

CONAHEC PLENARY SESSION
Remarks of U.S. Consul General Abigail Friedman
Aug. 26, 2007 10:15 am, Hilton Hotel, Quebec City

Thank you for inviting me here today. Merci de m' avoir invité à participer à ce colloque avec vous.

Estimados señoras y señores, es un gran placer para mi estar con ustedes esta mañana, hablando de un tema que, para mi, es un de los más importante para el desarrollo de nuestros tres países.

En realidad, no sabía en que idioma debería hablar hoy. Porque, sin duda, estos tres idiomas son esenciales para cualquiera operación en Norte América. Prefiero hoy día hablar en ingles y en francés por que hace muchos años en que no hablo español.

I am here today not only as a USG official, but as a parent of three young people who are, or one day may be, in the higher education pipeline. So I think I can speak with some authority and sincerity when I say that what you are working on here at this conference is truly one of the most important subjects for us, as citizens and parents in North America. It is also why I mean it with full sincerity when I say *thank you* for all that you are doing.

I want to applaud CONAHEC for your sustained efforts over a long period of time to enhance student mobility in North America. You have never wavered from this vision. You understand that if the countries of Mexico, Canada, and the United States of America are going to succeed in the 21st century, then it will be because of the quality of our workforce. And that will depend upon how well we have educated our citizenry.

The reality is that our three nations have the most intertwined relationships anywhere in the world. We see this with our trade relationship; with our security relationship; with our energy relationship; with our shared defense of North America; with our common environmental concerns; and with our people-to-people ties.

Some of you may recall that it was around the time we were considering NAFTA, that the three countries Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. delegations met to discuss whether it was feasible, in light of the NAFTA dialogue, to also increase and expand educational cooperation at the postsecondary level in a North American context. The answer was a resounding yes and our discussions evolved and developed into the successful cooperation which we enjoy today.

The North America Program of FIPSE traces back to those days. The actual program was begun in 1995 and, as many of you know, is administered jointly by the U.S. Department of Education's FIPSE, *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP), and Human Resources and Social Development Canada. Currently, there are 88 consortia, involving over 500 institutions from all three countries. Over 1,000 students have participated since the Program began. Many of the institutions who make up CONAHEC members are largely former grantees in the Program. This shows the strength of the Program's

impact. Without the Program there no doubt few instances of trilateral educational cooperation in place within North America.

Today, we are at a new turning point as we consider how to advance our North American cooperation.

After 9/11, America rightly took steps to protect our citizens and to defend ourselves against the terrorist threat. Our citizens expect that of their governments. But our new security awareness also means that in many areas we have had to take another look at the efforts we must take to assure that our wonderful North American connection continues to grow.

In the trade area, we are working more closely than ever with the business community to remove obstacles to trade; On security, our three governments are working to make sure that our security efforts are well-coordinated; we are working together to make North America more secure, and crossing the border more efficient.

And in the area of education, the time has come for us to think once again, as we did in the early '90s, if there are ways in which we can together advance and strengthen the education of our citizens in North America? What is it that we need to be doing to ensure that our students learn from our North American identity and are equipped – when they go out into the workforce - to contribute to North American prosperity?

En el sector educativo, ha llegado el momento otra vez de volver a hacer el esfuerzo que se hizo al principio de los noventas para seguir fortaleciendo la educación de nuestros ciudadanos en la región.

To do so, we ought to step back and consider how we can best advance cooperation in North America. There does not seem to be an appetite in North America for an EU-type, top-down model, or a North American union. People in all three countries would resist that model.

But there is a grass-roots reality of integration happening in North America. Our governments want to help advance that grass-roots effort. NAFTA helped to clear away some of the obstacles to the growing trade. The Security and Prosperity Partnership is trying to tackle other areas in order to improve economic competitiveness of the region, to protect the benefits already accrued as a result of NAFTA trade and then to spread them more broadly and evenly among our populations.

That is just one piece, a big piece of the reality of North America – where people every day are deciding to move, to buy and sell, to live, to visit, to study and to do research among our three countries. It is a reality, happening on its own.

But the reality is also that the movement of peoples through our region, particularly in the area of higher education, is more limited than it ought to be. It is hitting up against

obstacles which I know many of the people in this room have been struggling with for some time – whether they are credentialing, testing, accreditation.

My government recognizes the importance of greater mobility in higher education. In a Report on the future of U.S. Higher Education which came out last year, commissioned by U.S. Education Secretary Spelling, members concluded that the new higher education landscape “demands innovation and flexibility from the institutions that serve the nation’s learners.” “We want a world-class higher-education system that creates new knowledge, contributes to economic prosperity and global competitiveness, and empowers citizens;... We want a higher-education system that gives Americans the workplace skills they need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy;...”

That report emphasized that America “must put greater emphasis on international education, including foreign language instruction and study abroad, in order to ensure that graduates have the skills necessary to function effectively in the global workforce.”

The Spellings Report also identified the unique status of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) in achieving some of these objectives, and puts this program at the forefront of Department of Education programs for supporting innovation and creativity for both its domestic and international focused programs, including the North American Program for mobility in higher education – which began in 1995, on the heels of NAFTA.

I would now ask you who are here today to consider ways in which, alongside the SPP process, we can continue to advance educational cooperation and student mobility. Our efforts to date have been positive, but not enough.

The timing could not be better: Our governments understand that we need to communicate better what we are trying to do under the Security and Prosperity Partnership. We are looking at ways to bring in other voices and perspectives beyond the business sector.

I recognize that I am preaching to the choir, here. But I ask that in all of your discussions today, we go back to the question of how to help students as they seek an international education. Because the fact is, we don’t have to convince the students – they already know what they want; they already want to get an international perspective. What we do have to do is make it easier for this to happen. In all three of our countries.

I’d like to suggest that our goal should be to make international higher education as simple as going from one school to another in pre-secondary and secondary-school education at home. I know that this is pie-in-the-sky, but we need to set ourselves the goal of simplicity, accessibility, and efficiency.

No one is better placed to come up with new ideas to propose to our governments in this regard than CONAHEC. All of you here today have devoted your careers, your lives, to

education. You are in the best position to help steer our governments in the right direction; to help us make sound policy. We welcome your ideas.

Finally, let me applaud you for not giving up, for continuing to advance our cooperation in this area, for getting the word out about all that is going on among the three countries, for keeping the flame alive.

Thank you.