

Douglas T. Wright

Doug Wright is known as the “godfather” of the growing high-tech sector in Waterloo. While he didn’t do it alone, as president of the University of Waterloo in the 1980s, he aggressively pushed for closer links between academics and industry.



He ushered in the era of “spin-off” companies - businesses led by alumni or professors of the university. While spin-offs are an integral part of Waterloo’s economy today, at the time it was a controversial idea.

“Much of the truly remarkable growth and prestige the university has achieved is, by and large, a measure of the success of Doug Wright,” university historian Ken McLaughlin said once. “He was really forward-looking in his ideas.”

Some of the skeptics were concerned that industry would diminish academic freedom and the integrity of scholarly research. However, Wright argued there are times when the objectives of the business community and those of the academic world dovetail.

“What we’ve discovered is that we can have a constructive dialogue with industry and the business community without prejudice to our goals and interests, and which may in fact help us to serve society more effectively,” Wright said.

The seeds of the high-tech economy that boomed during the 1980s were actually planted in 1958 when Wright became a civil engineering professor at Waterloo. Wright had studied engineering at University of Toronto and Illinois, receiving his PhD at the University of Cambridge in England.

He was soon appointed UW’s first dean of engineering and became a vocal proponent of co-operative education. During the 1960s, his support of co-operative education was as controversial as his later vision of entrepreneurial professors.

Today, the University of Waterloo is the largest co-operative education facility in the world and Wright once said, “I didn’t invent the co-op system but I was the one who made it work.”

Wright left the university in 1967 and worked as a consulting engineer on the Ontario Place Forum and the Olympic Sports Palace in Mexico City. He then spent more than ten years serving as a top bureaucrat for the Ontario government helping to shape social and educational policy.

When he returned in 1981 to serve as president of the University of Waterloo, Wright set to work nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit of faculty and students. The university was already seen as a top engineering school in Canada but under ten years of Wright’s leadership, more than 10,000 students participated in co-op terms around the world. It was during Wright’s tenure that plans were drawn up for a research park on the north

campus. Today, the University of Waterloo Research and Technology Park is home to the area's growing high-tech sector and is one of the largest parks of its kind in Canada. Wright retired in 1993 and five years later the university's first building was renamed the Douglas T. Wright Engineering Building in his honour. Wright has also been named an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Upon retirement, Doug Wright said he was looking forward to spending more time with family. While receiving an award as the "founding father of technology entrepreneurship," Wright said, "We are on an excellent growth cycle . . . I hope to see a lot more of it over the next decade."

*Photo courtesy of the Kitchener-Waterloo Record Photographic Negative Collection,
University of Waterloo Library*