Thank you everyone for being here this morning.

It’s very impressive that you would give up your early morning routines to hear what I might have to say.

When I look out into the audience, I see many friends and colleagues I have had the good fortune to meet and get to know from three of the pillars of my life and career – universities, government and business.
That's gratifying, because I have always believed that there is a symbiotic relationship between those three sectors - each one is enhanced by the success of the others.

I especially want to thank Sheldon Levy for joining me today.

Sheldon and I share a fundamental belief in the transformative power of postsecondary education, and have each spent over 40 years devoted to advancing that work for the good of students - for the good of the communities we serve.

Each of us has spent more than a decade as a university president, and has been energized by the young people who have come in and out our doors – and we have each learned from them. It’s not hard to be inspired by your students, and I particularly admire those who come back to pursue degrees after time in the workforce.

Our work is gratifying – and from time to time frustrating – but always fascinating, given the complex challenges of university leadership. Those challenges will only accelerate in the future, and those who follow us in these roles will need to be supercharged in resilience and inclusiveness.

And, like me, Sheldon is in transition.

In a few short days, he takes a front row seat in government.

And in leaving the Council of Ontario Universities, I also hope to make a difference in a new way. Not from another “big” position in the sector, but from the standpoint of a “big” opportunity to use the flexibility of an administrative leave to work on a number of meaningful projects (global and local) that will benefit students and university leaders.

Now, because of these new found freedoms for Sheldon and me, our teams rather exuberantly named this event “Straight Talk” - a provocative title that suggests there are things we want to get off our chest.

Sheldon, I am counting on you not to let us down!

These themes in my opening comments -

- Relationships
- Transformation
• Energy of young minds
• Frustration
• Complexity and acceleration

– will be at the core of my thoughts today.

But first - let me give you some “straight goods” on what I believe are the most fundamental contributions of universities today, and how I believe everyone in this room – whether you represent universities, government or business – can propel them even higher.

Quite simply, our prosperity depends on the very things universities produce. And that’s knowledge – knowledge translated through our core mission in research and teaching, and the knowledge developed in our graduates, the talent needed to build a future workforce for a prosperous Ontario.

Entrepreneurship and innovation – research and commercialization of that knowledge – are the future of our economy.

Only by accelerating the shift to the knowledge economy can we maximize growth beyond the 1.5 per cent level at which we seem perpetually stuck.

Given the right conditions – and your help building stronger collaborative relationships – universities can be the engine that ultimately creates wealth.

Never before has the connection between the research being done at universities and the training of young minds in innovative ways been so intrinsically linked to the economy of today – a global economy.

When universities talk about their contribution to innovation, they talk about their tremendous research impact. “Made-in-Canada” research changes lives. And from time to time it is even recognized with a Nobel Prize! That epitomizes global impact.

Did you know that higher education research and development is a $12.4 billion industry and that 40-50 per cent of that R&D happens right here in Ontario?

We know universities punch a significant economic impact as do our colleges. Not only do they spend money in their communities, but so do
their students – and that includes international students. Plus, universities and colleges provide significant employment and offer some of the best jobs in their regions. Using the university sector that I know best, our largest institution has a $15.7 billion economic impact every year, while a mid-sized university can generate in excess of $2.5 billion annually. With 21 universities and 24 colleges in this province, that’s an astonishing combined impact!

Universities are creating job-ready graduates through co-ops, internships and community-based learning placements.

They are producing entrepreneurial thinkers for the job market – graduates who not only leave our universities with degrees in hand that stand the test of time, but those who graduate having created their own jobs for the future and jobs for others in smaller businesses. Even in large businesses, this new set of intrapreneurial skills will help existing organizations be more resilient.

Our universities are creating partnerships with industry, often in the context of their own strengths – Windsor and Mac with the automotive sector, for example; Queen’s and Laurentian with mining; York and Laurier with social innovation; and Trent and Waterloo with the green economy. And they are creating partnerships with industry, creating sector corridors, for example, in ICT – with UofT, Ryerson, Laurier and Waterloo.

And yet our critics often overlook universities when they think about wealth creation in society. Instead, they sometimes view us as consumers of wealth – public institutions that call for more investment by governments and our partners in order to make a difference in society for the long term.

That old-fashioned thinking needs to change.

It is my belief that universities need to be recognized as the entrepreneurial enterprises they truly can be, and as integral to our wealth creation ecosystem as business itself. But we need to do a better job at measuring that impact and have a broader reach across the curriculum for greater numbers of our students to graduate with these new skills.

There is no question that the mission of our public institutions has evolved. And so have expectations of us.
By supporting that broader mission of universities you – government and business – can meaningfully contribute to and expand your own roles in wealth creation. That could be by facilitating a receptive policy environment or by creating enduring partnerships.

So now a challenge!

*(Please indulge me! You can’t put me in a room full of government, business and university leaders and not expect me to advocate for a good cause!)*

To universities: I challenge you to move forward with change.

- Accelerate through the processes deeply valued by you, your engagement in wealth creation through partnerships and activities you prioritize.

- Create a benchmark for the innovation ecosystem at your university – in teaching, research, entrepreneurship, incubators, curriculum or cocurriculars. Set a new integrated target and aim even higher.

- Find new ways for business and community organizations to engage students in internships, co-ops and various other types of work placements. Make it attractive for them!

- Seek more partnerships to do more research to solve today’s problems. You cannot do it alone, and as I look to the future, you won’t always be able to rely on accelerated government support to invest at the level needed. Solving today’s problems will secure investments to work on tomorrow’s issues.

- Ask business and community leaders what skills they need in the next generation of graduates, and then seek to provide those.

- Unleash the constraints on leadership in your institutions (however you define that) to be more creative. I guarantee it will make a difference.

- Create room to fail – not student failure, as all learning is success - but innovation failure. That’s how we move forward. Experiment.

And to the business community – here’s a challenge for you.
Remember how I said there is a symbiotic relationship between universities, business and government and that the success of each depends on the success of the other?

- Well, we need businesses to be good partners in this knowledge economy. Invest in Ontario innovation and our entrepreneurs.

- Recognize that investing in the training of our recent graduates is a benefit for you, as well as the economy, society and cultural cohesiveness – not just a cost centre, but it’s also cost avoidance.

- It is not unusual to have a career today that stretches 50 or 60 years, particularly for women. As the Ontario Chamber of Commerce put it, it’s time for the private sector to recognize its role in ‘upskilling’ the workforce for the 21st century.

- Instead of a downturn in business training investment, we need you to do more of it - whether independently or in collaboration with others.

And now to government.

I challenge you to recognize universities and colleges as key economic drivers. What does that mean to me?

- Unleash flexibility in public policy to give universities the room to do things in new ways and build a university culture that is less dependent. If your “stewardship” means control and rules, I fear we will lose enormous opportunity.

- Enact policy that provides access to seed money, unencumbered, but certainly with accountability for outcomes.

- Demonstrate good partnership by collaborating on relevant decisions before the “cake is fully baked” – this also implies investing in a cultural fix.

- Even as you seek to deliver significant savings to meet your commitment to balance the budget by 2017-18, remember that there is a difference between investment in feeding the pipeline and investment in consumption.
• Spending on postsecondary education is investing in knowledge - and that kind of competitive spending is the kind that fuels the economy and creates long-term wealth.

• We need new investment not simply in access, but in quality to meet increasing demands for creativity and innovation. Challenge yourselves and postsecondary leaders to reinvent their engagement strategies with each other and with you, and be open to difference rather than chasing sameness.

Now, a final piece of “straight talk” for us all to consider.

The attributes of trust between us as public universities and our government, and between public universities and business needs a ‘refresh.’

Let’s get back to a place where government trusts universities to manage their complex affairs, and universities can trust government to make decisions that don’t bring grief; where universities can trust business to step up for our graduates and where business can trust universities’ ability to give them what they need. And finally, to a place where universities trust each other and universities and colleges trust each other and focus on the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

In the words of Ernest Hemingway: “The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is … to trust them.”

And I will leave you with one of my absolute favourites - in the sage words of Yoda: “Do. Or do not. There is no try.”

I thank you for your time and now, over to Sheldon to see if any of this resonates.