

Universities are places where imagination and unconstrained thinking converge to produce major advancements in fundamental knowledge. Intellectual breakthroughs hide in unusual places, and often appear when they are most unexpected. For this reason, the University must be a bastion of curiosity-driven fundamental research, where great minds freely explore new intellectual horizons through unfettered and unscripted work.

It was in this spirit that the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies was established more than a quarter century ago. In the words of the late Michael Smith, a Nobel Laureate and the first Peter Wall Distinguished Professor, *'Providing resources for capable and committed individuals to follow their instincts leads to the best of all discoveries, the totally surprising, the most unexpected, and the most useful ones'*. This statement is inscribed onto the walls of PWIAS, serving as a daily reminder of the Institute's mission to support exceptional scholars in their quest to push the boundaries of fundamental knowledge.

This statement also inspired me to take on the position of PWIAS Director in 2016, after spending two years in residence as a Wall Scholar. The two years I spent as a Wall Scholar had an enormous impact on my scholarship, exposing me to a vast new intellectual terrain through interactions with UBC colleagues from many disciplines across campus. The experience initiated a period of profound intellectual transformation that continues to this day.

As PWIAS Director, I have worked towards building a renewed vision for the Institute as a focal point of inter-disciplinary collaboration at UBC; a remarkable intellectual environment where leading artists and scholars from all academic disciplines come together to pursue fundamental research and cross traditional boundaries; a place where researchers are transformed into scholars, and where the best minds across campus and around the globe are encouraged to share the fruits of their work with each other and with the broader world. I believe we have made significant progress towards these aspirations, and I am continually inspired by the profound new ideas and research collaborations that are nurtured at PWIAS.

Over the past year, I have led the effort to develop a renewed strategic vision for PWIAS, and a concrete plan of action to ensure that we can achieve continued success. This process represents a critical juncture in the history of the Institute, an opportunity to reflect on past success, learn from mistakes and chart a bold new path forward. I have been guided in my efforts by discussions with many colleagues around campus and across the world, including many scholars who have never directly participated in PWIAS programs. From these discussions, it is clear that PWIAS holds a special position within the academic landscape at UBC and beyond, serving as a model for truly creative and unconventional thinking in the increasingly bureaucratic culture that is spreading across universities around the world.

On November 16th, I received a letter from Santa Ono, Chair of the PWIAS Board of Trustees, outlining a series of directives for the future of Institute programs. These directives were approved by the Trustees during an *in camera* session, excluding myself and the two current Wall Distinguished Professors, Brett Finlay and Derek Gregory. The Trustees voted to eliminate the majority of PWIAS programs (including International Research Roundtables, Distinguished Visiting Professor and Wall Solutions Initiative), and

to modify the remaining programs to achieve closer alignment with the existing VPR Research Excellence Clusters. Under the new plan, the Wall Scholars program will be significantly scaled back, and awardees will be expected to *'engage directly'* with existing UBC Research Excellence Clusters. Moreover, a major new thematic program will be developed to *'enhance and complement the work of existing Research Clusters'*, with *'funding being awarded primarily to members of those clusters'*. Under this scenario, a large fraction of PWIAS funds will thus be used to support an on-going UBC program run by the VP Research and VP Academic.

I am deeply troubled by this new approach, and feel that the mandated re-alignment of PWIAS programs is entirely misguided. It poses an existential threat to the Institute's core mission, academic independence and capacity to catalyze truly innovative and creative research. It also highlights an on-going and pernicious governance problem at PWIAS, and sets a dangerous precedent of senior administrators directing research at UBC. For these reasons, I feel that I have no choice but to resign as Director of the Peter Wall Institute. I cannot, in good faith, lead the Institute towards a path with which I disagree profoundly, and one that I see as wholly inconsistent with its mission and mandate.

Please understand that this was not an easy decision for me. I have tremendously enjoyed my time at PWIAS, both as a Wall Scholar and as Director. I have cherished my interactions with so many of you across campus, and I take solace in the fact that our research community remains vibrant and diverse. I am looking forward to continued collaboration and friendship with many of you over the coming years. I would also like to extend a heartfelt thanks to the exceptional PWIAS staff, Emma MacEntee, Bernadette Mah, Mel Ingram, Aurora Tejeida, Katie Stannard, and all those who came before them. Their boundless energy, skill, professionalism and good humor made it a delight to come to work every morning, and we all owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude.

In closing, I would like to leave you with an inspiring message from Abraham Flexner, the founding Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton. His 1939 Harpers article, *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge*, closes with the following words, which I take as a rallying-cry in defense of academic freedom.

We make ourselves no promises, but we cherish the hope that the unobstructed pursuit of useless knowledge will prove to have consequences in the future as in the past. Not for a moment, however, do we defend the Institute on that ground. It exists as a paradise for scholars who, like poets and musicians, have won the right to do as they please and who accomplish most when enabled to do so.

Sincerely,



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