

THE DEBT

An epic story of love and hate and Henry Hicks and large buildings and money and architecture and faculty and secrecy and...

By Erin Steuter

ALTHOUGH IT IS NOT POPULAR to say so, provincial government underfunding is not necessarily the source of all blame for the current financial chaos of Dalhousie University and the resulting labour dispute.

Dalhousie currently has an accumulated capital debt of \$25 million, about \$2.5 million in interest must be paid on it every year. Many members of the Dalhousie community believe that the debt is a result of careless decisions on the part of the administration.

Where did the debt come from?

In the 1960's and 70's universities were growing rapidly, education was a priority in governments, and Dalhousie was seen as a flagship of higher learning.

It was in this period the Arts Centre, the Life Science's Centre, the Tupper building, the Weldon Law building, the Central Services building, the Killam library, the SUB, and the Dalplex were built. Though in many cases the buildings were well subsidized by the provincial government's university assistance act — Dalhousie was left with a net unfunded capital debt of \$20,858,000.

"The university was growing rapidly and there was a need for facilities," says Michael Cross, Dean of Continuing Education. "Everyone assumed the heyday would continue and so the universities expanded at a rate beyond control."

Members of the current administration admit that under the administration of then Dalhousie president Henry Hicks, there was often not a great deal of consultation over the construction of many of Dalhousie's edifices.

Under the Hicks administration very often when a proposal for a new building was brought forward, Hicks would just say build it," says director of financial services, Michael Wright.

In retrospect a number of members of the Dalhousie community see that belief in unlimited growth was unrealistic.

"Those who were making the projections didn't know what they were doing — they overdid it," says former DFA president, Om Kamra.

Officially any decision to build at Dalhousie must be approved by Dalhousie's Board of Governors. The 50 member board is made up primarily of provincial government appointees.

Two MLA's presently sit on the board as well as representatives from the alumni and several other universities.

Though the Dalhousie Student Union has four representatives on the board, there are no faculty representatives.

Board of Governor meetings are not open to the public, and the minutes of the Board meetings have been unavailable to either faculty or students since the second world war.

A number of faculty and students believe that this is where the problem lies.

"The people who are making the decisions do not have to live with the results," says Student Union Board of Governors representative, Geoff Martin.

"When the Board invests in a wasteful endeavor they aren't the ones who must live with the consequent financial restraint — such as a lack of books in the libraries — the way professors or students have to.

Faculty and students have no way of seeing how decisions are made by the board. Thus secrecy is a key issue," says Martin, "it has served to alienate the entire Dalhousie community."

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"The Board of Governors have never provided any particular expertise," says DFA student liaison, Tom Sinclair-Faulkner. "In the private sector if a Board approved the construction of buildings without sufficient funding they would be fired."

Kamra points out that Dalhousie was a very different university back then. "In the 1960's and '70s there wasn't the same kind of questioning that there is today," he says.

Michael Cross says that although there was no direct faculty involvement, he suspects that had faculty been involved they would have made the same decisions. "No one can claim to have superior vision," he says.

He points out however, that faculty did create an outcry over the building of Dalplex.

"The construction of the Dalplex caused considerable controversy as people came to see the future financial implications of

building such a structure; that it would not be the financial bonanza that everyone hoped."

At the time that the Dalplex was built — a lack of adequate library acquisitions was already a problem, university labs were inefficiently stocked, and classes were becoming overcrowded. Many people were unhappy that so luxurious a sports complex should take financial priority over more 'academic' considerations.

"Why was the complex so extravagant?" asks Martin. "It's a \$13 million facility — couldn't it have been built for less?"

He says the university's architectural extravagance is easy to see — the maze-like LSC with inadequate heating and impossible acoustics, the grand yet unwarranted terraces that grace the exterior of the Arts Centre, the fortress like structure of the Killam.

"Can these be justified in terms of expenditure?" asks Martin.

The debt created by the construction of such buildings has become even more onerous a burden because of the combined problem of soaring interest rates and a period of financial constraint within the economy.

Says university services manager, John Graham, "We are hit with increased interest charges at the same time that we are short of money."

Thus the debt of the '60s and '70s directly relates to the current labour unrest.

"Because about \$2.5 million of the university's budget goes every year to service the debt, the university is not able to put enough reserves into paying our faculty, renewing our physical surroundings, and maintaining the academic quality of the university," says Martin.

"The resulting financial constraints have created an air of financial gloom that has sapped the morale all over campus," says Cross.

Indeed administration vice-president (finance) Robbie Shaw said in a recent interview that if he had known of the actual situation of the university — he probably would never have taken office.

Says Wright, "Shaw and myself were hired to move Dalhousie into the 21st century financially, but we found when we got here that we had to move it into the second half of the 20th century."

When Shaw and Wright arrived at Dalhousie the university had no automated systems by which to determine

its economic situation. "It took us six months to determine the extent of the financial problems," Shaw said.

"It is a foolish division," says Sinclair-Faulkner, "you can't make an academic decision without financial repercussions or a financial one without academic repercussions."

But not everyone is content to blame the former administration's mismanagement. Tom Sinclair-Faulkner suggests that the problem lies in the inherent contradiction that results when a university's financial decisions are made by a lay board and its academic ones made by an academic senate.

"It is a foolish division," says Sinclair-Faulkner, "you can't make an academic decision without financial repercussions or a financial one without academic repercussions."

He suggests that the Board of Governors be abolished and a uni-cameral system (one chamber) be instituted like that of the University of Toronto.

"Students and faculty should take on major responsibility for all decisions," he says, "thus a one chamber system should be created, made up of faculty, students and lay people to make the academic and financial decisions of the university."

After all the word university really means a self-governing autonomous decision making body."

But the administration maintains that the university will not get into the same situation again.

"Now the system is under close watch," says Wright.

He offers the newly constructed Forrest building as an example. He says that although the province provided 80 per cent of the funding — go ahead was not given until the other 20 per cent was found."

"A monthly check system is being set up to insure that the same situation doesn't happen again," says Wright, "if it does — I'll resign."

In the wake of two administrative resignations in recent months — his statement provides small reassurance.

