

# The dean's dream

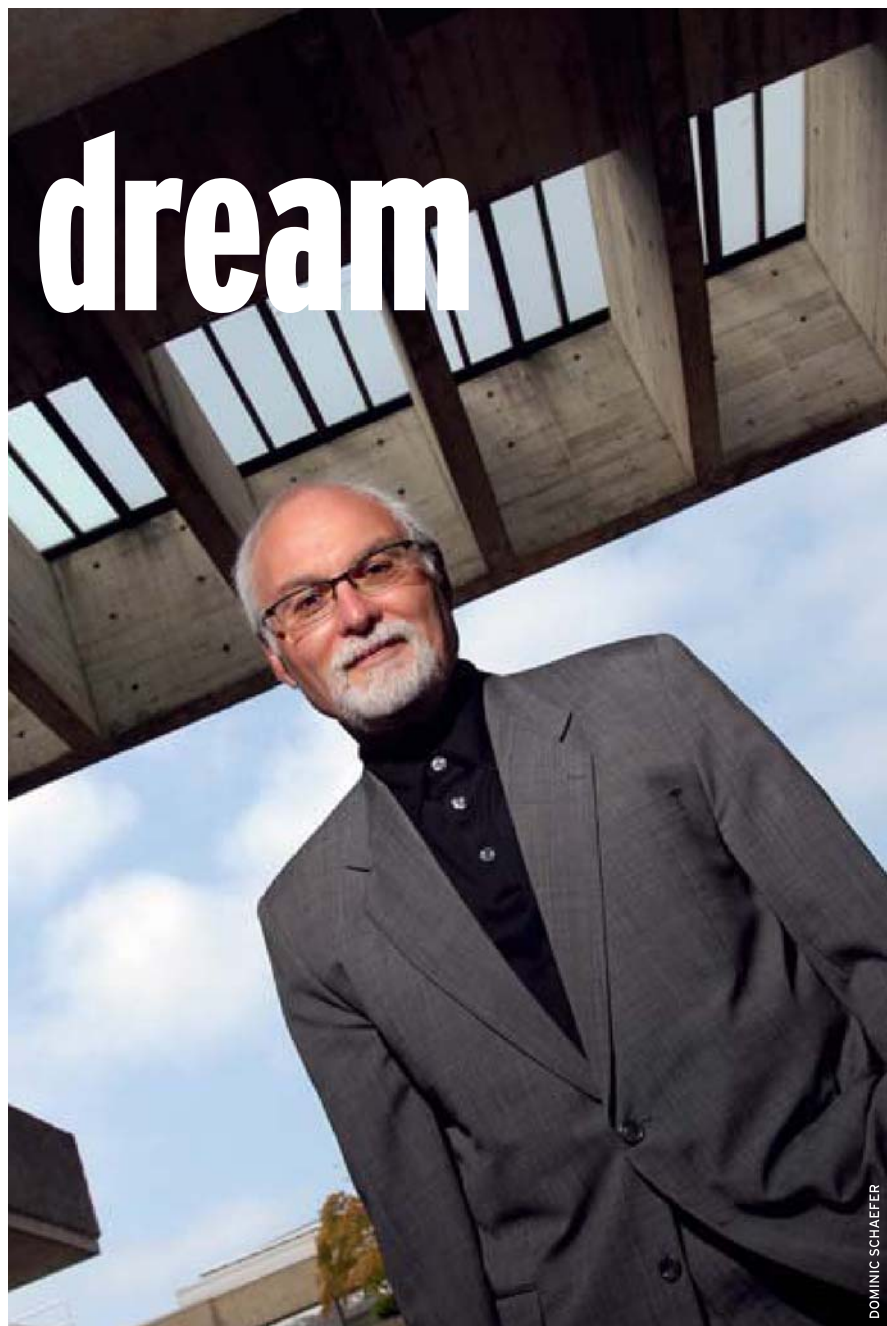
*Daniel Shapiro, the dean of Simon Fraser University's faculty of business administration, strongly believes that B.C.'s future economic prosperity lies in innovation*

## CURT CHEREWAYKO

Since assuming the role of Dean of Simon Fraser University's faculty of business administration in the spring of 2008, Daniel Shapiro has worked to keep SFU business students at the forefront of issues facing business today. With students and businesses adopting new technologies at an ever-faster pace, it's no easy task. However, business students at SFU are being introduced to new concepts like crowd-sourcing and content aggregation. Shapiro's current research is in the areas of corporate governance and the determinants of foreign direct investment. *BIV* caught up with Shapiro to discuss his vision of the B.C. of tomorrow and the role that innovation has in helping the province rebound from the recession

### **What new technologies should managers and business leaders adopt to improve their business operations?**

We're still coming to terms with that. I don't think to date there has been wide-



DOMINIC SCHAEFER

Daniel Shapiro, dean of SFU business, hasn't seen any systemic commitment in Canada to making the country a leader in innovation

spread acceptance or even understanding of how modern technology can be used by leaders to enhance leadership. I'm thinking in particular of communications devices and social networking tools. I have not seen any systemic application of those technologies across organizations.

**Social networks, the Internet and mobile devices like the iPod are becoming ubiquitous in the lives of**

**many Canadians, and younger Canadians in particular. Has the adoption of such technologies influenced the way that SFU educates its students?**

You can't walk into a classroom anymore, particularly a wired classroom – and they are almost all wired – and assume that you, as the teacher, are the person with the most information in the room. It's very likely that your students have access to more information than you are capable of knowing. So we

## “I don’t think to date there has been widespread acceptance or even understanding of how modern technology can be used by leaders to enhance leadership”

- Daniel Shapiro, dean of SFU's faculty of business administration

really have to begin to redefine what it is we do in classrooms. I know that some faculty members are attempting to block technology from the classroom, whereas others are trying to find ways to use it to their advantage. I think that, as with the corporate world, we’re moving toward a solution without knowing what it is quite yet. Personally, I think that banning technology from the classroom is wrong, counterproductive and backward-looking. We’re all going to have to find ways of engaging students in a wired environment.

### **What is the role of universities in ensuring that Canada remains competitively innovative? Do our academic institutions deserve blame for any shortcomings in Canada’s productivity?**

For years Canada has experienced a productivity gap vis-à-vis the United States. More recently, that has translated into the innovation gap. I think it’s hard to place the blame for the problem in the hands of any one institution. You hear things like: “Our corporate leaders are too conservative, they under invest in research and development”; “Our tax regimes are biased against innovation”; “Our resource base is such that there is more money to be made in being hewers of wood and drawers of water than there is in exploiting technology”; and “Our universities have not been successful in delivering basic research and development.”

I actually think it’s a combination of all of the above. It is a systemic problem and it is going to require much more attention to a series of issues.

### **Have any particular solutions caught your eye?**

I know that there is some discussion about creating a set of super-elite universities – a smaller set of universities that are consistently favoured by government in terms of funding, who would be more globally competitive in terms of their ability to create technology. I’m half-

sympathetic toward this argument. The Canadian tendency to create all universities equally has worked to our disadvantage. It has limited our ability to produce universities that are in an elite category globally-speaking. I think it’s the unique nature of Canadian federalism and the provincial control over education that has limited that process from evolving in Canada.

### **Are we still going to be talking about the innovation gap 15 years from now?**

We will be talking about innovation. Whether there will be a gap or not remains to be seen. Are we addressing it? To be honest, so far I haven’t seen very much evidence of that. There are lots and lots of people and groups who, at various levels, have clearly identified innovation and the knowledge economy and all those kinds of buzz words as the secret to our future success and prosperity. But I don’t see any great unifying force that brings all these people and these understandings together. I think it is the difficulty in getting an agreement on where to start and what to focus on.

### **Is that perhaps an acknowledgement that innovation is not a priority for the majority of industries in Canada?**

To be fair to the natural-resource sector, it’s a higher-tech sector than you might imagine. That sector may itself prove to be a useful springboard toward innovation. It may just be that the resource sector is where we will specialize as a knowledge economy. The pessimistic side: the wealth that is created by our natural resources provides a false sense of security, inflated currency values, makes the rest of our economy non-competitive and, therefore, possibly retards innovation. I don’t think that is going to happen. We may be emerging from that trap because of the increasingly obvious threat that environmental damage and climate change are going to pose. ■

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