

## **Honorary Doctor of Science**

### **Professor Michael I. KOTLIKOFF**

Public Orator Professor Alex JEN Kwan-yue

Mr Council Chairman:

Most scientists begin their training with an undergraduate degree in a science-related discipline. But Professor Michael I. Kotlikoff, Provost at Cornell University and a renowned professor of molecular physiology, reverses the trend. His first degree was actually in the arts and humanities.

This is a man whose laboratory uses mouse genetics to understand the limited ability of heart cells to repair following injury; who served as the Austin O. Hooey Dean of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University; who earned his doctorate in veterinary medicine, graduating first in his class, at the University of Pennsylvania; and who received a fellowship to the University of California, Davis where he earned his PhD in physiology.

Yet his first degree was in comparative literature. The experience was, he says, transformative. Exposure to art, literature and music can change one's life, he says. You acquire an understanding of aesthetics and develop analytical, and critical thinking and writing skills that can be applied to any career choice. You learn to reflect on yourself within a larger framework and explore ideas that shape your identity and sensibilities, ultimately leading to your becoming a more rounded, better informed and more knowledgeable person.

His background in the humanities as well as his acclaim as a scientist offer him a unique perspective as Provost at Cornell. As he points out, if excellence is the ultimate goal, a university has to play to its strengths by supporting its excellent programmes, its top professors and its most treasured students. The business of the university is to transform people, to change lives through discovery and teaching, and to help provide information and perspectives that help us meet global challenges.

Professor Kotlikoff's impression of CityU when he first became involved in our plans to establish Hong Kong's first school of veterinary medicine was that we held similar beliefs. For example, the underlying philosophy of One Health that supports our endeavours in this field is best seen through the glass of interdisciplinarity. As Professor Kotlikoff points out, policy, government studies and international development, especially in areas such as public health, are all vital to promoting veterinary medicine. Public health is universal, not just for science, and the CityU–Cornell collaboration that produced CityU's Jockey Club College of Veterinary Medicine and Life Sciences is a living testament to this idea.

The experience working with CityU in this huge project is clearly a major part of Professor Kotlikoff's career. But he is quick to point out that the journey was far from straightforward. There were setbacks and there was disagreement. There was support, but there were critics. However, he says CityU's energy, commitment, enthusiasm and vision couldn't be dampened. This spirit is something to be admired, he says.

Professor Kotlikoff is of course no stranger to entrepreneurial drive. His track record in innovation and taking risks and his capacity to fulfil a mission are well known. Many of us have looked on with great admiration and respect as he oversees the many major projects at Cornell that he has undertaken since taking over as Provost. Among his achievements, he supervised the opening of the Cornell Tech campus on Roosevelt Island in New York City; the creation of the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business; the development of the Radical Collaboration Drives Discovery initiative; and helped restructure the university budget to support a long-term plan for investment in Academic Excellence.

The new public health programme at Cornell, focusing on One Health, is also one of his major initiatives, as are major partnerships established with institutions in Israel, India, and mainland China. One example is the animal health training facilities he worked on in India. For his achievements, Professor Kotlikoff has received many honours and awards, including the Medal of Honour from Tohoku University in 1995 and being made an Honorary Fellow at CityU in 2016.

When asked which of these achievements has given him the most satisfaction, he cannot choose. But he does look back with pride at efforts made to generate excellence in teaching, especially in adapting to new learning styles among students with the advent of new technology.

Professor Kotlikoff is strident in his view that universities play an enormous role in society, making a real difference to life on earth, and he urges us to play our role in meeting the challenges facing higher education today. His vision is to remind the world that universities are not elitist, out of touch or irrelevant, but that on the contrary they continue to play vital roles enabling students to access the training they need for their chosen careers and that researchers have the time and space to pursue problem-solving research.

Mr Council Chairman, Professor Michael I. Kotlikoff has had a huge impact on CityU and is an influential leader of the highest order in higher education today. He will continue to play such a role in our future and so for his unwavering support, I present him to you for the conferment of a Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.