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Message from the President to All Members of the Faculty and Staff

concerning

Challenges Facing Dalhousie

In the ten months since my arrival at Dalhousie, I have sought to understand the University's strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of this letter is to communicate to you my understanding of some of the major challenges we face.

Dalhousie and other major universities draw sustenance from interaction with their surrounding communities and are thus able to develop and flourish in an international, scholarly environment. Programmes of undergraduate education and community service provide the academic and financial base upon which universities' graduate, research, and professional programmes rest.

I have had the opportunity to speak with many of you about the state and future direction of Dalhousie and its programmes. Concerns about underfunding notwithstanding, most people appear satisfied that the University serves its graduate and professional students well. There is also widespread confidence in Dalhousie's capacity for scholarship and research. In contrast, I have heard expressions of concern from many quarters about how well we serve undergraduate and, in particular, part-time students. This concern has been expressed not only by individuals, but by University and Faculty committees, and student and other groups. It is reflected in a series of reports produced over the last five years which call for more emphasis on student recruitment, teaching and community service, continuing education and student services.

Not long ago, I initiated a small survey of "opinion leaders" within the political, business, community and higher education sectors, in an attempt to elicit common external perceptions of Dalhousie. The results lend weight to the concern expressed internally about Dalhousie's service to undergraduates and to the community. They also suggest that there is little public appreciation of Dalhousie's role and aspirations in the realms of graduate education and research. The exercise in question consisted of confidential interviews with 18 prominent members of the business, political, community and higher education sectors. Owing to the small and unrepresentative nature of the sample, the results cannot be regarded as an accurate reflection of external perceptions of Dalhousie. It is only because these results underline and illuminate concerns communicated to me by members of the University community and by external individuals and groups, that I believe them to be worthy of your consideration.

Most of those interviewed identified Dalhousie primarily with strong professional programmes (i.e. Law, Medicine and, to a lesser extent, Dentistry). With the exception of those in the higher education sector, few made reference to the University's programmes of graduate education or research. Very few individuals deemed Dalhousie's undergraduate programmes to be among its distinctive features. In this connection, approximately a third of those interviewed were under the impression that other Maritime institutions provide a better "undergraduate experience" and contribute more to the student's personal development than does Dalhousie. There was real concern that an undergraduate at this University is "just a number".

This concern may reflect broader unhappiness with Dalhousie's relationship to the community at large. Although almost a third of those interviewed deemed Dalhousie's contribution to the community and the region to be important, a majority expressed the view that Dalhousie is insensitive to external interests. One of the sentiments underlying this view was that "Dalhousie does not care what people outside the University think". Those who expressed this sentiment attributed the University's perceived arrogance to academic snobbery on the part of its members or to what they perceived to be Dalhousie's place in the local establishment: they evidently regard the University as a "south end" institution in both geographic and social terms. Others expressed the view that Dalhousie does not put its resources at the disposal of the community to the extent that it should, and that it places unnecessary barriers between itself and prospective students. Inconvenient class times, restrictive policies on transfer credit, and fees which discourage part-time graduate study were cited in the latter connection.

The responses of representatives of the higher education sector suggested that some members of other Maritime universities have similar perceptions of Dalhousie - that it tends to be arrogant, insular and complacent. Although one person described these sentiments as the inevitable result of differences in size and academic quality between Dalhousie and other local institutions, others suggested that Dalhousie is in part responsible for these negative perceptions and might change them by recognizing the strengths of other universities and by making its programmes and resources more accessible to their members (through the appointment of more Honorary Research Associates and other means).

In sum, the results of these interviews are grounds for both confidence and concern: confidence, because they suggest that many people recognize Dalhousie as the pre-eminent institution of higher education in the Maritimes; concern, insofar as they imply that many others fail to appreciate its scholarly activities and believe it to be without a conception of service. The latter suggestion distresses me for three reasons.

First is the possibility that the perceptions in question may in part be true. If so, Dalhousie is failing in important aspects of the mission which it has defined for itself. Our key planning document, "1987 and Beyond", in

describing the mission of the University, recognizes service to the public and the general community as a prime objective, and also states that Dalhousie must have a strong commitment to accessibility. It would seem that, externally, these are not recognized as characteristics or objectives at Dalhousie.

Secondly, regardless of whether or not the perceptions in question are true, they are likely to lead to withdrawal of public support for the University. They may in fact already have begun to do so. If, for example, a significant proportion of the public does not understand the nature of research activity and graduate education, it will not appreciate Dalhousie's special needs for funding. Perhaps for this reason, some of the 18 individuals interviewed in the course of the above project - and those from the community sector, in particular - indicated that they have come to suspect that Dalhousie must be less capable of managing its resources than are other local universities. Likewise, if the public does not understand that Dalhousie must compete in a national and international academic labour market, it will fail to appreciate why the faculty is dissatisfied with compensation which - as one of those interviewed put it - "most people in the region wouldn't regard as half-bad". External appreciation of the nature and implications of Dalhousie's role in the higher education system is a prerequisite for adequate funding in the years ahead.

Finally, a public perception that undergraduate students and the community are not well served by Dalhousie would be of concern because it would invite government interference. The Report of the Nova Scotia Royal Commission on Post-Secondary Education illustrated the risk. Dalhousie and other universities will lose their current degree of autonomy unless they are - and are seen to be - responsive to the needs of their students and society.

What, then, are we to do about these external perceptions? A three-pronged approach appears to be in order. First, the extent and depth of the perceptions should be assessed by means of a more systematic survey. Secondly, their validity and implications should be addressed by the faculty, students and staff of the University. To this end, I propose to initiate a process through which we can evaluate and, if necessary, revitalize undergraduate education at Dalhousie. Finally, means must be devised to communicate to the public the nature and extent of the University's service to its students and to the Maritime region.

Over the next several months, I intend to develop a strategy to help us achieve these ends. In some areas, work done over the past year has laid a firm basis so that I expect to be able to describe in September what I believe to be the essential elements of our future strategy. I welcome your comments and advice.

I am currently developing a strategy designed to achieve

help us

H.C. Clark