*, (5 June 2002), p. 5.

inadequate by SFU, and the amount of math in the IA program was said to warrant only a B.A. credential,³¹⁵ although TechBC students had entered the program understanding that it led to a B.Sc. Many students saw this as a further betrayal, and it did not engender confidence in the new regime to which they were captive. Vice President Waterhouse intervened at the Senate Committee on University Priorities to reverse this decision and recommend a B.Sc. credential for all TechBC students admitted prior to 2002.³¹⁶ At Senate, the degree names were further amended to add “,TechBC” to the end of the degree name in order to avoid “diluting the value of the SFU B.Sc. degree.”³¹⁷ Although TechBC student David Brokenshire – who would later be elected as a student senator – expressed concern that making this distinction “might result in the degree being viewed as a lesser degree,”³¹⁸ it has perhaps had the opposite effect in the minds of some former TechBC students. Fourth-year student Ian Buckley, who will convocate with an IA degree in June 2003, remarked that “I think that’s beautiful, I think that’s so ironic. I think it’s just the epitome of perfection, because it will have TechBC on it still. I have no problem with that. I think that’s a positive thing, I think that’s hilarious.”³¹⁹ The degree names for SFU Surrey students entering in September 2002 and later have yet to be determined.

In addition to the academic planning issues, the integration of a new campus into SFU presented a significant logistical challenge, with implications for student records systems, library services, human resources, facilities, equipment, financial systems, Web sites, email systems, signage

³¹⁵ Simon Fraser University, *Final Report: SFU at Surrey Short Term Academic Planning Committee*, (5 June 2002), p. 9.

³¹⁶ John Waterhouse, “Memorandum to Senate Re: Motions from the SFU at Surrey Short Term Academic Planning Committee,” (18 June 2002).

³¹⁷ Simon Fraser University, “Minutes of a Meeting of the Senate of Simon Fraser University held on Monday, July 8, 2002 at 7:00pm in Room 3210 West Mall Centre.”

³¹⁸ Simon Fraser University, “Minutes of a Meeting of the Senate of Simon Fraser University held on Monday, July 8, 2002 at 7:00pm in Room 3210 West Mall Centre.”

³¹⁹ Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

and stationary.³²⁰ TechBC’s modules were converted to one-credit courses in the SFU registrarial system. Student GPA conversion was a more difficult task: TechBC had operated a 4.0 GPA scale with a maximum grade of A, whereas SFU uses a 4.33 scale with A+ grades. TechBC students’ grades were ported to the SFU system unchanged, leaving them disadvantaged for scholarships and other forms of academic comparison.³²¹ SFU staff moved quickly to make some services, including libraries and co-op placements, available to students as a demonstration of good faith and the benefit of being part of SFU. In retrospect, 41% of former TechBC students surveyed for this project agreed that the transition “was well-managed,” and only 33% disagreed. On the other hand, only 37% agreed that SFU “considers the interests of students in its decisions regarding TechBC” and only 22% said that SFU is “responsive to student concerns and problems.”³²² As damning as these figures might appear to SFU, they do reflect a more general frustration with the process of TechBC’s closure and amalgamation,³²³ and SFU did not necessarily fare any worse than another institution would have in the same situation. Any such institution was encountering a situation where 75% of students disagreed with the government’s decision to close TechBC;³²⁴ SFU, at least, benefited from general student agreement (79%) that it was the best institution to assume TechBC’s students and programs, if closure was necessary.³²⁵

³²⁰ Terry Lavender, “More than 500 pupils enrolled at Surrey,” *SFU News*, 5 September 2002.

³²¹ Diane Luckow, “Registrar’s office overcomes hurdles,” *SFU News* (5 September 2002); Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003.

³²² John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 6.

³²³ 63% of students disagreed that the *government* “considered the interests of students in its decisions regarding TechBC” (23% agreed), and 67% disagreed that the government was “fair and even-handed in its decision-making regarding TechBC” (19% agreed). See John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 4-5.

³²⁴ John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 2.

³²⁵ John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 5.

Faculty members, meanwhile, are adjusting to the new reality of SFU. They find themselves once again within an established institution, unsure of their own futures but conscious of the need to join the competition for tenure. “We’ve got a very nervous group of faculty,” admits one SFU administrator. “But they’re also very committed and keen.”³²⁶ This tension is visible to students, according to Brittney Bogyo, who is now President of the “Unnamed Student Society,” which represents students in the Surrey programs. “Some of [the faculty] were former SFUers, and some of them did not want to be part of SFU. And some of them did not want to deal with the bureaucracy and infighting that they foresaw. Which is going on massively, like the fighting over getting tenure, which is a big problem right now,” she says.³²⁷ On the other hand, many faculty acknowledge that SFU has performed as well as any institution might be expected to in the circumstances. One professor observed that

SFU has some truly enlightened people in leadership positions right now, some very very clever and big-minded and big-hearted people. And I think the institution’s damn lucky and we’re damn lucky that they’re in there, and I think it’s due to them that things have gone as well as they have. And I think SFU by and large has done about as good a job at this as any university could be expected to do. ... They’ve been very forward-looking and very wise in their handling of the situation, and I think without them it could, *would* have been a lot worse.³²⁸

The real test for SFU will be how the TechBC programs grow and develop under its management, and whether the faculty remain. The students are largely captive to SFU, since there are still no transfer credit arrangements with other institutions. The learner survey indicated that 92% plan to remain at SFU and complete a degree.³²⁹

³²⁶ Confidential interview.

³²⁷ Brittney Bogyo, personal interview, 10 February 2003.

³²⁸ Confidential interview. Emphasis in original.

³²⁹ John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 15.

TechBC Board chair Sharon Shilliday was unceremoniously dismissed by Order in Council on 11 February 2002, along with the remaining governors.³³⁰ Like many people involved with the university, she harbours considerable bitterness toward the government and the way it handled TechBC. Curiously, however, she is a strong supporter of SFU's role in managing the former TechBC campus and programs. “It's what we'd wanted all along,” she says, recalling the early days of the Fraser Valley University Society, which had lobbied SFU President William Saywell to establish a campus in the valley. “It doesn't matter who's serving students as long as it's a full-service *university*,” she says. “In the end, TechBC had morphed into much more than I or the community expected.”

Still, the woman from the Fraser Valley who spent more than a decade lobbying for and helping build TechBC has a warning for the politicians: “As soon as we lose our university, I'm coming out of the woodwork.”³³¹

³³⁰ British Columbia, OIC 100, Approved and Ordered 11 February 2003.

³³¹ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

Chapter 6: Evaluating the Arguments

The battle over TechBC and its possible demise was a heated and very public process. Arguments that are carried on through the media usually lack the benefit of sober analysis of the public policy issues involved. This chapter analyzes two sets of arguments: those used by the government to justify its decision to close TechBC, and those used by other post-secondary institutions to justify why they should assume its programs and students.

The government's rationale for closing TechBC

The provincial government has never published a comprehensive rationale for its decision to close TechBC and transfer its students and programs to Simon Fraser University. In the course of this project, many competing reasons have been advanced, many of them with reference to statements by Advanced Education Minister Shirley Bond. For the purposes of this chapter, I shall evaluate Minister Bond's statements made during the “open cabinet meeting” of 7 February 2002 in light of evidence assembled for this project.

“Operating and capital costs for TechBC have certainly exceeded the original budget... For 2001-02 the targets were that the operating budget at this point in time should be \$18 million. I should point out that the current actual operating expenses are \$23.6 million.”³³²

The “original budget” figure is likely from the academic plan submitted to Assistant Deputy Minister Robin Ciceri on 4 August 1998. This budget, which did not include capital costs, called for a provincial government grant of \$18,000,000 in 2000/01 and \$19,000,000 in 2001/02.³³³ In fact, the

³³² All quotes in bold are from British Columbia, Executive Council, “Transcript of the Open Cabinet Meeting: Thursday, February 7, 2002.”

³³³ Technical University of British Columbia, “Draft Academic Plan Information,” (4 August 1998), p. 68.

university received a base operating grant of \$17,800,000 in 2000/01 and \$19,548,000 in 2001/02. This latter amount, a 2.8% variation from plan, was provided as recommended by a government-commissioned independent financial review of TechBC, which was conducted by Peter Adams in October 2000.³³⁴

In addition, TechBC received one-time grants of \$4,050,000 in 2001/02 for expenses related to the conversion and occupancy of interim space in Surrey Place Mall, for a total government grant that year of \$23,598,000.³³⁵ This amount is clearly in excess of original operating budget projections, however those projections foresaw a permanent facility in operation by 2000,³³⁶ in which case the interim facilities would not have been necessary. Conversely, the original budget did not include any provision for lease costs in the Central City development.

“Student enrolment numbers have consistently fallen short of the targets that were put in place... it was anticipated that in order to carry the operating expenses, 1,440 students would actually be in attendance at this institution. Today we have 378 undergraduate students.”

The August 1998 academic plan foresaw 515 undergraduate and 454 graduate FTEs enrolled in 2001/02,³³⁷ when in fact only 362 undergraduate and 30 graduate FTEs enrolled that year.³³⁸ There has been considerable debate about this discrepancy and the use of enrolment statistics by the Minister to justify decisions regarding TechBC. It is clear that the 1998 projections assumed that permanent facilities would become available beginning with the second cohort of students, who entered in September 2000.³³⁹ However, as described in Chapter 4, this timetable was abandoned when the government decided to proceed with the ICBC “Central City” partnership, which would

³³⁴ British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology, “Technical University of British Columbia 2001/02 Total Operating Grant,” (3 April 2001).

³³⁵ Gloria Back, letter to Bernard Sheehan, 5 April 2001, p. 2.

³³⁶ Technical University of British Columbia, “Draft Academic Plan Information,” (4 August 1998), p. 37.

³³⁷ Technical University of British Columbia, “Draft Academic Plan Information,” (4 August 1998), p. 68.

³³⁸ Technical University of British Columbia, “TechBC Strategic Business Plan,” (11 December 2001), p. 26.

not provide permanent facilities until 2003. Enrolment projections were adjusted downward to coincide with available space.

However, TechBC *did* have difficulty achieving even these revised targets. As described in Chapter 5, the Adams report (October 2000) called for a target of 470 FTEs for 2001/02³⁴⁰ but TechBC achieved only 392 FTEs in that year, or 83% of its target.³⁴¹ Although TechBC officials advanced numerous reasons for this fact, many of them beyond the control of the university, the minister was correct when she asserted that student enrolment was less than expected.

“The original vision and mandate for this institution was that ultimately private sector partnerships would generate a significant portion of the operating expenses to actually run the institution. In fact, those have not materialized, and there are few, if any, private sector dollars... The vision was that one-third of faculty salaries would be paid by industry at this particular point in the development of the institution. As you'll see, there is actually minimal revenue from private sector activities. In fact, when I looked back at the economic mandate for the institution it was originally believed that almost 50 percent of the operating and expenses around the institution would be generated from the private sector. That simply has not occurred.”

The August 1998 budget called for \$1,065,000 in revenue from applied research and \$1,500,000 in other revenue for the 2001/02 fiscal year.³⁴² These two sources would have represented 10% of the revenue for that year ; even in 2003/04, the final year of that plan, only 28% of revenue was to come from those other sources.³⁴³ However no significant private-sector revenue was actually recorded in 2001/02.³⁴⁴ This was clearly below expectation, although in retrospect it is doubtful that those projections were realistic for a start-up institution. As one administrator familiar with the financial situation explained,

³³⁹ Technical University of British Columbia, “Draft Academic Plan Information,” (4 August 1998), p. 37.

³⁴⁰ Gloria Back, letter to Bernard Sheehan, 5 April 2001, p. 3.

³⁴¹ Technical University of British Columbia, “TechBC Strategic Business Plan,” (11 December 2001), p. 13.

³⁴² Technical University of British Columbia, “Draft Academic Plan Information,” (4 August 1998), p. 68.

³⁴³ Technical University of British Columbia, “Draft Academic Plan Information,” (4 August 1998), p. 68.

³⁴⁴ Technical University of British Columbia, “TechBC Strategic Business Plan,” (11 December 2001), p. 26.

the economic mandate required resources, which meant that you had to be able to free up faculty to do the stuff. And you had faculty juggling not only development, delivery, plus research, and so when do you find the time for economic mandate? So it was almost as if the economic mandate piece of it was a couple of years too early... If anything could slide it was the additional revenue, as opposed to not getting the curriculum done or not hitting your recruitment targets.³⁴⁵

Advanced Education Ministry officials, however, worried that the lack of private sector revenue indicated that TechBC had been unable to secure the confidence of high tech industries.³⁴⁶

“We have been unable to come to the conclusion that the plans that have been provided [by TechBC], in terms of the current way that services are delivered at Tech B.C., would be a solution for us, and certainly would not provide the certainty that we require for students.

As discussed at length in Chapter 5, there were doubts among government officials – and even TechBC staff – about whether TechBC’s final business plan, which was developed to address the issues identified by the Minister, was viable. The plan proposed a dramatic expansion in student numbers and a dramatic reduction in costs, to be achieved within the first year. It would have been a significant challenge, presenting a number of risks.

The Minister spoke of “certainty that we require for students,” however it was her own comments, and those of her cabinet colleagues, that first inspired uncertainty among TechBC’s students. The certainty that she sought was, in fact, certainty for the Ministry, something that TechBC’s final business plan could not provide.

“The Tech B.C. proposal, at the end of the day, was more costly than the SFU proposal by more than \$22 million over three years.”

As ultimately agreed between SFU and the Ministry, the SFU proposal will cost \$8,770,000 in 2002/03, \$11,180,000 in 2003/04, and \$13,540,000 in 2004/05, for a total of \$33,490,000 over three

³⁴⁵ Confidential interview.

years.³⁴⁷ TechBC’s final business plan called for a provincial operating grant of \$17,900,000 for each of those three years, for a total of \$53,700,000. This suggests a cost differential of \$20,210,000 over three years, somewhat less than the Minister asserted. In Estimates debate on 29 April 2003, Minister Bond stated that the decision to transfer TechBC to SFU had resulted in an annual savings of \$7 million³⁴⁸ and this appears to be correct for 2003/04. Of course, it should be noted that the SFU proposal calls for the delivery of less than half the FTEs proposed by TechBC.

The Minister’s announcement on 7 February 2002 included \$10.5 million of one-time transition costs, which she stated was “absolutely worst case, in essence... and I expect to see it much smaller than that.”³⁴⁹ In fact, the total cost of winding up TechBC was \$50.5 million, including \$6.6 million to write down the value of capital assets, \$2.1 million for employee severance, and \$0.7 million for employee vacation and other contract terminations. It also included \$41.1 million paid to ICBC as a negotiated settlement between the government and the crown corporation³⁵⁰ to terminate the lease for TechBC’s permanent facility.³⁵¹ This latter cost would likely have been incurred anyway, since TechBC’s final business plan called for the abandonment of the ICBC development and continuation in leased space.

The long-term savings arising from the closure of TechBC may be negligible, because SFU will doubtless be lobbying the Ministry for both capital and operating funding for the Surrey

³⁴⁶ Confidential interview.

³⁴⁷ British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, “SFU Surrey Campus: Total Provincial Operating Funding,” (16 September 2002). The agreement between SFU and the Ministry says that funding for Academic Support Services, which is \$1,500,000 in 2002/03 and 2003/04, is “to be determined” for 2004/05. For the purposes of this comparison it has been assumed to be unchanged in 2004/05.

³⁴⁸ British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, *Hansard* 14(10), 29 April 2003, p. 6318-6319.

³⁴⁹ British Columbia, Executive Council, “Transcript of the Open Cabinet Meeting: Thursday, February 7, 2002.”

³⁵⁰ Confidential interview.

³⁵¹ British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, “Confidential Communications Note: SFU Surrey Campus (former TechBC),” (25 September 2002).

campus. A university campus for only 800 students is of doubtful viability both economically and politically. Given this reality, it seems probable that TechBC’s closure will provide cost savings only during the current three-year deficit reduction plan.

The competing proposals for TechBC

The Ministry of Advanced Education received seven proposals from other institutions indicating an interest to assume TechBC students and programs. While the Deputy Minister’s letter to institutions did not set out specific criteria for the assessment of proposals, the attached consultation document indicated that “any alternative approaches should focus on accommodating the needs of current students, accommodating faculty, and wherever possible, protecting the intellectual property developed over the last few years.”³⁵² It also stated that “every effort should be made to accommodate TechBC students within existing facilities” and that the leased space at Surrey Place Mall would be available for receiving institutions. “Preference will be given to options that accommodate TechBC students in Surrey,” the document said.³⁵³ Interestingly, the document was silent on the Ministry’s expectations regarding the continuation or growth of TechBC’s programs beyond the existing students; this was decidedly a secondary consideration of the Ministry. The seven proposals are discussed below in the context of these issues.

Accommodating the existing students

Four proposals confined themselves to arrangements for existing TechBC students. UBC and SFU submitted a joint proposal to manage a process by which existing undergraduates could

³⁵² British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, “Technical University of British Columbia: Consultations with British Columbia Public Post-secondary Institutions,” (3 December 2001), p. 1.

³⁵³ British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, “Technical University of British Columbia: Consultations with British Columbia Public Post-secondary Institutions,” (3 December 2001), p. 2.

transfer to comparable programs at SFU, UBC, ECIAD, or BCIT, but only if they met admission requirements of those institutions. A secondary option, if “a substantial cohort neither wants [to transfer to other institutions] nor are capable because of prerequisites to transfer,”³⁵⁴ the TechBC program could be continued in Surrey in 2002/03 and then possibly moved elsewhere. Graduate students would receive “priority consideration” for admission to existing programs elsewhere. The proposal envisioned a “joint board of studies” to oversee the project, which would cost \$13,000 per undergraduate FTE and \$20,000 per graduate FTE.³⁵⁵ The proposal also noted a need to accommodate the program growth slated for TechBC at other institutions through the “double the opportunity” initiative. Very preliminary concepts for an “e-learning consortium” and an “SFU Surrey Centre” campus were mentioned but not elaborated.³⁵⁶

The joint UBC/SFU proposal in essence did not offer anything that was not already available to TechBC students, namely the opportunity to transfer to other institutions where they met admission requirements. This option was always available (although no formal transfer agreements had been signed between TechBC and other institutions) and would have remained so even if TechBC had been closed and no arrangements made for its students. The Surrey cohort option, which was not outlined in any depth, appears to be similar to what SFU outlined in more detail in its own proposal. UBC’s interest in the project was mostly for the intellectual property, and \$500,000 was proposed for “one-time archiving and dissemination of TechBC learning technology and course development/management tools.”³⁵⁷

The University of Victoria proposed to admit current TechBC students from the Information Technology stream, if they were willing to relocate to Victoria and if they had achieved a grade of B-

³⁵⁴ John Waterhouse and Derek Atkins, letter to Gerry Armstrong, 14 December 2001, p. 2.

³⁵⁵ John Waterhouse and Derek Atkins, letter to Gerry Armstrong, 14 December 2001, p. 3.

³⁵⁶ John Waterhouse and Derek Atkins, letter to Gerry Armstrong, 14 December 2001, p. 5.

or better in each of their IT courses. The resulting degree would be “by special arrangement,” and UVic would require students to take at least an extra year of studies if they wished to receive the regular UVic Computer Science credential. “It would not be appropriate to award a UVic Computer Science degree since their work at TechBC does not map well to our program,” the proposal indicated.³⁵⁸ Although considerable work appears to have been devoted to finding appropriate course equivalencies for TechBC’s modules, it is clear from UVic’s proposal that the university had no intention of continuing TechBC’s programs into the future or accommodating faculty.³⁵⁹

Two private institutions also submitted unsolicited proposals to the Ministry, but vehemently opposed their release to this author, arguing that they contained confidential information and trade secrets; only a brief summary of each is available. The University of Phoenix proposed to accommodate current Information Technology and Management & Technology students, and to partner with another institution for Interactive Arts students. The Kingston Education Group, which owns Kingston College and Lansbridge University (“one of the world’s first privately owned Internet universities”³⁶⁰) proposed to “acquire all or part of TechBC’s students and curriculum,” according to the Ministry summary.³⁶¹ According to a Ministry source, the private institutions were primarily interested in assuming part or all of the building, and their proposals were not given serious consideration.³⁶²

³⁵⁷ John Waterhouse and Derek Atkins, letter to Gerry Armstrong, 14 December 2001, p. 4.

³⁵⁸ D.M. Miller, “Possible Transitioning from TechBC to the University of Victoria,” 14 December 2001.

³⁵⁹ The proposal did indicate that “if there is a need to offer TechBC faculty positions to fulfill their current contracts, we would certainly consider and could use some limited-term faculty positions provided the positions are fully funded over and above our current complement” (p. 4). However, they would all be subject to the usual UVic appointments procedures.

³⁶⁰ Lansbridge University, <http://www.lansbridge.com/general/index.shtml>.

³⁶¹ British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, “Ministry Assessment of Proposals,” (5 February 2002).

³⁶² Confidential source.

Building for the future

The remaining three proposals saw the possible demise of TechBC as an opportunity for their own future growth and expansion. While each proposal offered certain benefits for existing students, they also recognized the value of both the intellectual property to be inherited and the potential for expansion in an otherwise cost-frozen environment.

Kwantlen University College had perhaps the most to gain from TechBC's demise. The establishment of TechBC as a full-fledged high-tech university had certainly marginalized any ambitions that Kwantlen might have had in that area, as the existing post-secondary institution in Surrey. With TechBC's demise, Kwantlen would have received three fully-developed Bachelor of Science programs, the potential for a new campus, and expansion of its library resources; “this will move Kwantlen ahead approximately five years in its online education plan,” the proposal stated.³⁶³ KUC President Skip Triplett also used the opportunity to push for increased stature: “the [Ministry] may want to consider whether it would be politically advantageous to change our name to something like Kwantlen Technical University, or Kwantlen Polytechnic University or Kwantlen Comprehensive University. This would allow Richmond and Langley to also lay claim to ‘having’ a university and provide a ‘win’ to three more municipalities.”³⁶⁴

Kwantlen proposed to continue offering all three TechBC program streams, and develop block transfer between KUC and TechBC programs. Graduate students would be accommodated at other universities or Kwantlen could be given the authority to offer graduate degrees. The Kwantlen proposal offered four campus options: integration of TechBC students into existing facilities at its Newton and Surrey campuses; acquisition of a North Surrey site to replace

³⁶³ Kwantlen University College, “Education Plan,” (6 December 2001), p. 3.

Kwantlen’s leased Newton facility; continuation of the Surrey Place Mall site with possible later relocation to a new Surrey campus; or occupancy of TechBC’s planned space in the ICBC development, which would meet Kwantlen’s capital needs for the next ten years.³⁶⁵ Kwantlen refused to release the financial plan for its proposal, claiming that its release would harm negotiations with a union and negotiations to purchase property.³⁶⁶ Documents obtained from the Ministry state that the Kwantlen proposal would cost \$12,000 per undergraduate student, assuming a capacity of 840 FTEs.³⁶⁷

The major problem with the Kwantlen proposal was the perception among students and faculty that it, and other university colleges, is not a “real” university and that its selection would devalue the TechBC program and credential. The Ministry’s assessment noted that “TechBC students may object to receiving a degree from a university college as opposed to a technical university,”³⁶⁸ and this issue was discussed in detail in chapter 5. Kwantlen had a strong trades focus, which might have helped it pursue the economic mandate that had stymied TechBC to date. Nevertheless, the political consequences of transferring TechBC to Kwantlen would have been serious: Surrey had been promised a full-scale university and a merger with Kwantlen would appear to be a negation of that commitment. President Triplett’s suggestion to change the College’s name demonstrates Kwantlen’s sensitivity to this problem.

³⁶⁴ Skip Triplett, letter to Shirley Bond, 6 December 2001, p. 2. The three municipalities mentioned are Richmond, Langley City, and the Township of Langley.

³⁶⁵ Kwantlen University College, “Facilities Requirements for Accommodating TechBC Students,” (undated).

³⁶⁶ Mark Grady, letter to author, 17 April 2003. This decision is presently under appeal.

³⁶⁷ Ministry of Advanced Education, “Public Post Secondary Proposals Regarding TechBC: Proposal Submitted by Kwantlen University College,” (undated).

³⁶⁸ Ministry of Advanced Education, “Public Post Secondary Proposals Regarding TechBC: Proposal Submitted by Kwantlen University College,” (undated).

Perhaps the most novel proposal was submitted jointly by the British Columbia Institute of Technology, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, and Kwantlen. It called for the joint establishment of a “Surrey Centre for Advanced Technology and Design” that would offer the three TechBC programs, with BCIT leading the IT program, ECIAD leading IA, and Kwantlen leading Management and Technology. The consortium proposed to “negotiate a more favourable lease” at the existing betaspace site at Surrey Place Mall, indicating that “given the political furor over the current arrangements with the new ICBC facility that was supposed to house TechBC we would welcome current government assistance in negotiating a new lease.”³⁶⁹ A decision on a permanent facility would be made in conjunction with plans for a new Kwantlen campus in Surrey, a project for which, ironically, TechBC’s original Cloverdale site was promised after the move to Whalley. The proposal called for 500 students in 2002/03 at a cost to the provincial government of \$12,043,750, increasing to 700 students in 2004/05 at \$13,631,250 and 800 students by 2006/08 costing \$14,475,000. It also requested a separate capital renewal grant in order to replace high-tech equipment.³⁷⁰

The two major difficulties with the consortium proposal were potential problems accompanying a complex tri-partite management structure, and the aforementioned student hostility to receiving a degree from a university college, technical institute, or art institute. Additionally, a “Surrey Centre” would likely have had limited political appeal, as it would have been perceived as something considerably less than a full-scale university.

³⁶⁹ Tony Knowles, Ronald Burnett, and Leslie (Skip) Triplett, “Accommodation of TechBC Students: A Consortium Proposal by BCIT, ECIAD and KUC,” (11 December 2001), p. 4.

³⁷⁰ BCIT/ECIAD/KUC, “TechBC Pro Forma Budget 2001 / 2002,” (undated).

The Simon Fraser University proposal was ultimately the successful one, and this came as relatively little surprise to most students and faculty at TechBC.³⁷¹ SFU guaranteed students admission and “the opportunity to complete an appropriate degree” at a full-scale university, which would maintain an ongoing presence in Surrey. Recognizing the value of the existing TechBC programs, it proposed to continue the IA and IT programs in Surrey for at least three years, with the opportunity to later integrate them within the university’s degree offerings. The eventual agreement had student enrolment increasing from 440 in 2002/03 to 860 in 2004/05, with half the undergraduates funded at \$12,000 per FTE and half at \$9,600; graduate students are funded at \$20,000 per FTE. The Ministry also provides \$2.2 million annually for lease costs at Surrey Place Mall, and \$1.5 million for academic support services such as administration, library, student services, and computer services.³⁷² SFU obtained all the tangible and intellectual property of TechBC, and the Ministry covered all the costs of winding up TechBC. The final agreement between the Ministry and SFU contained the curious statement that “SFU will assess *and agree to use* advanced technologies to support on-line learning, as demonstrated through current activities.”³⁷³ The consequences of this statement beyond TechBC’s programs is unclear; presumably any such expansion of on-line learning would require the approval of SFU’s Senate. Given the Senate’s exclusive jurisdiction over academic matters, the validity of such a statement in an administrative agreement is questionable.

³⁷¹ See, for example, Brittney Bogyo, personal interview, 10 February 2003; Ian Buckley, personal interview, 6 February 2003; Tammy Mooney, personal interview, 11 February 2003; Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003; and confidential interviews.

³⁷² British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, “SFU Surrey Campus: Total Provincial Operating Funding,” (16 September 2002).

³⁷³ Simon Fraser University and Ministry of Advanced Education, “Memorandum of Understanding: Simon Fraser University Surrey Campus,” (signed by Michael Stevenson on 28 February 2002, signed by Gerry Armstrong on 2 April 2002), p. 4, emphasis added.

Compared with the six other proposals, the SFU option had some rather obvious advantages. It was financially competitive, administratively straightforward, provided a ‘win’ for Surrey with an ongoing satellite campus, and allowed TechBC students to obtain a degree from a full-fledged university. Indeed, students see SFU’s reputation as the primary benefit of the transition.³⁷⁴ Ultimately, it was SFU’s willingness to meet the governments needs, by providing special arrangements for TechBC’s existing students and committing to the significant ongoing project of a third campus, that made its bid successful. In return it received the significant intellectual property developed by TechBC at essentially no cost to itself, along with the opportunity to hire a captive group of talented and well-qualified faculty; indeed, it was probably the only proposal that could have retained most faculty members in the province. More intangibly, the integration of TechBC’s programs will increase SFU’s prestige and reputation for innovativeness, although the relative boost to SFU is probably less than it would have been for Kwantlen. Politically, the government needed “good news” to justify its decision to close TechBC, and SFU’s proposal was the only one that could realistically provide it.

³⁷⁴ John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 10-11.

Chapter 7: Lessons from the TechBC Experience

It is too early to draw definitive conclusions about the Technical University of British Columbia and its place in the development of post-secondary education in the province. While the university no longer exists as a corporate entity, its legacy will be seen in terms of whether and how its programs survive under the management of Simon Fraser University, and also how its graduates compare with those in more traditional programs. At the time of writing, most of TechBC's first student cohort has completed the four-year undergraduate program and awaits graduation at SFU's June 2003 convocation ceremony. The "Program in Interactive Arts and Information Technology" continues with two more cohorts of former TechBC students, as well as two cohorts (2002 and 2003) of students admitted directly to SFU. The program remains in 'betaspace,' the converted Zellers store, while discussions continue about possible permanent spaces, including the atrium constructed by ICBC for TechBC. The betaspace campus looks much the same, and is even populated with many of the same professors and students who worked under TechBC, but most interview and survey respondents indicated that it *feels* different. The students no longer perceive the 'infinite possibilities' promised by TechBC's slogan, but rather they attempt to maintain its niche within existing academic and organizational structures of its host university.

There is a degree of bitterness among many, which is not consciously directed at SFU but tends to hit the university as a sort of collateral damage. It is part culture shock, and part strong dissention with the government's decision to close TechBC. Less than 20% of former TechBC students agreed with the government's decision to close it,³⁷⁵ about the same number who agreed

³⁷⁵ John Trueman, "Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey," (unpublished paper), p. 2.

that the BC government was “fair and even-handed in its decision-making regarding TechBC.”³⁷⁶

On the whole, the students miss TechBC, and only one in four said that they would not have chosen to attend it if they had known what was going to happen.³⁷⁷

As noted at the outset, however, nothing written here will revive TechBC, and the best that can be expected is a sober evaluation of its strengths and shortcomings. What follows are some implications for the post-secondary system that result from the research conducted for this project.

The fact that TechBC was shut down only three years after it admitted students suggests a need to consider its *raison d'être* in the first place. TechBC was conceived and built as a relatively small, niche university in contrast to the general trend in British Columbia and elsewhere. This fact led to two major difficulties: increased costs, and unmet demand. On the cost side, it should have been apparent from the beginning that a small university specializing in high-tech programs would necessarily be more expensive than conventional institutions. Even with on-line learning, unconventional campuses and non-union staff, the economies of scale presented by large institutions were not available to TechBC. The university's final business plan provided a tantalizing picture of how these difficulties might be overcome, and it would have been extraordinarily interesting to see the plan implemented and evaluate its success; such success would have had profound implications for other post-secondary institutions in these days of efficiency, cost reduction, and “accountability.” However, the plan carried significant risks, and the Ministry's decision – absent any partisan political considerations – can be characterised as a cutting of losses and adoption of the low-risk, more conventional option provided by SFU.

³⁷⁶ John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 5.

³⁷⁷ John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 16.

The other difficulty presented by TechBC’s niche status was that it did not fully address the demand for post-secondary education in the Fraser Valley. The university’s roots were in the demands of community members, mainly parents, for more post-secondary spaces and greater choice in the Fraser Valley. However, a focussed high-tech institution would only meet a small portion of that demand, and while it served as a magnet for students from other parts of the province it did not fully meet the needs of the local population. Indeed, a study conducted for SFU Surrey indicates that only 38% of students enrolled in fall 2002 were from the Fraser Valley.³⁷⁸ A full 51% are from Vancouver, Burnaby, Richmond, and the Coquitlam area – locations that are served by UBC, SFU, BCIT, and various colleges. Somewhere along the line, the vision of the university’s planners superseded that of its founders. Students wanting to study anything beyond the narrow fields of Interactive Arts, Information Technology, and Management & Technology must still travel elsewhere, or attend the same colleges that had existed before TechBC’s creation.

It was a situation that always disturbed Sharon Shilliday, a TechBC board member and long-time advocate for university access in the Fraser Valley. “My vision was Waterloo West,” she says, suggesting a comprehensive university with special strength in co-op and technical programs. The government would only fund technical programs in the new university and wanted to leave arts programs to the colleges, which were cheaper and already doing the job well, she recalls.³⁷⁹ The University of Waterloo has been successful in establishing a first-rate reputation for mathematics, computer science and engineering training, but it also retained community support by providing other programs for local students. Community support for TechBC would likely have been higher if it had done the same, and this approach might also have provided some of the economies of scale that the niche university lacked.

³⁷⁸ Simon Fraser University, “Geographic Distribution of SFU Surrey Students (n=516),” undated. This calculation assumes that all “other” students (8%) are from the Fraser Valley.

This is not to say that the concept of a specialised university was unsound. On the contrary, TechBC’s unique programs and delivery models illustrate the possibilities afforded by an independent, start-up institution. Most academics interviewed for this study agree that the innovation found at TechBC would not have evolved within an established institution, or even a new institution with a comprehensive mandate. Innovation often requires autonomy, resources, and independent purpose – all of which are in short supply in traditional universities. While SFU may be able to sustain the innovation found at TechBC – and it is too early to evaluate whether this has been the case – it could not have initiated it. “What we were doing was we were getting the benefit of the investment that they had already made,” concluded SFU Associate Vice President Bill Krane.³⁸⁰ This is not an uncommon situation in the high-tech world: numerous innovations have come from start-up ventures, which are then acquired by larger corporations. Indeed, the TechBC-SFU transition has already been analyzed in the context of corporate mergers in the high-tech sector.³⁸¹

Ultimately the decision to create a public university is a political one. While some in government may have seen TechBC as a strategic investment in high-tech learning with the potential to blossom into a British Columbia equivalent of MIT or CalTech, the primary motivation behind its creation was to respond to the demands of local residents for post-secondary spaces for their children. In contemporary Canadian society, political interest attaches to the training of undergraduates, not research or graduate programs. As it unfolded, TechBC likely exceeded the modest goal of access in the Fraser Valley, although that was not always apparent to local residents.

³⁷⁹ Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

³⁸⁰ Bill Krane, personal interview, 13 February 2003.

³⁸¹ Robb McCollum, “SFU Surrey Integration Issues and Recommendations: A Student Perspective of the Simon Fraser University – Technical University of British Columbia Integration,” (unpublished paper, August 2002).

This fact clearly indicates the need for appropriate marketing for a new institution. In the present case, there were a number of marketing opportunities: the ‘civic pride’ aspect of a local full-fledged university, the dearth of university spaces in the area, and the then-rapid expansion of the high-tech sector and a commensurate need for skilled employees. Yet, in retrospect it becomes clear that TechBC mishandled these opportunities. The ‘TechBC’ acronym omitted what was arguably its biggest selling feature: its university status. Instead, the institution was often confused with BCIT or the various private technical and computer training colleges that offered diploma programs. This problem had two consequences: it contributed to TechBC’s difficulties attracting students, and it also impaired the potential community support. Although Sharon Shilliday argues that “the base of support that the [Fraser Valley] University Society built was never unavailable to us,”³⁸² little had been done to maintain that support once the university was formally established. Several community organizations observed, when they were approached for support when the university’s future was in jeopardy, that they had had little contact in the intervening years. Instead, the university had become internally-focussed as it undertook the enormous task of building programs and delivery models from scratch.

The internal focus affected the university’s relations with the business community as well. Original plans had called for significant industry involvement, partnership, and investment, and the new Liberal government was keen to use input from the business community to shape decision-making. However, business’ interests lay in research and the development of new technologies and partnerships, not the delivery of undergraduate curriculum.³⁸³ On the other hand, undergraduate education is the major priority of politicians. While industry representatives played a key role in the

³⁸² Sharon Shilliday, personal interview, 11 March 2003.

³⁸³ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

development of the programs,³⁸⁴ TechBC had no graduates at the time of its shutdown and thus had few concrete results to show to industry. In any event, TechBC’s early graduates would have encountered challenges competing with students from UBC and SFU, both of which had well-established computer science and engineering programs. TechBC had essentially no reputation to attract new students or offer its graduates. In retrospect, the economic mandate of the university, which had always taken a back seat to the development of programs,³⁸⁵ was probably too much to expect so early in its life. The final business plan assumed almost one million dollars in revenue from this function,³⁸⁶ which was probably unrealistic given the institution’s track record to that point.

The economic mandate for TechBC was also reflected in its governance this. Although the lack of a formal Senate had been a major issue in the university’s early days, it turned out to be somewhat of a red herring in the end. As Jane Fee noted, even the venerable University of Toronto does not have a formal Senate, and TechBC’s Academic Planning Board eventually filled that role.³⁸⁷ Tenure, academic freedom, and job security were not major issues within TechBC, although an irony of the story is that the transition to SFU has left most professors much more concerned about job security than they had ever been at TechBC. Indeed, the lack of tenure – and especially the fierce competition to obtain it – probably allowed TechBC faculty to focus their energies on the development of programs and the teaching of students, rather than the relentless crunch to publish papers and demonstrate research output. This is not to say that the issue was not important, and academic freedom existed at TechBC only as long as its administrators and governors supported it. The board’s academic freedom policy could be changed at any time, and the majority of Board

³⁸⁴ Confidential interview.

³⁸⁵ Confidential interview.

³⁸⁶ TechBC, *TechBC Strategic Business Plan*, 11 December 2001, p. 13.

³⁸⁷ Jane Fee, personal interview, 14 February 2003.

members could be replaced at the whim of the government. In this regard, TechBC was no different from other, more established universities, none of which had tenure and academic freedom issues written into their legislation. However, all of them shared the desire for recognition and acceptance into the broader academic community, and ultimately it is those norms that dictate a university's actions in this area.

TechBC's focus on student learning appears to be almost unparalleled in the university sector in Canada. In part this focus was occasioned by the opportunity to design entire programs from scratch within a short time frame, with a strong degree of centralised control and oversight. Such control is often eschewed by professors in traditional institutions as stifling of academic freedom, however on closer examination it is really academic *autonomy* that is at stake. TechBC's professors had much freedom but very little autonomy, because virtually all academic planning work involved a high degree of collaboration among professors, administrators, consultants, and staff. The result was programs that received exceptionally high ratings by students.³⁸⁸ Despite the protestations of university faculty associations, the collaborative non-tenure model is not universally abhorred by academics. One TechBC administrator observed that “despite the fact that [TechBC] drew heavily from a number of traditional institutions, there are people out there in traditional institutions who are very non-traditional in their thinking.”³⁸⁹

On the administrative side, TechBC did have credibility problems in terms of achieving its objectives, but this appears to be a broader problem for new institutions. UNBC took almost ten

³⁸⁸ See John Trueman, “Student perspectives on the TechBC-SFU Transition: Summary results from a student survey,” (unpublished paper), p. 3-4. It should be noted that these results are, doubtless, influenced by a degree of nostalgia toward TechBC and probably overstate the actual degree of satisfaction with the institution. Also, the survey did not poll students who had left TechBC for any reason. Unfortunately, there is no publicly-available data from any studies conducted while TechBC was operating independently.

³⁸⁹ Confidential interview.

years to achieve its steady-state population of about 3000 students, and indeed its legislation had anticipated that it would require special status for some time.³⁹⁰ Royal Roads University was founded with a model that anticipated a very high degree of cost-recovery, but this has not occurred. Universities are complex institutions, and depend on a large number of internal and external catalysts to achieve their policy objectives. They are also notoriously resistant to government control. Any government should recognize, when creating a university, that it is much more difficult to return the genie to the bottle than to release it.

The TechBC story offers numerous lessons about the importance of buildings. Many people interviewed for this project have argued that TechBC's fate was exclusively the product of the controversial ICBC 'Central City' development. This is not entirely true, although the situation might look very different today if development had proceeded on the original Cloverdale site. If anything, the TechBC story demonstrates how vitally important it is to have a bona fide campus for a new university as soon as possible. It is tempting, in these days of distributed learning and on-line education, to think that buildings are of secondary importance. While these arguments are appealing from both a financial and philosophical perspective, they ignore certain pressing realities. To the vast majority of the public who do not attend university, an institution *is* its physical location, and that location is inseparable in the public's mind from its academic programs, professors, and even its students. This is seen even in the terminology used: *building* a university, *going to* school. British Columbia has tended to choose impressive but out-of-the-way locations for its universities: Point Grey, Burnaby Mountain, Gordon Head, Cranbrook Hill, and Esquimalt Lagoon. There is an other-worldliness about our universities that shapes public expectations. For a student, choosing a

³⁹⁰ S. 17 of the *University of Northern British Columbia Act*, R.S.B.C. 1996, c. 472, provided that UNBC would remain under its own legislation until it had achieved its enrolment targets, after which time the Act could be repealed by regulation and the university continue under the *University Act*. This took place on 15 July 2002 by B.C. Regulation 131/2002.

university usually means visiting it. This often reveals nothing about the quality of the programs or the teaching staff, but it does provide a sense of place that can only be gleaned from a tour of the site and perhaps a meal in the cafeteria. For parents, the university's facilities symbolize stability, tradition, and reputation: ivy-covered walls and stone buildings reflect the substantial government and personal investment in higher education. Public support and student enrolment hinge on these things, and a university without a permanent facility is asking its potential students and faculty to take a leap of faith – something that TechBCers did, with devastating results.

If TechBC's facility – even the ICBC building – had been finished and occupied by 2001, many of these problems would likely not have manifested themselves. Student enrolment would probably have been higher once potential learners could see and feel the product, rather than imagine it. Politically, there may have been pressure to renegotiate the university's exorbitantly high lease payments, but it would have been difficult to justify abandoning a facility that was already occupied. Moreover, the community would have had something tangible with which to associate their university, just as Burnaby had the Erickson/Massey edifice a generation earlier. Even in this virtual, post-modern world, *space* is important.

What does the TechBC experience mean for other post-secondary institutions in British Columbia? Most broadly, it demonstrates that the mere fact of a university's existence does not necessarily justify its continuance. This is an era of accountability for *results*, something that is vaguely sketched out in the government's “Accountability Framework”³⁹¹ but has yet to be articulated in any detail. Presumably these results go beyond cost control and the delivery of student enrolment targets to include such things as preparing students for employment, meeting labour market needs, and evaluating program quality. This exercise potentially has profound

ideological implications, for example if universities were to be steered away from liberal arts programs toward those that were exclusively job-focussed. This concern has existed for some time; indeed, there was considerable umbrage taken in the mid-1990s when the Harcourt government focussed on *training* rather than *education*. One of the ironies of the TechBC story was that a neo-liberal government closed what was arguably one of Canada’s most right-wing universities³⁹² (which had itself been established by a social democratic party) and sent its programs and students to Simon Fraser University, which had a long-standing reputation as a home to leftist radicalism. Clearly, governments look for things besides ideological compatibility when making decisions about the future of institutions.

The story reveals a broad and perhaps unsolvable problem with post-secondary education, which is that the *government*, rather than the student body, is the primary client of post-secondary institutions. The process of soliciting proposals from other institutions brought into focus the notion that the government is essentially a purchaser of academic programs on behalf of students. Universities offer programs based not on student demand but rather on the number of seats funded by government. This is a situation that remains as long as government contributes the vast majority of the cost of education. If the TechBC process were to be taken to its logical extreme, universities become not the owners of programs but rather temporary contracted providers. Every few years, the government could put ‘out for tender’ the opportunity to deliver a certain number of FTEs in history, math, computer science, and so forth. Institutions would be forced to innovate and economize in order to make their ‘bids’ as appealing as possible. This is an approach already employed for a host of government services, particularly community social services which are

³⁹¹ British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, *Developing an Accountability Framework for British Columbia’s Public Post-secondary System*, (undated: c2002).

³⁹² This quote is commonly attributed to Jean Watters’ observation in the aftermath of the 7 February 2002 announcement that TechBC would be closed.

contracted to a plethora of non-profit agencies for fixed terms.³⁹³ It is an inherently destabilizing means of program delivery, and is profoundly incompatible with academic norms such as tenure and academic freedom. It would, however, motivate institutions to find more efficient and effective means of program delivery – as it did for TechBC, when it was forced to rethink its business plan in order to be competitive with those being submitted by other institutions.³⁹⁴

At the time of writing, a similar process is unfolding at the Open Learning Agency. The agency itself will be disestablished,³⁹⁵ but its Open College/Open University program will be transferred to an as-yet-unspecified public post-secondary institution. On 13 March 2003 the Ministry issued a request for expressions of interest to all twenty-six public institutions, as well as the criteria by which the proposals will be assessed.³⁹⁶ The government is seeking an existing institution to take over not only the Open University’s distance education courses, but also the pedagogical structure of open learning, including flexible credentials, minimal residency requirements, open access and self-registration, continuous enrolment, and recognition of non-formal learning. Preservation of these attributes is one of the Ministry’s key criteria, according to the request for proposals.³⁹⁷ However, given SFU’s own difficulties incorporating a non-traditional program into an established institution, it will be a unique challenge to see an existing university continue to operate the Open College/Open University program as a semi-autonomous subsidiary. For example, the OC/OU functions on the principle of open access with minimal prerequisites, while traditional universities tend to be very concerned about these issues, as evidenced by UBC

³⁹³ This is also an approach becoming increasingly prevalent in the health sector, particularly for ancillary services such as food, cleaning, and laundry.

³⁹⁴ Parenthetically, the process of absorbing TechBC has also caused SFU to rethink itself. Long accustomed to operating as an upstart university in the shadow of UBC, SFU must now adjust to the idea that it is the established, “traditional” institution.

³⁹⁵ *Open Learning Agency Repeal Act*, S.B.C. 2002, c. 73.

³⁹⁶ Open Learning Agency, “Message to all BCOU students and clients,” 18 March 2003. Available at <http://www.ola.bc.ca/ol/whatsnew/index.html#rfeoibcou>

and SFU’s concerns with assuming TechBC students: “Admission requirements vary substantially across institutions and are not in place for frivolous reasons. Students admitted without required prerequisites would be disadvantaged and this must be avoided at all cost.”³⁹⁸ This statement, which is indicative of the usual university view, made the joint UBC/SFU proposal unappealing to the Ministry because it would not guarantee that TechBC students could complete their degrees in a timely fashion.³⁹⁹ One of the major advantages of SFU’s proposal is that the latter would guarantee admission and full transfer credit for TechBC students who had already made progress in their degrees.

Both TechBC and the Open Learning Agency can be said to have harboured certain “organizational ideologies,” that reflected the programs they housed. For TechBC, this included an openness to industry input and a “learner-centered approach,” while for OLA this means maximum flexibility and the removal of obstacles such as fixed academic calendars, onerous prerequisites and restrictive residency requirements. There is a definite policy rationale why these programs existed in independent institutions, and it remains unclear how these unique approaches will be preserved within established comprehensive universities. The OLA transition process is continuing at the time of this writing and is not expected to be complete until 2004.

In the dying days of TechBC, some people joked that incoming SFU staff were searching for the “secret” that made everything run.⁴⁰⁰ Universities are complex organizations – both to manage and to study – and defy such simplistic explanation. If there is any secret to be found in TechBC, it is the commitment and dedication of its students, faculty, staff, and governors to a vision of a better

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ John Waterhouse and Derek Atkins, letter to Gerry Armstrong, 14 December 2001, p. 2.

³⁹⁹ This was also a problem with the UVic proposal.

⁴⁰⁰ Confidential interview.

world and a better kind of university. President Watters observed bitterly in his farewell message that

It is regrettable that shortsighted politicians and decision-makers did not share our vision for developing a better way of learning, of researching, of making a difference in a world where the only constant is change. Ignorance is a poor excuse for maintaining the status quo, let alone setting the clock back by destroying the most innovative institution most of us have ever encountered.⁴⁰¹

The fact that TechBC no longer exists as an independent institution does not mean that the knowledge generated and the lessons learned cannot be applied and expanded, whether that be at Simon Fraser University or elsewhere. While SFU develops a vision for its Surrey campus that builds upon the TechBC foundation, a new institution – the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, in Oshawa, Ontario – is preparing to accept its first students in September 2003. Its legislation bears a *remarkable* resemblance to TechBC’s governance arrangements, UOIT will be offering somewhat more general programs, such as nursing and education, as well as high-tech programs including nuclear engineering and radiation science.⁴⁰² In its formative years, the university will be paired with nearby Durham College and share some of its campus facilities, presumably avoiding some of the up-front cost problems that TechBC encountered.

About one-third of TechBC’s staff, and nearly all the faculty, remain with SFU. Many of the remaining staff have found places in other universities. All of them are profoundly changed by the experience of fighting for, and ultimately losing, their university. Many will continue questioning what they see as failings in the comprehensive university, and wait for the opportunity to put their ideas from the TechBC experience into practice. TechBC’s faculty, staff and students are indeed convinced that “our time will come again” – it is merely a matter of when, and where.

⁴⁰¹ Jean Watters, “Jean’s Message.” <http://www.spiritoftechbc.ca/jeanmsg.phtml>.

⁴⁰² University of Ontario Institute of Technology. <http://www.uoit.ca>.

Epilogue: For Further Study

The story of the Technical University of British Columbia continues to unfold under the stewardship of Simon Fraser University. The merger of the two institutions is a multi-year process that continues at the time of this writing and can only be evaluated in light of subsequent developments.

There are a number of perspectives from which the transition might be evaluated. Those who were most attached to the vision and activities of TechBC as a unique form of high-tech education are anxious to see whether TechBC's innovation and uniqueness are preserved within the broad institutional structure of SFU. Early indications show a certain disappointment on this front, and inevitably compromises will be made that attempt to serve the broader interests of the SFU community over those of TechBC 'purists.' Perhaps the more salient question will be the degree to which SFU has come to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of TechBC, and a more fruitful study would be of the decision-making process by which SFU has come to the necessary decisions.

An early example of this is the decision to convert TechOne, the common first-year curriculum, from the 5-week, 1-credit module system to SFU's standard 13-week, 3-credit semester system. The module system was definitely a unique 'innovation' of TechBC, but it was never universally accepted by students or faculty. In particular, students complained of an overly fast pace, the emphasis of breadth over content depth, and too much assessment. From SFU's point of view, the module system posed administrative inconveniences and, more significantly, transfer difficulties. In the context of a broader university, SFU hopes to retain TechOne not only as a prerequisite to continuation in IA and IT programs at Surrey, but also as an entry point for study in Computer Science and other disciplines at the Burnaby Mountain campus. When evaluating this

decision, it is perhaps less useful to analyze whether TechBC's uniqueness was preserved, but rather to investigate the broader goals being pursued. Are students benefiting from amalgamation with SFU? Surveys of the first three cohorts conducted in March 2003, near the end of the first academic year under SFU, yielded a definite *no*, however in many ways it is too early to tell.

Another equally important perspective for study is the degree to which changes to and expansion of SFU's Surrey Campus enhance post-secondary education in the Fraser Valley. As described in Chapter 2, the TechBC project took on a certain life of its own, possibly at the expense of the original goal to expand university access in the Fraser Valley. One of the major benefits for the region of the SFU merger was the possibility of more comprehensive university offerings in Surrey. On 12 May 2003, SFU's Senate approved in principle the establishment of a School of Interactive Arts and Technology, as well as business, education, and continuing studies courses at the Surrey campus.⁴⁰³ It will take several years for these plans to be brought to fruition, and their realisation will depend on securing more adequate physical accommodations for the campus, a topic that was discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

A third perspective for study is the degree to which the TechBC merger has changed SFU. As one SFU administrator has observed, the process of absorbing TechBC has caused many SFU staff to abandon the traditional view of SFU as a new, radical upstart institution in relation to the long-established UBC. Now the tables are turned: SFU is the 'traditional' university as it amalgamates TechBC.⁴⁰⁴ What does this mean for the university as a whole? Besides acknowledging that it is not as young as it used to be, will the integration of TechBC profoundly change SFU's programs and structures, or will the Surrey campus be a mere appendage *a la* the

⁴⁰³ Simon Fraser University, "SFU to offer new degree programs, continuing studies courses at Surrey Campus," (press release, 12 May 2003).

⁴⁰⁴ This observation was provided by Bill Krane, personal interview, 13 February 2003.

downtown Harbour Centre campus, which has a rather peripheral role in the eyes of most SFU faculty and students.⁴⁰⁵ There are a host of amalgamation-related issues that have yet to be explored.

The pre-amalgamation story of SFU has a number of facets that have yet to be explored. Perhaps the most fascinating is the role played by universities and colleges in lobbying the government to consider TechBC's closure. All BC universities employ government relations staff, and they also participate in an organization, the University Presidents' Council, that operates beyond the scope of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. Its President, a former senior public servant, declined comment for this paper.

This paper's discussion of the other institutions' proposals for TechBC was of necessity written from the point of view of Simon Fraser. Much has yet to be learned about the process underway at other institutions, particularly Kwantlen University College. As noted in Chapter 6, Kwantlen had the most to gain from a merger with TechBC, but it was also the choice most vehemently opposed by students and faculty. Did the government abandon the Kwantlen proposal on that basis, or did it have other failings? More broadly, the Kwantlen-TechBC scenario lends itself to an examination of the unusual and perhaps incompatible dualism of the university-college system in British Columbia.

The Ministry of Advanced Education has vast records on TechBC, and only a tiny fraction of them were accessed for this paper. Closer examination of these records may reveal insight to the Ministry's relationship with TechBC, how supportive the senior public servants were of the new

⁴⁰⁵ The Harbour Centre campus hosts many unique programs, but they appear to have little impact on the university as a whole.

university, and how the relationship soured after the 2001 election. The same issues can be explored from the TechBC perspective once SFU has catalogued the records it has inherited.

The social history of TechBC also features some promising avenues of inquiry. How did the student movement to save the university differ from other student protest movements? In this regard there will be a need to archive the records of the TechBC Learner Association while they are still available. Other intriguing records also exist, especially video recordings of President Watters’ ‘town hall meetings’ held to discuss TechBC’s future.

Finally, there exists for the time being the fascinating situation of ‘a university within,’ where the students and faculty work under a regime that has been sent in from elsewhere. This state will doubtless change as SFU Surrey diversifies its program offerings and student base.

The story of the Technical University of British Columbia remains both a source of fascination and insight to the development of post-secondary education in this province.