

Episode 3 – President Keshen

Brad Fraser 00:01

Hello and welcome to the Social Work beginnings podcast. Social Work Beginnings is a student hosted podcast engaging with instructors, agencies and members of the Social Work community in Canada. As we strive to learn to become effective social workers at the beginning of our careers, we seek to amplify the ongoing work to advance social justice in Canada within social work. This podcast was born out of a desire to equitably increase the accessibility of opportunity to learn outside the classroom about our diverse field. Our guest today is the University of Regina is eighth president, President Jeff Keshen. Dr. Keshen assumed the role of President and Vice Chancellor on July 1, 2021, following an almost year-long, rigorous, national search process. Dr. Keshen holds a doctoral degree from York University with a research concentration in the history of war and conflict. He is the recipient of the Government of Ontario, June Callwood Award for outstanding service in volunteerism for success with the establishment of the University of Ottawa's experiential learning service. Dr. Keshen is the author of five books, more than 25 scholarly articles and has edited 11 books. Dr. Keshen lives in Regina, with his wife and his two children. Thank you for joining us today President Keshen.

President Keshen 01:28

Thanks so much.

Brad Fraser 01:30

We had the opportunity to talk about social work week coming up here. And as you know, the Faculty of Social Work lets in a new cohort of students around this time. What would you say to those new students in terms of joining the University of Regina in the Social Work program?

President Keshen 01:50

Well, the first thing I would say is they have a really bright future tremendous opportunities, we hear from government all the time about how there are shortages of social workers in all fields across the province. So that's, that's part of it. I think that as well as the obvious ones about as they enter the university, my advice is always to say, as a professor, and as that teacher, and also as a parent is a balance, you're trying to do a little bit each day, come to class, don't put off stuff, don't procrastinate. Those are the obvious ones. But also, I think that you're entering a field, which is very special in is it meets a variety of social needs, many of them very desperate social needs, you're gonna be dealing with very challenging situations, for all things like addictions and child welfare. And sometimes the more unpleasant aspects of society. However, you'll be helping people with great need, and people sometimes with with maybe not as much need but still consider that they really would benefit from social worker. And what I mean by that is, a parents will use social workers to help them deal with difficult situations we did, as well as parents, I found the social workers to be tremendous assets in helping us deal with, with challenges for our own children, which will be small when you think about in the grand scheme of things, but their behavioral issues, and there's so many, many programs that social workers can get help with. And I would just say that I'm hugely admiring of the of the field, you're amazing professionals. And I think that you contribute to society. And, and, and folks who are really going through very difficult difficult cases, difficult circumstances.

Brad Fraser 03:37

Absolutely. And you touched on the fact that it's a professional program. And so I guess in terms of, you know, just the, you know, of our as a whole, under your leadership, there has been a focus on that experiential learning that social work has a long history of in person practicums, both in the Mini, which is a part time practicum. And then a full time that students were going to be finishing tell us a bit more about that focus, though, as a university on giving students that experiential learning.

President Keshen 04:04

So I'm from the Arts myself, I'm a historian. And Social Work, Nursing, Business, all those areas and many others have practicums. And it's that experience within the community that not just enriches the student experience, but makes them far more career ready on graduation. So the reason I mentioned that in the Arts is that we talk about the Arts as having transferable skills, communication skills, writing skills, researching skills, and then many art students history. English, often will have difficulty getting that first job because they're not specialized. The impetus when I got involved in experiential learning back in the day when I was at Ottawa, you as an historian is connecting students to do volunteer work on researchers to get not just students appreciative of the skills that they can bring in the way that they can apply them to a variety of different organizations and companies and all types of abundant opportunities, but to get those employers a look at the art students, because, um, they are often glossed over when it came time for the graduating when they're applying for jobs, because we know that the best job interview is the one that you see people see you performing the job in place. So I always thought about the fact that experiential learning, which is intrinsic to social work, and intrinsic, to so many areas had to be instilled within all parts of the university. So students recognize the applicability and the wide applicability of the skills that they were carrying, to enrich their educational experience by giving themselves that sort of experience, that sort of that experience outside of the classroom, which is a lot of fun, often doing work in relationship courses and getting credit for it. And having employers look at them in their ability to apply their their skills in a workplace setting. So that was how I became involved in it. And it was really to expand the things that we already saw in many faculties in many disciplines, many professional programs to the entire university. And I think our students will benefit from them.

Brad Fraser 06:08

Absolutely. And you talked a little bit about your kind of background as a historian and, you know, we're gonna put it in the podcast notes, but I was able to take a look at some of the books that you've edited in regards to social welfare and policy. And so I think, you know, for many of us in social work, we actually take policy classes and it's sometimes an underrepresented part of social work. People think of the work part of the profession, perhaps at a micro kind of individual person to person scale, but policy has such a huge effect on social work, and so many of the intersections of what we do, where did that interest for you come from as a part of history to focus on social welfare in Canada?

President Keshen 06:50

I've edited books and social welfare. My actual focus, now I'm going to connect the two, is on war and society. Isn't it interesting, that much of the social policy in this country, so any social policy has its roots in say 19th century social gospel, Church, State eventually took a lot of that activity over. And a lot of that was done locally, like health policy was done locally was entirely inadequate to meet the

situation. For example of the first pandemic after the First World War. Unemployment could not be done by city run operations where they had digging ditches, making roads, things of that nature by pick and shovel. So this is the way it was done. It was relief work temporarily, and people would be provided with the very basics. It's fascinating under times a crisis, where policy is out of necessity, teleported forward, major changes in social policy and where myself and many colleagues became involved in it, it the birth of our modern social welfare state, from everything from Family Allowances to unemployment insurance, to a university education that was provided free comes out of the Second World War in the 1940s. It comes out of why it's because out of the depression, people did not want to go back, their government knew that it needed more powers to do that it got those powers in wartime. And people remembered what happened after the First World War, where government basically returned to these status quo Antebellum and there was a steep postwar downturn, it wasn't going to happen again. So social policy, the intersections of my work and war and society comes out of that time of crisis, where government finally does step up and takes more responsibility, because the public was demanding it at that particular time. The same thing happened in England with the Beveridge report in 1942. Marsh report follows in Canada in 1943, so the birth of our social welfare system. So that's how I became interested in it. And then, of course, you trace the roots which are not in state, but by other agencies, which took which took the charge of Social Policy, which would have been in earlier years, some local governments on a happenstance basis, and the church, which eventually has to come into the area of social gospel, because in the time that industrialization, people were looking at the faith and thinking, it's not sustaining us. So the church had to face a crisis itself about if I was going to show its relevance. You don't endure your lot in this life to get your reward in the next. You say in the here and now the social gospel, about building the kingdom of heaven on earth, and that's what I was in time and place of industrialization, which makes the challenge of social policy going forward. Should it be only times of crisis that brings us forward to sort of a new paradigm? And, I don't think we're there at that point too much too much has happened. But there's still some of that, some of that, I think of that of that dynamic, if you will. So that's where it comes from, if your folks are interested.

Brad Fraser 10:03

Yes, absolutely. And, you know, I flagged a couple excerpts that I think our listeners will find interesting. And I'm going to read briefly here, you were writing specifically about veterans. When you said here in 1918, the National Conference on Canadian universities had proposed a modest low and grant program to help veterans enter essentially the academia. But Prime Minister Robert Borden rejected it, which is what you're I think we're alluding to in World War One. But then you then contrast this with recounting the time during and after the Second World War, if I'm following what you said, or where Ottawa then invested and 53,000 or so veterans, what I found interesting is you make the point that is specifically to provide them the opportunity to receive undergraduate education and beyond. And so with that in mind, you have such a clear historical depth that many of us won't have yet and at this stage in our undergrad, with in regards to policy, so with that type of excerpt in mind, what does this Canadian history say about government and investment in education? And and how do you see that in terms of like a modern lens that we social workers engage with both as students then ultimately engaging in policy in our workplaces in the future.

President Keshen 11:13

So it just on the other point, it is interesting that those who made the policies for veterans in the Second World War, including the Free University education one year for every year of military service, vocational training, which was woefully inadequate after the First World War, but it was a step forward, because the government never been involved in that Veterans Land Act in the Second World War, which is far more generous, the First World War, all those folks who made that policy were veterans of the First World War, who saw getting adequacies of the policies that were implemented and the disillusionment that happened with veterans. And the fact that they even became, in some circumstances a threat to this to constitute authority, many vets were on the streets with Winnipeg strikers in the great general strike of 1919. And the Great War Veterans Association had made many, many resolutions, which were highly critical of government. So it was the architects who were, who were first world war veterans who saw this policy. I think, that in this day and age, with investments in education, the education we can speak about, it is certainly providing the the basis of innovation in our society, the basis of a citizenry, that doesn't fall prey to conspiracy theories, and there's a lot of value added. And we have to show the value added of higher education. We also I think, have a responsibility within education. And I know that there's a a to and fro of on this in the political level and also the autonomy of institutions. Do we have that responsibility to ensure that our graduates such as in professional programs, are connecting to the opportunities in our economy? Now, many will say that, of course, the university is more than than not just about it is about education, to bring people to a more broader and more nuanced and more sophisticated way of thought in our society benefits from that as a whole. And absolutely, that's the case. I think it's also a balance is also about knowing that a lot of our students come here to ensure that they have that opportunity. I do believe that challenge going forward for us, and also for those who fund our education system, it will be what will it look like? If we're speaking broadly? And I don't know if we're answering your question adequately. But I do believe that our student body, and and those who would like to take a higher education, adult learners, people in communities across the province internationally, I believe that they have different expectations of what how we're going to respond to them. For example, The Social Work program has a provincial mandate, if we back it up 10 years, we would not be having half our courses online remote and social work, because what you're doing is you're responding to a challenge in the education system, where people for economic reasons for work life balance reasons they might have families, or just because we have the responsibility, also, of opening up opportunities across the province, we have to deliver education differently. And what we showed during the pandemic is that is possible. So in terms of investments and working with the government on this, I do believe we have to be thinking about because if we don't do it, others will. We have to be thinking how do we what modalities and how do we deliver that education in a way that better serves the entire gamut of potential clients, and people who want education when also say clients, but I also mean by that is people are taking degrees differently. Now, micro credentials are not a new thing, but more people are wanting them sometimes it's to upskill from a particular job that people are doing sometimes is to start and then to stack your different qualifications up to credits you build towards degrees. So I think the.is going to be the future of what we want to say is what's the The next stage in how we're going to be educating people. And I think working with public's with our public funders, and working with others who want to support education. That I think is where I think we have great hope, great opportunity. But it's also going to take investments, because provided the infrastructure to do that providing high quality online courses, that all requires a significant investment. So I think that that's going to be the one where we're going to have to work with our

province, work with our provincial government, work with federal opportunities, because internationally, we're seeing a lot of undertaking that challenge we don't want to be left behind.

Brad Fraser 15:42

Absolutely. And you started to talk about hope there. And so that follows well into the kind of the next question. And I'm going to quote you, and I believe your fellow editor writing together here, that you said that it, "has been clear in the past, however, that Canada's social policy has been a reflection of the ideology and philosophy of the times." And so as you maybe reflect on perhaps a new normal that people are striving for in a world changed by COVID. And I think earlier, you kind of pointed to the fact that it's not quite the same effect as a World War, but it has had a profound effect on society. What gives you hope, both professionally, at the University of Regina, but then you mentioned earlier, but And personally, as a husband, as a father, as a historian, what gives you hope in moments like now?

President Keshen 16:27

I think that what gives me hope is that we shown the ability to respond as, as an organization, not just University of Regina, but across the post secondary sector, to extraordinary circumstance where we still imperfect as it was, and as difficult it was, it was an disillusioning, sometimes for those who are taking classes in their basements and not interacting, we showed our ability to respond and to continue and to offer education. So that gives me hope that given what the demands are, and given where we see opportunities to be able to connect with students, who otherwise would not even consider post secondary education, who cannot afford to move out of their communities, there will always be a lot of folks who will want to come here and have that experience on site. But it gives us opportunities to expand our reach. But also it makes it far more viable for people to stay in their communities, work in their communities, contribute to their communities across the province, and not have to leave and then and then communities will also, you know, lose those folks as well. I always think that it's important, there's always going to be difficulties don't have any circumstances always going to be challenges, my word, whatever. This is the profession that that faces that. But I think that if we show that we're trying to work hard to respond to those opportunities, it gives us great, it gives us great hope that we're moving forward. The other thing I would say to social workers that are entering the profession, is for them also to know and to remind themselves always that they're doing very important to noble and work that is helping to save people from very difficult and sometimes tragic circumstances to give them hope, and the depths of really despair. And for them to know that they need to take care of themselves, as well as you're going to be dealing with a lot of very difficult, heavy and traumatic situations. So please also be prepared for yourself, to be able to take it and to always have hope and to remind yourself that the amount of the difficulties that you're seeing, and imagine the tragedies you're seeing, you are providing hope for people who sometimes feel that the situation is hopeless. Despair, I don't think is ever the option that we want to go to.

Brad Fraser 18:50

That's such a lovely way to end. But I think it would be important to ask, is there anything else you'd like to share with the students that are listening or perhaps for the many professionals that are tuning in that are in the throes of their career, anything else you'd like to leave them with?

President Keshen 19:06

I would like to leave them with this, even though I mentioned you're entering a program and a career that is desperately needed. And I hope that you'll all remind yourselves of the wide-number of people that you, really, help. And as I said before, it's not only those who are in crisis, it's those who need advice. And your profession provides that advice, including for us as well. I think you just are tremendous, tremendous, profession and tremendous people for going into it.

Brad Fraser 19:41

Thank you for your time today. President Keshen

President Keshen 19:42

Thank you so much.

Brad Fraser 19:44

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