

January 24, 2018

The Hon. A. Hawkins  
Minister of Advanced Skills, Education & Labour  
P.O. Box 8700  
Confederation Building  
St. John's, NL A1B 4J6

Dear Minister Hawkins:

The Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association Executive Committee very much appreciated the time you and several of your key staff members gave to a meeting with our representatives in December. We know how busy you are.

As we enter the New Year, we would like to follow up on some of the key issues that we discussed last month. These reflect our conviction that the University, with support and encouragement from the Province, must restore its focus on the core activities of teaching and research; they are the heart of Memorial's contribution to Newfoundland and Labrador and vital to every new generation of citizens - the foundation of a democratic society. As you probably know, data from Statistics Canada and elsewhere also shows that investment in education is an enormously effective engine for high quality job creation.

**Creation of a Provincial Research Fund:**

One concrete way for the Province to offer its support for these goals would be to create a fund for small research grants, with applications adjudicated by a committee of researchers. The amounts offered need not be large; many projects, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, can be completed with a few thousand dollars. In other cases, a small grant might offer seed money for the development of a larger project ultimately funded elsewhere. We believe that any such fund should be open to a wide range of possible projects. Support for curiosity-based research, not projects driven by predetermined priorities, is an essential condition for an innovative research climate.

The history of the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at Memorial offers a model of what such an approach can accomplish. ISER was founded in the early years after confederation with a focus on basic research that was particularly relevant to the changing situation of Newfoundland and Labrador. A core goal was to create a research culture locally. Over time, the Institute put Memorial on the map as a centre for research on the North Atlantic rim: Newfoundland and Labrador, but also Northern Europe and the wider Canadian Arctic. ISER still exists, but its funding and mandate has been reduced and it has not always been able to offer a full suite of fellowships in recent years.

**Putting Teaching and Research First:**

For the University's part, we fully recognize the challenge presented by budget cuts. We don't want to suggest that a little belt-tightening can make up for significant reductions to Memorial's grant. Nevertheless, we think that resources are too often diverted to practices that detract from the core activities of research and teaching. Many of these reflect administrative trends rather than the particular

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needs of this province. We mentioned as one example MUN's use of executive search firms – "headhunters" – to recruit administrators. Given Memorial's well-staffed Human Resources and Marketing and Communications Divisions, we cannot understand why MUN needs outside consultants to conduct a job search. Further, this costly practice reinforces a "business model" approach to universities that distracts from the true purpose of an educational institution and does little to address the distinctive needs of our provincial university.

Instead of trying to imitate other institutions, Memorial should emphasize what sets it apart. For example, many Canadian universities have moved away from extensive contact between undergraduate students and professors. First -and second-year courses in particular are often delivered in classes of 500 or more, with students' direct contact limited to graduate student Teaching Assistants. At Memorial, students in many departments still enjoy relatively small classes even at the introductory level, with professors doing most of the teaching. This is a model promoted in the United States as an elite option. Memorial should highlight it.

#### **Decision-making at Memorial:**

As we mentioned when we met, we believe that the goals outlined above require a renewed commitment to collegial government of the University. We recognize the importance of diverse representation from different areas of the community on the Board of Regents, for example, but we feel it is counter-productive to completely exclude Academic Staff Members – the very people most familiar with Memorial's educational and research work - from sitting as Regents.

What we are proposing would help restore Memorial's founding spirit, as reflected in these comments from Herbert Halpert, founder of Memorial's Department of Folklore (quoted in *Observing the Outposts* by Jeff Webb). Noting that "Memorial University was both new and small" when he arrived in the early 1960s, he added:

[B]ut it was flexible. It was run by men who had no hesitation in doing things for the first time in English-speaking Canada. Introducing folklore as a university subject is one example, another ... was the setting up of the Institute of Social and Economic Research, a daring project undertaken against the advice of several mainland universities... (p. 158).

As Webb shows, this approach of augmenting the distinctive strengths of Memorial and of this province, rather than trying to compete with others by imitating them, was shared by many central figures at Memorial at the time: former MUN president Leslie Harris and George Story, editor of *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, among them. This is the type of leadership we need at Memorial today.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions about any of the issues raised here or would like further elaboration from us.

Sincerely yours,



Robin Whitaker, PhD

President, Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association