

A UNIVERSITY TRANSFORMED



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*Over the past 12 years,
President Meric Gertler has
positioned U of T as a global
powerhouse in research,
sustainability and student
opportunity*

BY JOHN LORINC

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHNNY GUATTO

AS A YOUNG

urban geographer in the early 1990s, Meric Gertler found himself pondering an intriguing riddle:

Why do certain city-regions excel economically? The special sauce, he and other geographers suggested, lay in tight clusters of social connections among companies, universities, investors and government officials.

At the time, the idea that a dense weave of knowledge and capital could drive innovation and prosperity was cutting edge. Now, it's widely accepted. So, when Gertler, formerly U of T's dean of arts and science, became president in 2013, he was keen to apply this idea to a large university. How, he wondered, could U of T do more to bolster the social and economic life of the Toronto region, and how could a diverse university community draw on those same lessons?

Over the past 12 years, Gertler, who is widely respected for his analytical expertise and understated approach, has transformed these insights about regional development into a leadership agenda for a post-secondary institution. Under his watch, U of T has expanded its international impact, boosted philanthropic support, reduced its carbon footprint and cemented its reputation as a global hub for research, entrepreneurship and innovation.

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GERTLER ARRIVED IN THE PRESIDENT'S office with a keen interest in how civic institutions such as universities shape cities. A few pundits even dubbed him the mayor of U of T. "It just seemed obvious that

a public university not generously supported by the public purse had to make use of every asset available," he recounts. "And where our three campuses are situated was one of our most important assets."

His twin goals: to consolidate U of T's reputation as a global university with a distinctly urban outlook and to strengthen its relationships with the city-region around it. Early on, he spearheaded a collaboration among Toronto's four universities to address shared challenges. One of the first initiatives was a survey of the daily travel patterns of the region's 180,000 students, aimed at improving transportation services (Extending rapid transit to U of T Scarborough was identified as a priority.) Gertler also drove an effort to address the shortage of student housing.

In 2015, he asked Shauna Brail, an associate professor of urban innovation, to serve as U of T's first presidential adviser on urban engagement. She gathered input from U of T scholars on how the university could engage in city-building. Faculty members in civil engineering and geography had long focused on urban issues, but Brail aimed to cast that net further – into social work, public health, music and architecture. Soon, faculty members were saying, "I study cities. Here's what U of T should do."

That engagement process culminated in the 2018 launch of the School of Cities, now led by Karen Chapple, a professor of geography and planning. The school is intentionally interdisciplinary, with almost 250 affiliated scholars from 65 academic departments who are encouraged to find new points of intellectual connection. "We created this big tent because to talk about inequality or climate change or political polarization, you need people from different disciplines," she says.

Building on this momentum, U of T Mississauga in 2020 launched a master's program in

urban innovation at the Institute for Management and Innovation, to prepare graduate students for careers in economic development and regional policy. "It trains students to work in city-building organizations and institutions as well as municipal and provincial governments," says Brail, the institute's director.

Chapple notes that the School of Cities also plays a vital public role, engaging policymakers grappling with urban challenges. "If the head of housing in Mississauga asks who's working on housing in their city, I can point them to four experts," she says.

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GERTLER'S RESEARCH ON REGIONAL economies highlighted how successful cities cultivate innovation. In that regard, U of T plays an underappreciated role in the Toronto area's economic well-being. The university has longstanding ties to some of Toronto's dominant business sectors – from mining and engineering to finance – but Gertler saw an opportunity to position the city as a global hub in areas such as artificial intelligence and biomedical research.

In 2015, U of T acquired an interest in the financially struggling Phase Two tower of MaRS, now a major innovation hub. A few years later, the university began pondering the future of the Banting and Best buildings on College Street. In 2019, after seeing renderings of the pyramid-shaped towers that would replace the buildings and house U of T's new centres for AI and biomedicine, philanthropists Gerald Schwartz and Heather Reisman were so taken with the plans that they donated \$100 million for the project, now known as the Schwartz Reisman Innovation Campus. When complete, it is expected to house the country's largest concentration of student- and faculty-led startups. (The Schwartz Reisman gift is one of the largest U of T has received as part of its

Defy Gravity campaign: see p. 39.)

U of T began setting up business incubators and accelerators in the early 2000s but has stepped up its efforts in the past decade and now operates 12 such facilities across the three campuses. U of T Entrepreneurship (UTE) staff have promoted these opportunities to students and faculty, as well as to startups and investors outside the university. According to UTE director Jon French, the university now supports almost 1,000 entrepreneur teams a year. The Health Innovation Hub, at the Temerty Faculty of Medicine, alone supports more than 200 health-focused ventures.

French notes that while U of T researchers have traditionally licensed discoveries to outside firms, many more now opt to establish their own startups. One standout: Waabi, an AI company specializing in autonomous trucking founded by computer science professor Raquel Urtasun that has raised US\$280 million. “Toronto has always been at the forefront of AI,” says Urtasun. “There’s tremendous talent here.”

Derek Newton, assistant vice-president, innovation, partnerships and entrepreneurship, adds that in the past 12 years, UTEST, which supports early-stage entrepreneurs, has anted up \$2 million in micro-grants (\$50,000 to \$75,000 each) to help 40-plus companies and further reinforce the university’s innovation ecosystem. “Overall, UTEST companies have gone on to raise over \$800 million,” he says.

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INNOVATION, OF COURSE, DEPENDS ON discovery. Before Gertler became president, U of T was already known as a research powerhouse, with deep ties to Toronto teaching hospitals and a network of stand-alone institutes. But in 2019, following broad consultation, Gertler and U of T’s senior leadership established an office for “institutional strategic initiatives” – to

expand cross-disciplinary research tackling global challenges.

Leah Cowen, U of T’s vice-president, research and innovation, and strategic initiatives, explains that the vision is “to bring together diverse researchers from across the tri-campus community” and “to think differently about research.”

humanities; social sciences and management; life sciences and medicine; natural sciences; and engineering and technology).

Today, U of T researchers lead 22 large-scale projects on topics from robotics to pandemics to urban mobility. These initiatives have attracted hundreds of millions of

Dancer Matt Rutledge takes part in an All-Nations Powwow at UTM. The event is one of many ways the university has responded to Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation report



Researchers in the Continuum Robotics Lab at UTM are developing different shapes and sizes of robots to take on new tasks



This approach makes use of one of the university’s great strengths: the breadth of disciplines in which it excels (U of T now ranks in the top 20 global universities in all five major subject areas: arts and

dollars in funding, including \$200 million from the Canada First Research Excellence Fund – the largest federal grant ever awarded to a Canadian university – for the Acceleration Consortium, which

Canada's largest urban geexchange facility, below King's College Circle, will help the St. George campus halve carbon emissions by 2027



is harnessing AI and robotics to speed up the discovery of new drugs and materials. Since 2021, these projects have funded 800 student research opportunities.

Drawing in scholars from across the university “is challenging,” says Cowen, but the approach reflects a global trend toward broader collaboration. She praises Gertler’s leadership for making it work: “He’s extraordinarily collaborative and engages everyone to bring their best skill set to the table,” she says. “That ethos has permeated the university.”

Those connections increasingly include formal partnerships with international universities, such as University College London and the University of Melbourne. It also includes the U of T India Foundation, which works with non-profits and governments in Mumbai to facilitate research and entrepreneurship. As political scientist Joseph Wong, U of T’s vice-president, international, notes, “One thing Meric has always emphasized is to recognize that our international partnerships will transform U of T. We need to be globally engaged; that’s absolutely imperative to maintain our standing internationally.”

The institutional focus on global engagement has taken other forms, too. In 2023, Gertler joined more than 75 university presidents and senior leaders from 16 countries who convened, in person and online, at Keio University in Tokyo for the U7+ Alliance of World Universities Presidential Summit. Their mission? To urge the world’s most developed countries (the G7) to use education and research to advance peace and security. “Education and knowledge creation are vital

Students gain hands-on experience examining reproductions of historical Chinese manuscripts at Roberts Library



to building peaceful and sustainable democracies,” Gertler said at the time.

Perhaps the most celebrated acknowledgment of U of T’s global influence came last year when computer scientist Geoffrey Hinton won the Nobel Prize in Physics, for his research on neural networks. Hinton, who was born in the U.K. and came to Canada from the U.S. in 1987, credited Canada’s and U of T’s support for “curiosity-driven” research for enabling his success.

For Gertler, the Nobel win affirmed both the university’s

research strategy and its commitment to inclusiveness. “There’s probably no other university in the world that combines our globally recognized excellence as a research powerhouse, with our size, our degree of openness and access, and our diversity,” he says. “It’s a unique combination.”

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FOR MANY IN U OF T’S EXTENDED community, the most visible sign of change at the university has occurred at the iconic heart of the St. George campus. Following an extensive reconstruction, King’s

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (TOP) JOHNNY GUATTO; (ABOVE) GEOFFREY VENDEVILLE; (RIGHT) DON CAMPBELL



College Circle has been remade into a car-free space, below which sits Canada’s largest urban geothermal exchange facility – an installation that provides carbon-free heating and cooling to surrounding buildings and serves as a “subterranean classroom,” allowing students to see how such systems work.

This ambitious project highlights how U of T overhauled its approach to sustainability in two important ways: its physical plant and operations; and student programming.

At the start of his presidency, Gertler recalls, the university “had

Two individuals have driven this effort: John Robinson, a professor with the School of the Environment and the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, and the presidential adviser on the environment, climate change and sustainability; and chief operating officer Ron Saporta. Robinson says it was early on that he and Gertler decided to focus on sustainability not as harm reduction, but as a way to *improve* both the environment and human well-being; and to integrate operational and academic sustainability.

slash carbon emissions on the St. George campus in half by 2027 and allow U of T to phase out natural gas in favour of electricity.

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IF PROJECT LEAP AIMS TO FORTIFY U of T against climate risks, other forces have similarly altered the university’s trajectory. The world, as Gertler observes, was vastly different when he took office in 2013: Canada-U.S. relations were strong and stable; the U.K. was in the EU; Russia had yet to invade Crimea. Against that backdrop, U of T increased international student recruitment – not only to enrich the learning experience for *all* U of T students, Gertler notes, but to attract more students from underrepresented countries.

The university also ramped up efforts to help Canadian students study abroad. In 2016, only one in eight U of T students sought international experiences. That low number reflected concerns about cost and a lack of awareness about available options. Nearly a decade later, the university promotes work- and learn-abroad opportunities more aggressively via a dedicated website, and needs-based funding for study-abroad opportunities has tripled to \$3 million. Recognizing not all students can travel, U of T has also developed more than 100 “global classrooms,” connecting students virtually with peers and professors abroad.

To enhance students’ engagement in their studies and improve their chances of landing the job they want in a competitive market,

NEEDS-BASED FUNDING FOR STUDY-ABROAD OPPORTUNITIES HAS TRIPLED TO \$3 MILLION



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Students conduct research on urban farming atop the green roof of Highland Hall at U of T Scarborough, one of dozens of sustainability projects across the three campuses

a very haphazard approach to advancing sustainability locally.” Over the past decade, U of T has sharply accelerated its timeline for reducing its carbon footprint and achieving “climate positive” status (removing more carbon from the atmosphere than it adds). At the same time, it has expanded the number of sustainability courses and research opportunities available to students. The results are clear: for two years in a row, U of T has topped the QS World University sustainability ranking, beating out more than 1,700 other post-secondary institutions.

Today, students are working on a range of sustainability projects, including using campus facilities to test new technologies and approaches. One example: a self-cleaning solar panel coating based on Prof. Cynthia Goh’s research into nanoparticles. Work is happening on the policy side, too: teams of graduate students are assisting city officials with Toronto’s climate strategy.

As for improving the sustainability of its own operations, the university recently embarked on “Project Leap,” a \$138-million initiative that Saporta says will

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Supported by a \$200-million federal research grant, the Acceleration Consortium is using AI and robotics to speed up the pace of scientific discovery

U of T has expanded its co-op and internship opportunities across the three campuses. Through these offerings, U of T students gain placements with community organizations, industry partners and campus and neighbourhood sustainability projects.

Beyond experiential learning, U of T has also strengthened its commitment to innovation in undergraduate teaching. The creation of the role of vice-provost, innovations in undergraduate education, has ensured a greater emphasis on the latest teaching practices. Investments in technology have transformed student support systems, while the Cheryl Regehr Early Career Teaching Award recognizes excellence among newer faculty.

U OF T HAS ENHANCED SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS STRUGGLING WITH MENTAL HEALTH

Support for graduate students has improved, too. Last year, U of T announced it would raise the base funding package for PhD students to \$40,000 a year, an increase of about 30 per cent, in keeping with the university's goal of attracting top scholars from across Canada and around the world. The move followed two years of consultations to understand the concerns of graduate students such as Tina Keshavarzian, a PhD candidate in the Temerty Faculty of Medicine. The increased funding, she says, will "provide the stability students need to engage in their research and research community, leading to better academic outcomes and shorter times to completion."

At the same time, U of T has enhanced support for students struggling with mental health. Despite investment in counselling services, U of T, like other North American universities in the late 2010s, was not able to keep up with increased student demand. So, Gertler and then-provost Cheryl Regehr set up the Presidential and Provostial Task Force on Student Mental Health (which was chaired by current provost Trevor Young). Among its

2020 recommendations: delivering same-day or next-day appointments, offering 24-7 multilingual counselling and creating a chatbot to help students find the services they need. Today, "we've all but eliminated our wait list," says Sandy Welsh, vice-provost, students. "And we have expanded our partnership with CAMH and other health-care providers for students who may have to be hospitalized, to better support their return to campus." Academic divisions, she adds, have also adjusted policies or practices that contribute to student stress.

All these changes have made U of T a more diverse and accommodating place than it was a decade ago – a goal Gertler regards as integral to his mission of building an inclusive and world-class environment for learning and research.

This effort has meant overcoming sometimes formidable social divisions. Jodie Glean, executive director, equity, diversity and inclusion, recalls one of her first meetings in 2019: a discussion about the lack of kosher food on campus – a gap that has since narrowed. "It may seem small," Glean says, "but it had a big impact."

When Gertler started, there was a recognized need to expand institutional efforts to address challenges and barriers faced by Black, Indigenous or racialized students, staff and faculty. Since then, a culture of "inclusive excellence" has grown, and a commitment to addressing sources of discrimination has produced tangible results, says Glean, including the 2021 signing of the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Higher Education. Led by former U of T Scarborough principal and U of T vice-president Wisdom Tettey, the charter has since been adopted by dozens of universities.

A similar shift has occurred in U of T's relationship with Indigenous communities. Following the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation

report, U of T issued *Answering the Call – Wecheehetowin*, with 34 actions for the university community that included Indigenizing the curriculum, expanding opportunities for Indigenous researchers and creating more Indigenous spaces. “We’ve been making progress on all those fronts,” says Gertler.

One such space, Indigenous House at U of T Scarborough, is expected to open later this year. Designed by Formline Architecture, it includes research and meeting spaces, a library and a teaching garden. At the St. George campus, the Ziibiing landscape in front of Hart House includes teaching spaces, an amphitheatre and Indigenous plantings. UTM, in turn, built a teaching lodge in 2023 and also hosts an annual All-Nations Powwow.

To recruit more Indigenous students, U of T, in 2023, began covering the cost of tuition for students from nine First Nations in southern Ontario. The decision, says Shannon Simpson, senior director of Indigenous initiatives, is another step toward implementing *Answering the Call – Wecheehetowin* and strengthening ties

with the university’s neighbouring Indigenous communities.

Simpson adds that Gertler has made a point of participating in an annual ceremony awarding scholarships to Indigenous students. He, in turn, highlights the creation of the university’s Indigenous Research Network. “When I look back, these initiatives are what make me most proud,” he says.

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THE PANDEMIC, GERTLER ADMITS, tested his ideas about the importance of proximity and collaboration. Professors shifted to online teaching, and research teams found ways to work together virtually. Yet university life rebounded quickly once the public health threat waned.

“During two years of virtual interaction and isolation, we demonstrated we could get by without face-to-face interaction,” he muses. “But since the pandemic ended, we’ve seen a renewed embrace of proximity and interpersonal interaction as essential to sparking new ideas.” As for his conviction, early in his presidency, about the role of the university in the life of the city, Gertler adds, “I always thought universities could be much bigger players in shaping the trajectory of urban change. I think that hunch has been confirmed.” ■

U of T’s Black Graduation ceremony recognizes the achievements of Black students, fostering a sense of community and inclusion



THANK YOU, MERIC

Reflections on a visionary leader



REETA ROY (LLD Hon. 2017), CEO, Mastercard Foundation

It has been a joy to work with Meric in establishing the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program at U of T. His leadership created a welcoming space where bright young minds from Africa can thrive. His bold vision and commitment to collaboration have strengthened U of T’s ties with African universities, fostering innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership for generations to come.



CHAD GAFFIELD (PhD 1978), CEO, U15 Canada

Deep thinking and strategic, Meric embodies how brilliant scholarship can drive both inspired leadership at U of T and global collaboration among top research universities. He carries the qualities of a great Canadian: a humble yet confident presence, open and resilient, ambition grounded in unshakeable values. And he has a remarkably warm and generous spirit.

PHOTOGRAPH BY POLINA TEIF; ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID SPARSHOTT