

The 2015 Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences annual conference and 75th anniversary celebration

In November 2015, the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences had the privilege of bringing together a broad range of members, partners and supporters for two important activities: a reception to celebrate the Federation's 75th anniversary and a conference to discuss some of the organization's top priorities. The following is a brief review of highlights from these events.

A reception to celebrate our 75th anniversary

More than 250 guests gathered at the Chateau Laurier's Adam Room on November 16th to help celebrate the Federation's 75th anniversary. Claudette Commanda, member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Band Council, and professor in feminist and gender studies at the University of Ottawa, welcomed the gathering to unceded Algonquin territory. Her opening words addressed the need for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and her support for the dialogue on these issues at the conference. Ted Hewitt, President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), delivered an address thanking the Federation for its many years of service and reinforcing the importance of the organization's contribution to scholarly work in Canada. The Federation also unveiled two exciting media resources to tell the story of the organization's history: a 75th anniversary [video](#) and an [interactive digital timeline](#). See photos from the celebration [here](#).

A conference to explore the role of the Federation today

On November 17, the Federation hosted its 2015 annual conference at Ottawa's National Arts Centre. At total of 188 delegates attended, representing a broad spectrum of higher education thinking, including faculty, administrators, students, funders and professionals in the non-profit sector. The conference examined lessons and accomplishments from the Federation's history and explored key issues vital to the future success of the humanities and social sciences in Canada. Videos from the panels and *Big Thinking* lecture are available for viewing [here](#), and conference photos are [here](#).

A retrospective with past Federation presidents

The conference opened with a panel of past Federation presidents who shared lessons from their mandates and provided perspectives on the Federation's current challenges. Key issues highlighted by the panel included the challenge of effectively engaging members and persuasively advocating for stable research funding. Carleton University President and Vice-Chancellor Roseanne Runte, who served as the president of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities between 1982 and 1984, said that the Federation has an enduring role to educate leaders who are not familiar with the humanities and social sciences, adding that





the organization can speak more effectively with its collective voice than separate smaller associations who might otherwise not be heard.

Donald Fisher, Acting-Principal of Green College at University of British Columbia and President of the Federation between 2004 and 2006, emphasized the Federation's role in supporting multidisciplinary work at universities by providing forums for collaboration, such as the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. He also stressed that there is a role for the Federation in helping the humanities and social sciences demonstrate their relevance to the rest of society. This point was echoed by Noreen Golfman, Provost and Vice-President (Academic) at Memorial University and Federation President between 2007 and 2011. She recounted some of her difficulties engaging members and capturing the attention of government, warning that practitioners in the humanities and social sciences can't take their relevance to the public for granted.

Reconciliation and the Academy

Discussions of the Federation's top current priorities began with how the postsecondary education sector can and must contribute to reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. This conversation began with a *Big Thinking* lecture delivered by celebrated writer, journalist and musician Wab Kinew, who is now serving as Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Affairs at the University of Winnipeg. He argued that a pervasive myth of cultural superiority has led to a longstanding bias against Aboriginal knowledge, leading to great wrongs against Aboriginal peoples. He reminded the audience that practitioners in the social sciences had a role in creating Canada's residential school system. Academic institutions therefore have a responsibility to support reconciliation. He argued for instance that every mid-level professional in Canada ought to have a baseline knowledge of Indigenous peoples—a feat that will require concerted effort from our academic institutions.

In a panel following Kinew's address, University of Ontario Institute of Technology President & Vice-Chancellor Tim McTiernan stressed that the process of reconciliation requires academic leaders to practice self-reflection in order to change perspectives, explaining that we are too often unaware of the power structures that exclude others. S. Brenda Small, Vice President for the Centre for Policy in Aboriginal Learning at Confederation College, said that truly welcoming Aboriginal knowledge into our academic institutions will require systematic change, and she encouraged more people to become involved in a fearless conversation to understand the perspectives of others. Gabrielle Fayant, a leader in youth organizations such as the Assembly of Seven Generations and ReachUp! North, reminded attendees that social policies have had a significant effect on people like her, whose life has been affected by Canada's welfare and social service systems. Academics whose work supports such policies have a responsibility to make things better, she said.

Demonstrating impacts in the humanities and social sciences

The second major issue explored at the conference was the rising demand for academics to demonstrate the impact their work has on the rest of society. Delegates explored this issue in four concurrent workshops, each devoted to a different area of impact: teaching and learning, economy, society, and policy. In these workshops, many participants:

- Emphasized that the impacts of academic work can be challenging to measure, due to indirect pathways to impact, a high degree of collaboration and long time frames.



- Contested the idea that academic impacts could be well described using strict, standardized, quantitative measurement techniques.
- Supported the idea that the humanities and social sciences should find better ways to describe the positive effects they have in the world around them, although many also said they struggled with how to do this.
- Agreed that engaging in more collaboration with partners outside academia can both improve research quality and enhance the impacts of research.

Overall, two concepts were broadly supported by participants:

- that the Federation help develop and share tools that can support researchers who need to describe the impacts of their work; and
- that the Federation be a strong voice for the humanities and social sciences in higher level discussions about research impacts.

