

MUFA Newsletter

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“Forward with Integrity”

On Thursday, October 20, President Patrick Deane hosted an open forum to discuss his recent document *Forward with Integrity: A Letter to the McMaster Community*. The event was well-attended, and spurred many thoughtful comments and questions. Several of our colleagues have agreed to write briefly about their impressions of the forum and where we go from here. I encourage anyone who wants to communicate their own views either to post something on [mufagabmac-l](http://mufagabmac-l.org) or to send their commentary to mufa@mcmaster.ca for possible inclusion in a future *Newsletter*. The determination of the appropriate course for McMaster is simply too important a matter to leave solely in the hands of administrators and government ministries.

*Peter Sutherland,
MUFA President*

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Laudable Initiative

To the best of my recollection, Patrick Deane's letter to the McMaster community is the first proposal for a broad-based reform of undergraduate education at McMaster since the ill-fated Vichert report, which emerged around 1971. It is encouraging to see the president of a research-intensive university like McMaster focused on improving the quality of undergraduate education that we provide, for two reasons. First, there is a danger at any research-intensive university that undergraduate education takes a back seat to faculty research and graduate study. Second, university presidents these days can easily become exclusively focused on the university's external relations with donors, alumni and governments, and thus distanced from what is actually going on in the university over which they preside.

"Forward with integrity" is a laudable initiative not just for the fact of its existence, but also for the way in which it brings together some of the best thinking about the direction of undergraduate education in North America with noteworthy features of McMaster's current elite undergraduate programs: the undergraduate MD program with its small-group problem-based self-directed learning, the Arts & Science program with its inquiry seminars, other undergraduate health sciences programs with similar structures to the undergraduate MD program, the Integrated Science program.

The word "integrity" in President Deane's letter refers not only to ethical integrity but also to what we might call "integratedness": integration of undergraduate education on campus with experiential learning off campus, integration of the insights of various disciplines, integration with community service, integration with faculty research.

President Deane calls on us to identify aspects of our current undergraduate programs that already provide such integration and to consider ways in which they can be changed to make our students' learning more integrated.

This agenda of course faces challenges. There is

no new pot of money coming to the campus to fund the changes. They must be made within a constrained budgetary framework, which is likely to become even more constrained as the provincial government moves toward a balanced budget. Further, one may have legitimate reservations about how desirable the proposed changes are. They could make things worse, for example by watering down the depth of our undergraduate students' learning. But the legitimate worries about feasibility and desirability are better viewed as concerns to be addressed as we change than as reasons to drag our feet.

The President's letter holds out a vision of a distinctive form of undergraduate education: experiential, multidisciplinary, integrated with faculty research, serving the community. We already provide this sort of education in our elite undergraduate programs. Implementing the vision across campus should enable us to attract even more of the best and the brightest of Ontario's (and Canada's) high school graduates and to give them the kind of educational opportunities that we would want for our own children and grandchildren.

*David Hitchcock
Philosophy*

In Dreams Begin Responsibility

It is really difficult to deal with the multiple issues raised by Dr. Deane. It is an articulate, passionate and well argued letter which is designed to provoke us to respond. His priorities (undergraduate experience, building connections between the University and the community and supporting research) seem eminently sensible. I will confine my comments to the issue of undergraduate education. Recent books have castigated universities for neglecting undergraduates and it is stunning to hear our President list that amongst his priorities. He is clearly supportive of initiatives that foster active learning in many forms and recognizes that learning can occur outside the hallowed halls of the university and assessments should be broader. These approaches have been well developed in a number of specific programs at

this University, but the real challenge will be to “make high quality learning experience the norm across the University” (to use Dr. Deane’s words).

In his *Novum Organon*, Francis Bacon referred to false notions that beset men’s minds. He called them idols and described four such — those of the Tribe, the Cave, the Theatre and the Marketplace. *The Idols of the Tribe* stem from the inherent limitations of the human mind and senses, our tendencies to draw conclusions from limited evidence, and our search for certainty where none can be expected. *The Idols of the Cave* arise from the blinkers provided by our upbringing, culture, and training, which reinforce the idols of the tribe in drawing conclusions to fit our prejudices. *The Idols of the Theater* are the false notions perpetuated by the great systems of thought that defy questioning and the most troublesome of all, *the Idols of the Marketplace* which were the errors that arise from the conventional usages of words as they evolve over time. Bacon found the Idols of the marketplace vexing. These were “the ill and unfit choice of words” which “wonderfully obstructs the understanding” and “words plainly force and overrule the understanding, and throw all into confusion, and lead men away into numberless empty controversies and idle fancies”. One can find examples of each of those in our current world and though the “New Learning” has become ancient, the idols remain in their millennial guise.

In Dr. Deane’s attempts to re-vitalize the University and the faculty, he may well find that some of these idols may obstruct the path. We inhabit our own “caves” though we now call them Departments, Faculties and Programs and to leave those caves and remove those blinkers is difficult. We have a tendency to throw out a lot of words but find it hard-pressed to agree on what they mean. “Measurable outcomes” is one such. Perhaps in the context of education and development unmeasurable ones may be the ones we really need to think about. There is a large body of evidence that active learning works. However it is vitally important to tailor this to specific contexts which require careful consideration of resources, both material and human. To make “active learning” the norm is an

exciting notion but the complexities of scale must make us really flexible and not transpose models that work in one context to another.

There is an incredible temptation to outsource teaching and learning through distance learning. These options are wonderful and may tackle the resource problem, provided we remain aware that as academic institutions we ensure that students are carefully monitored and guided. Sustainability is a major problem and we have to ensure that our endeavours are sustainable not just in the short term but in the distant future as well.

One could say more, lots more and I’m sure the faculty will be actively engaged in the arguments. It is really refreshing to see a new President provoking so much discussion. I hope that we do not disappoint him but begin the process of serious engagement with the students and administration to ensure that McMaster remains a vital force. Dr. Deane may well be dreaming — but if he is, he is in very good company and we should all join in, for in dreams begin responsibility (old play quoted by Yeats)

P. K. Rangachari
Medicine

Building on Collegiality and Creativity

President Deane’s ‘Forward With Integrity: A Letter To The McMaster Community’ is a welcome breath of fresh air. The ‘Directions’ document dates from 1995 and ‘Refining Directions’ from 2003. It is, then, high time the University community is given the opportunity to review the goals and approaches to teaching and research within the University.

Particularly significant is the emphasis in the Letter on networking, collaboration and eliminating obstacles to cooperation across the campus. The strong sense of collegiality and cooperation, that is at the heart of McMaster’s flexible approach to research and teaching, has been a crucial factor in the University’s ability to absorb the massive 50% increase in undergraduate and graduate students since 2001.

The willingness of individual researchers to reach across departments and Faculties has been a major strength of the University. The President's interest in ensuring this collaborative approach is extended to the immediate local community, as well as to the wider world, is heartening.

It is to be hoped that the central administration can be encouraged to take up this cooperation challenge. Too frequently in the past, key central administrators seemed unwilling to appreciate that they should be serving the overall academic mission. Departments, Faculties and research centres too often found themselves confronted with ill-considered administrative initiatives that were time-consuming obstacles to effective teaching and productive research.

Also significant is the stress in the Letter on building on McMaster's reputation for innovative programs. Thinking creatively about how to give students a high quality learning experience is crucial. While some of the current 'flagship programs' are resource-intensive and, hence may be difficult to replicate in a future characterized by austerity, inventive approaches will be necessary to accommodate fully any future increases in student numbers. And, of course, we must not disadvantage individual students as we seek to experiment with alternative educational approaches. But there are certainly plenty of wonderful new ideas being introduced at the departmental level by able young faculty that can form the basis of future projects.

Overall, President Deane should be thanked for presenting the University community with a new opportunity to shape our future and turn our collectively developed goals and priorities into action. The next important step in this endeavour is a campus-wide discussion of the Letter and its implications for the University budget. The Directions/Refining Directions documents suffered from the flaw that the principles they set out were not always reflected in the spending priorities of the University. It is highly important that the University community now engage in the collective decision-making process that is needed to ensure a University-wide consensus for the principles and priorities that will eventually be

translated into action through the University budget.

*Richard Stubbs
Political Science*

Which Way Forward: Extrapolating From a Point

The President's letter is generating discussion in hallways, councils, over lunch and, most recently, in a well-attended town hall meeting. In my experience, a significant portion of the discussion has centred on the question "What, exactly, is the President suggesting?" In fact, it seems the letter is very clear on "what". He notes the relative underfunding, per student, for Ontario universities, and the persistent observation of the deterioration of the undergraduate experience. While not abandoning the pursuit of increased funding, the President suggests we investigate how best to use existing resources, particularly as the University has more control over this. Since McMaster has a well-deserved reputation for innovation in education and for integrating its teaching and research mandates, it makes sense to try to use these strengths to both address the challenges of present times and to consolidate our distinctive identity.

It is concerning "how" that the letter is not so clear. The President asks us to extrapolate from a point. Mathematicians know that extrapolation from just a single point isn't possible — it is not possible to determine even which direction is forward. While the letter mentions a variety of very successful model McMaster programs that emphasize some form of student-directed learning, they are in many important respects the same. The incoming students are highly selected for academic success; the programs are restricted to a small cohort; and they are resource intensive, particularly in terms of faculty contact. It is not obvious that these pedagogical approaches are relevant to addressing large numbers of students with a lower academic achievement, who may be struggling with a deteriorating undergraduate experience that is characterized by an increasing student/faculty ratio. The letter alludes to this; thus the call for creativity.

If this initiative is to be productive, more points are needed. The research experience of physicists suggests we evaluate a theory by first testing the limiting cases. So far, these innovative programs have tested one limit of the undergraduate experience — a radical suggestion is that the next step is to test these methods at the other limit. Perhaps a pilot program involving a three-year Bachelor program will be most helpful. Many of these programs already have a flexible structure that is amenable to an interdisciplinary approach. Such a pilot program would challenge assumptions about the need for stringent academic selection and increased resources in order to confer an advantage to the student. It will confront the meaning of integrating undergraduate teaching and research through programs that “foster a capacity for research”, rather than by affording opportunities for research styled upon a graduate model. It will serve the community, in particular the educational responsibility owed to the Province, by promoting a thoughtful consideration of a group of students who are not necessarily focused on academic or professional careers. In summary, it may be the most effective method to decide if this is the way forward.

*David Venus
Physics & Astronomy*

Homewood Human Solutions is McMaster University’s Employee & Family Assistance Program provider. Their services are available 24/7 and are free to employees and their families. Homewood Human Solutions provides counseling, work-life and health coaching, health risk assessments, and much more. For more information, visit the Homewood Human Solutions website at www.homewoodhumansolutions.ca, or call their toll free number: 1-800-663-1142.

LITERARY LEGENDS

BY SEA AND BY LAND



“...to see the wonders of the world abroad...”

Join Dr. Graham Roebuck, Professor Emeritus at McMaster University, Director of McMaster Stratford Shakespeare Seminars and Past-President of the John Donne Society, on a two-week literary journey from New York to Stratford-on-Avon and London. Departing May 29, 2012 on board Cunard’s Queen Mary 2, the group will sail to Southampton, England and then embark on a six-day land excursion to Stratford-on-Avon and London, escorted throughout by Dr. Roebuck.

Fares Starting From**

Cruise: \$1412 Inside \$1675 Oceanview \$1990 Balcony

Land: \$1995

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This Newsletter is published monthly between September and May by the Faculty Association at McMaster University. The Association's Executive for 2011/12 is composed of the following members:

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Opinions expressed in this Newsletter are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Association or of its Executive unless so specified. Anyone wishing to contribute to the MUFA Newsletter is invited to send submissions to the Faculty Association Office (HH-103A, e-mail: mufa@mcmaster.ca, ext. 24682). Deadlines are the 15th of each month. All submissions will be published at the discretion of the Editor.

Current and past issues of the MUFA Newsletter are posted on the MUFA website (www.mcmaster.ca/mufa).

HOUSING

FOR RENT: Three bedroom, 1.5 bath, fully furnished house located within walking distance to McMaster University campus. House is located in Westdale on a family friendly street, close to G. R. Allen Elementary School. Separate kitchen and dining room, living room, sun room,



TV room. Living room has gas fireplace. Academic office separate in backyard outbuilding. Available from July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013. Rent is \$1800/month plus utilities. For more information, contact joanna.wilson@mcmaster.ca.

Welcome New Members

Adrian Cordova
Christy Gombay

B-Tech Program
Nursing

Many thanks to our new MUFA Council representatives: **Miroslav Lovric** (Mathematics & Statistics) and **Anna Moro** (Linguistics & Languages)

Passages

Robert Joyner, Business, September 8, 2011
G. R. (Bob) Piercy, Materials Sci & Engineering, August 27, 2011

Mark Your Calendars



MUFA General Meeting

Tuesday, December 6, 2011
2:00 pm

Council Chambers (Gilmour Hall 111)