

To merge or not to merge:

rationalization options invoke a hostile response from some

by Tim Cyr

"Critical Choices: The Nova Scotia University System at a Crossroads" — informally was ostensibly written by the Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education (NSCHE) to address a number of pressures facing the university system in Nova Scotia, including the changing economy, the financial pressures on the public purse, federal cuts of up to 48%, increased demand to post-secondary education, challenges in the quality of instruction and research, and structural inefficiencies (NSCHE, p.3).

It quickly becomes clear that financial issues and the potential gains of restructuring the system are at the heart of the matter. For although it represents only one section of the paper, one cannot help feeling that the NSCHE had restructuring in mind when it set out to complete the Green Paper.

The NSCHE proposes that where possible, two or more institutions or faculties in Nova Scotia join together as one unit and hopefully, in the process, eliminate a lot of the duplication in both programs and administration. Costs will be saved, programs will be streamlined, and everyone will benefit, including taxpayers and students.

There would be more opportunities for inter-disciplinary interactions (something that many faculties lack) and easier redeployment of staff to their most useful and efficient post. The consolidation could take the form of full amalgamation, as if University of King's College came under the full direction of Dalhousie University, or it could be a more loosely connected federation. In any event, there are a wide range of possibilities, most of which fall into one of the five proposed structures.

Option 1: Consolidation with complementarity — One larger research intensive institution within a system of smaller and diverse institutions

Perhaps the best way to explain Option 1 is with an example. Dalhousie University could be combined with the Technical University of Nova Scotia (TUNS), Nova Scotia Agricultural College (NSAC), Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), King's and Atlantic School of Theology forming one larger institution.

The point is to amalgamate all components of the Nova Scotia university system that have a focus on both research and graduate studies. In so doing, the province would gain a medium-sized institution that could afford to carry-out advanced research and education. The hope is that all universities in the system would benefit from the research and expertise drawn into this newly-formed institution.

Option 2: Consolidation with commonalities — Consolidation on the basis of coherence of mission, mode of operation, culture

Again, the easiest way to explain is through an example. A College/University of the Fine and Applied Arts and Design could be created by combining the fine and applied arts programs at Dalhousie with the architecture school at TUNS. Or perhaps an Institute of Pure and Applied Science and Technology could be derived from Dal's science faculty, TUNS and NSAC.

The point is that institutions that carry similar or complementary programs could combine these programs under one administration. Costs would presumably be reduced, duplication eliminated and the students would gain through quality of education and by the number of courses offered.

Option 3: A Metro University

This option (and the next) are certainly easier to understand. Combining the seven institutions that exist in the Metro area would form one large university, the motivation being the cost savings associated with shared systems and services and the elimination of "redundant" programming. The paper states clearly that this new university could operate at fewer sites than at present, meaning that certain locations would be removed from the university system and hence shut-down completely.

Option 4: A University of Nova Scotia

At the extreme end of the spectrum is this option which would combine all the universities in Nova Scotia. Under this scenario, there would be only one president to represent all 13 universities in the system.

Option 5: A Suite of Joint Programs

Although the NSCHE feels that change in the Nova Scotia university system should be significant and rapid, this final option probably represents the most feasible as well as the most easily accomplished of all options. Rather than simply amalgamating programs or institutions, this option calls for faculties to work together to meet their goals.

One example that has been widely and openly discussed is to combine the business faculties of Dalhousie and SMU. Each faculty would continue to be administered under separate governance; however students would benefit from being able to take courses from either institution. Given the time, this option could slowly evolve until one program alone existed, however, the NSCHE is convinced that change is necessary immediately given the impending cuts in funding.

The principle which underlies each of these options is the economic reality known as "economies of scale." It is felt that a larger institution would be more efficient, and hence cheaper to run, than the present system of 13 separate institutions. By combining programs, faculties and even entire institutions, the resulting system would reach what is known as "critical mass," that point at which the institution becomes financially sustainable. For example, Dalhousie University, although being the largest university in Nova Scotia, still has too small an undergraduate base to support its

research and post-graduate work. By amalgamating the undergraduate base of another Metro University, it may become large enough, achieve "critical mass" and hence become a self-supporting institution.

Few people would argue that any university system should be controlled by solely financial resources. It may make financial sense to have NSCAD absorbed by Dalhousie; however, decisions should not be made on financial grounds alone. NSCAD offers an atmosphere, culture and history distinctly different from Dalhousie's, one that impacts on the work that is produced within.

Finally, if any of the 5 options presented above were put into action, a second decision as to how the resulting institution would be governed would have to be made. The Green Paper lists four options which fall anywhere from one president overseeing the entire Nova Scotian university system to a refined (revised) version of the status quo.

It is important that the NSCHE re-examine the assumptions they laid out at the outset of the paper. Although assuming that universities are primarily designed to meet the needs of their "clients" (students) by promoting their skills and knowledge; providing an intellectual environment; transferring values; and promoting the powers of the mind (NSCHE, p.4), it seems that these goals have become lost in the financial reality.

Granted, the funding cuts will require some changes in the university system, but following the assumptions of the first few pages, changes are needed at more than simply the financial level. The question that must be asked is how well any changes meet the full-range of needs faced by all involved in the university system.

Finally, the Green Paper was written at a time when Federal action was uncertain. Now that it is known that the federal government intends to reduce its commitment to universities in Canada, the impact on Nova-Scotia's 13 universities will be more dramatic. How this changes the results of the Green Paper must be discussed.

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The president is a figurehead! A figurehead is defined in the Webster's Internet Hypertext Dictionary as:

- (1) a figure on a ship's bow,
- (2) a head or chief in name only.

My suspicions were confirmed after the consultation, where upon the wall of the Henson College Auditorium, there existed a portrait of Howard Clark, our figurehead, beautifully dressed in his academic robe, framed and mounted, smiling and looking down upon the anxious crowd.

I understand the extreme pressures Dr. Clark must be under in finding a new job, but as the current Dalhousie President, I feel that he should physically attend these consultation talks to represent Dalhousie University, instead of being there in spirit.

After listening to the many brilliant academics and researchers who presented well argued points before the NSCHE, the same people who make Dalhousie what it is today, I question who really is representing Dalhousie University and its interests at the rationalization discussion tables...

Or, perhaps the problem not lies in the president himself, but in the fact that there exists a president.

Curtis Cartmill

**Social
security
review and
rationalization**

Oh where has our beloved leader gone when much discussion is needed?

On Wednesday, January 18, The Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education (NSCHE) consulted the Dalhousie academic community on several rationalization issues.

The commentary and discussion generated at the event was quite useful, in terms of proposing and building up the different university models that the NSCHE have put forth in the synopsis of the Green Paper (November 1994).

Of these proposed models, the most embraced model at Dalhousie is the consolidation of Metro's universities, creating a potentially geographical powerhouse of an institution of research and higher learning.

There was also much discussion about the opposition towards a consolidation, opposition from other universities that are unwilling to discuss the consolidation option with Dalhousie. An interesting point was made by a member of one member of the audience, about unwillingness to discuss topics and address key issues.

This person commented that "if you were to put all the university presidents in a room, absolutely nothing would get accomplished."

At this point, I began to look around, and noticed that our beloved Howard Clark was not present at this consultation. This confounded me so. Why would not our president act as our saviour, advisor or representative at such an important function? Then it hit me.