

Dal foundation year proposed by Tomkow

by Brian McDonald

Although Dalhousie undergraduate education "is the best in the Maritimes and one of the best in Canada," according to Terry Tomkow, a Foundation Year to be taken by all students at Dalhousie would offer even more to the undergraduate student.

Tomkow coordinated a workshop concerning a foundation year during the President's Symposium on Undergraduate Education.

However, Tomkow proposes a different type of curriculum be offered during the Dalhousie Foundation Year (DFY) than that of foundation years at other institutions. "I don't think a 'great-books' or 'pick-a-theme"

method of selecting curriculum will provide students with the tools needed to deal with the world out there."

The proposal Tomkow tabled at the workshop suggested the theme of a DFY be "the events and ideas of the twentieth century. It may not be the greatest of human epochs, but it happens to be the one in which we live." It was suggested that the program have five parts: Skills, which enable the student to acquire the intellectual equipment necessary for dealing with various ideas; Modern Ideas, the study of which should be done in units that deal with an individual theorist or theory; Modern Times, a history of the twentieth century; Modern Arts; and Contemporary Issues, which could consider any ongoing controversy.

Undergraduates are woefully ignorant of the twentieth century, according to Tomkow. "Take modern history. For most students, the events of fifty years ago are as unknown to them as ancient history. This simply shouldn't be, when you consider the various sources available. Many of them haven't even seen a film on the second world war."

One of the questions raised at the workshop was whether such a program would be elitist, driving away intelligent students who might be intimidated by the curriculum. Tomkow said, "We are not going to keep such a student by offering no sense of direction." On the other hand, DFY "could attract that student coming directly from high school who doesn't have any

sense of direction."

Although he doesn't agree with the curriculum of, for example, the King's College Foundation Year, Tomkow is impressed with the attitude of the students. "King's students learn right away that their curriculum represented someone's studied judgement about what is worth knowing. The moral they seem to draw is that some things are worth knowing. By contrast, Dalhousie students seem to learn early that nothing is worth knowing if it will not be on the exam."

Another important effect of a DFY will be the students' "feeling they are part of an intellectual community. A student will know the student sitting next to him has taken the same core courses as he has. There are common ideas for them to discuss."

The foundation year program could be introduced to Dalhousie on an experimental basis, "with a few hundred students, and if things work out well, we could expand it gradually. It will take a substantial commitment in both time and money, but I think it would be worth it."

Student panel voices concerns

by Ellen Reynolds

Course evaluations and the quality of teaching at Dalhousie were the focus of the Students' Assessment and Vision panel at the President's Symposium on Undergraduate Education.

Four students assessed their experiences as undergraduates at Dalhousie last week.

Rhodes scholar and political science student Graham Flack began by questioning Dalhousie's registration process. Flack suggested a two-trip registration — one trip to the department to ensure a place in the course, and another to the registrar.

Students with mandatory classes should be given first pick. This would solve the common problem of third-year or honours students not being able to take a mandatory class in their final year.

Joanne Abbensetts, a Jamaican student working on her Masters in Developmental Economics, also had problems with the difficult registration process. Abbensetts said she felt lost and alienated, especially as an international student.

"Academic counselling is imperative for undergraduates for registration and course selection," she said.

Flack and Abbensetts suggested a more detailed calendar which included course and professor evaluations. "Students have a right to know previous experiences of students," said Flack.

Abbensetts said the feeling of alienation was not limited to registration. As an international student, she often gets the impression from other students that she is an intruder and doesn't belong.

Sandra Shields, a part-time mature Social Work student,

said she isn't made to feel she belongs either.

Shields says one of the reasons for this is restricted library hours at the School of Social Work. They don't allow for evening and weekend study — the only time a student who works days can study, she says.

Douglas Manuel, a third-year medical student, stressed the need for better teaching. He thought that much of learning was the students' responsibility, but that even with that attitude, Dalhousie's emphasis on research means the quality of teaching suffers.

"Many students say if you get one good prof a term, you are lucky," said Manuel.

The chair of the Philosophy department, Steven Burns, found this statistic "astonishing" and questioned the usefulness of course evaluation. Some professors, he said, think the evaluations are deceptive. Many difficult courses, respected by the faculty, are given bad evaluations by the students because marks are low, Burns said.

"University is a place where students are supposed to dig out the treasures. It's not laid out for them like in high school," he said.

Burns said most faculty don't want to, or are unable to, spend time on teaching because of their other responsibilities. "Who tells us to raise the level of research? You can't get tenure

promotion with same number of publications as you could 10 years ago," said Burns.

Caroline Zayid, president of the Dalhousie Student Union, chaired the panel and agreed with Dalhousie president Howard Clark's suggestion to reward professors for good teaching and generally emphasize teaching more. Zayid also said there should be ways to help students make better choices on courses and professors.

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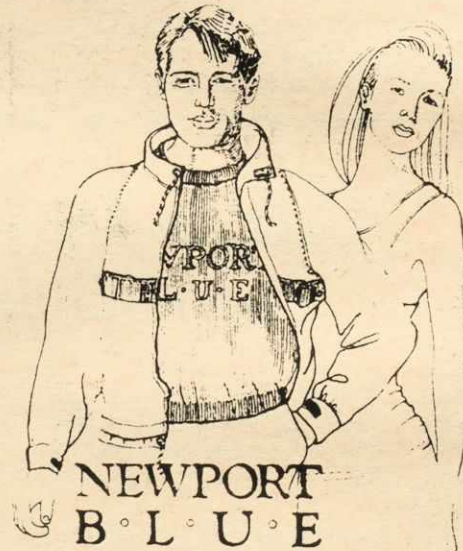
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