

"University-wide plan: We must have a clear sense of our own priorities"

• An Interview with Dr. Robin Armstrong, UNB President •

Brunswick: You have been President of the university of half a year, have you identified any important developments that you would like to see take place at the university.

Dr. Armstrong: Getting to know the intricacies of a university of the size and complexity of UNB is a time-consuming task. I have begun a series of visits to each of the academic and support-service units to meet staff and to discuss their aspirations and concerns. The first major initiative that I will undertake is the development of a university-wide plan. The MPHEC has announced that it intends to extend the planning process begun in Nova Scotia to New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. It is highly desirable that we enter this process with a clear sense of our own priorities. Secondly, the feasibility of the upcoming major fund raising campaign at UNB requires that there be a clear statement of goals and objectives and a direct linkage of the projects in the campaign to these goals and objectives. Already I have circulated a memorandum to all academic and support services staff outlining the nature of the planning process. It is my intention to meet with student groups and to ask for their input during the process. The first step, the development of a mission statement, will be carried out during this term. I anticipate that one priority included in this statement will be the enhancement of our programs of undergraduate education and the student experience. I hope to see a Centre for Teaching and Learning established along the lines of the successful experience at Carnegie-Mellon University. This would bring together and expand on our existing efforts and would signal the beginning of the development of a culture in teaching at UNB.

Brunswick: What attracted you to this job in the first place? It is a smaller school and a good distance away from Toronto and Montreal, was there anything in UNB's portfolio that made you interested in the job?

Dr. Armstrong: I was attracted to UNB because of the reputation of its undergraduate programs and because of its importance in the scheme of higher education in Canada as the leading university in New Brunswick. Furthermore, I see much potential for raising the stature of this university as a research institution by making judicious use of the vacancies that will arise as a result of the bulge of retirements that will occur over the coming decade.

Brunswick: Over the past ten years, it has become increasingly obvious to the Student Union that the Student Union Building is vastly inadequate in size to meet the needs of the student population at UNB. Would you be interested in seeing a building expansion at the SUB? How close is that to happening?

Dr. Armstrong: Sure, I would be interested in seeing an expansion of the Student Union Building. The current building, opened in 1969, was designed for a much smaller student body. However, there has not been a recent needs assessment nor has a funding proposal been prepared. Once the specific needs are determined, the timing of a building expansion will come down to a funding issue. I have been told that the Student Union has pursued the expansion issue with varying degrees of vigour from year to year. Until students consistently identify it as their top priority, it's hard to think of it as being close to happening.

Brunswick: With the advent of the GST and the possible impact of a recession, what financial challenges face the university in the next few years? How do you think they will affect the students with regard to the quality of their education and the cost of their education? Are you optimistic about the future of university education in Canada?

Dr. Armstrong: The university system in Canada has been under great financial pressure for the past decade and there are no signs that the situation will change in the foreseeable future. The advent of the GST and the possible impact of the recession and the War in the Gulf will make the situation even worse. The Government of New Brunswick is committed to the diversification of the provincial economy away from the traditional dependence on the resource industries and to strategies that will allow New Brunswick to successfully compete in a high technology, knowledge-based global economy. It is my impression that they understand the value of the human capital and the essential role of the universities in its development. The record of recent Governments in meeting or exceeding the funding levels recommended by the MPHEC is also encouraging. To accept a university presidency at this point in time, one must be optimistic about the future of university education in Canada.

Brunswick: You have been accused of having an inordinate partiality to the Sciences, a partiality that it is assumed will affect your emphasis when it comes to matters of development and funding. The accusation is natural since the Sciences are your field of discipline and expertise. Are there any grounds for the fear that is implicit in these accusations? How do you regard the Arts in the programme of a university and in the development of society? What aspirations do you have for the Arts faculties and UNB in the next five years?

Dr. Armstrong: For eight years before coming to the University of New Brunswick, I was Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science at the University of Toronto. I think it is true to say that I was regarded as a strong supporter of the humanities. The basic arts and sciences provide the essential core of any broad range university. University education must be concerned not only with scientific and work-related skills and abilities, but also with ethics, morality

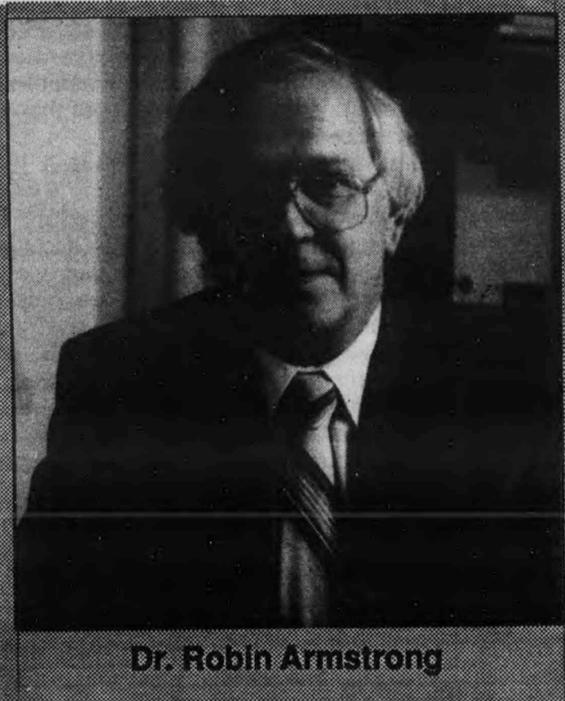
and philosophy, and the needs of people not merely to live well in the material sense, but to live well in the moral, ethical, social, political and aesthetic senses as well. I will support the Arts faculty in any way that I can in their efforts to achieve realistic goals for

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the benefit of the students and for the enhancement of the reputation of the university. At this time, I have added my support to their proposal to establish a National Centre for the Study of Family Violence.

Brunswick: What is your view on the role of student government at a university of this size? What should be the role of the administration with regard to the relationship between the Student & Government and Administration?

Dr. Armstrong: One expects both Student Governments and University Administrations to strive to build, maintain, and enhance the quality of the academic, social, and cultural life of the



Dr. Robin Armstrong

students. Under the University Act, there are numerous duties and obligations imposed on the Administration. At the same time there are many legitimate and important campus activities which primarily involve student leadership. It should be incumbent on both groups to establish communication links and to foster a genuine atmosphere of cooperation in providing a healthy environment which is conducive to the development of the whole person. Neither group can function effectively without the active support of the other.

Brunswick: I'm sure you have heard about the UNB Student Union's proposal to the College Hill Social Club asking the club to change their Board of Directors' structure. In doing so, the Student Union has argued that the student's interests would be better served, since they would have some say on this new board. Do you feel this is a worthwhile mandate for a student government to be undertaking?

Dr. Armstrong: The College Hill Social Club is a legitimate campus organization and has a lease with the University that extends until 1997. It is certainly to the advantage of students for there to be good relations between the Student Union and the CHSC. I have no doubt that the Student Union made its proposal in good faith. The response of the CHSC has been to establish an Advisory Committee. The Committee has representation from the UNB-SU, the GSA, the STU-SRC, the UNB-Administration and the CHSC. It is premature to comment on the acceptability and effectiveness of this Advisory Committee, although initial feedback has been encouraging. The CHSC has agreed that all major items will be referred to the Committee and to their Board of Directors before action is taken.

Brunswick: What involvement do you anticipate from the administration concerning the College Hill Social Club/Student Union issue?

Dr. Armstrong: The Administration does not intend to become directly involved in the issue, but is ready and willing to assist in finding a resolution if asked. The participation by Dean Austin on the Advisory Committee is an example.

Brunswick: Bar Services has been around at UNB for quite some time now; however, it has yet to make a profit. Have you had time to appraise the service yet? If so, do you feel it is a vital

and useful service and do you think it needs some changes in order to become a more profitable venture?

Dr. Armstrong: The New Brunswick Liquor Licensing Board has put certain requirements onto the University such as insisting that we hold a campus licence rather than request special occasion permits as had been the pattern until a few years ago. In order to meet our legal obligations as a landlord and as a provider of alcohol, the University has put certain controls in place to ensure that we focus first on the safety of our students or other clients and secondly on covering out costs. In short, it is a deliberate decision to run the business to protect the interests of the community rather than to over-emphasize the bottom line of the budget. In fact, non-student events do now break even while student events fail to break even. But students pay one way or another - the operating deficit is charged to the residence system budget. I do not at this time envisage significant reductions in the controls we observe or substantial price hikes to our student clients in order to make the business profitable. Many or most of our students seem to think that our pricing structure is already too high.

Brunswick: How would you evaluate the role of UNB alumni in the development of the university? Are there any initiatives that should be mentioned with regard to that relationship?

Dr. Armstrong: Alumni are important to any university both because they are an important source of financial assistance and because they provide a network of good-will ambassadors spread across the country and around the globe. I am working with Bob Skillen, our new Director of Alumni, to revitalize existing alumni branches and to establish new branches, as well as to develop a plan to increase the involvement of our alumni in the affairs of the university. I have embarked on a series of visits across the country with Bob and Pauline MacKenzie, the President of the Associated Alumni. My early experiences indicate that UNB alumni are a loyal and enthusiastic group and that recollections of their student days are happy ones. An expanded reunion involving the participation of the entire campus is being organized for June 27 to 29 of this year. The Associated Alumni will introduce an affinity card program this spring in conjunction with the Bank of Montreal and the cards will be available to students on campus.

Brunswick: The library system at UNB has been highly recommended for a school of its size, however there have been constant complaints about the shrinking of space, the inadequate concern among administration for the preservation of valuable documents, and from students about the significant cut backs in journal acquisitions and text acquisitions. These are significant concerns. Do you have any plans to see these problems eliminated in the next few years?

Dr. Armstrong: A library is an essential resource for any university, both for the education of students and for the research work of faculty. The UNB library in Fredericton has a special significance as the largest and most comprehensive library in the Province. The library faces significant problems as you have noted. These are primarily the result of the years of university underfunding rather than because of any lack of appreciation on the part of the administration. The problems are not new to me as they are the same ones that plague all university libraries in the country. There is a search under way for a Director of Libraries. It is my intention to work closely with the successful applicant to address these issues.

Brunswick: Comparisons between your style of leadership and that of your predecessor are inevitable. Downey was especially known for his PR approach. His style was largely that of an externally focused president whose status in the larger community was of high. His profile within the university community was comparatively lower. Do you see the role of the president as carrying out such a pattern? Are the days of the University President who is essentially a "school principal" type over? Do you think that the president should have a direct rapport with students at the university?

Dr. Armstrong: I am very fortunate to have come to a university that has been as well managed and that is in such good shape as UNB. That this is the case is a testament to the job done by Jim Downey and his administrative team. In today's environment it is important that the President spend a large fraction of his time on matters external to the university such as alumni relations, government interactions and fund raising initiatives. It is also important that the presidents of the major universities join the national debate on the reshaping of our system of education. Quality education is a source of advantage in a highly competitive world. That being said, I believe that the President has an important role to play within the institution by setting the tone through his involvement in scholarly matters, and providing moral support for the activities of all the estates of the academic community including the students. It is my intention to be seen to provide leadership within while at the same time exercising my responsibilities external to the university.

Brunswick: On a more personal note, how have you adjusted to Fredericton life?

Dr. Armstrong: Neither my wife nor I have had any difficulty adjusting to life in Fredericton; we both grew up in small communities and like the associated lifestyle. Both the university community and the people of Fredericton have given us a warm welcome. □