Installation address

R. Florizone
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Faculty, staff, students, invited guests, my fellow university presidents and leaders; Chancellor Fountain, members of the Board of Governors and Senate: thank you so much for being here today. It’s wonderful to be here with all of you.

Given the sheer volume of activity that goes on at a university day-in and day-out, it’s easy to get lost in the whirlwind of it all. Moments like this are an opportunity to take a step back — to reflect on our story: why we’re here, what brought us to this moment in history, and where we might go in the future.

We come here from different backgrounds, different disciplines, different countries. But something we all share is a common belief in the power of knowledge and understanding to improve and transform lives.

Our world is an increasingly interconnected, interdependent and complex place, and I believe that the university’s mission of teaching, research, and service has never been more important. To take on that mission as the 11th president of this incredible university is a privilege and a humbling honour, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

What brought me to Dalhousie was what makes this university a destination for students, faculty and staff from around the world: the opportunity to be part of nearly two centuries of academic excellence in this great community by the sea.

It’s been impossible not to take note of the growing waves made at Dal. The voices from within this university ripple out across this region and
around the world: in books and scholarly journals, in the offices of physicians, lawyers and other professionals, in public buildings and boardrooms, and in living rooms and at kitchen tables.

Even by the narrow measure of brick, mortar and mergers, Dalhousie’s growth and success in recent years has been remarkable. And certainly, the expansion of Dal’s campuses and the welcoming of faculties in Engineering, Architecture & Planning, Computer Science and Agriculture are all impressive.

But Dalhousie’s greatest strength has been in its impact, in this university’s success in teaching, research and service. It’s in the thousands of students who’ve walked through Dal’s classrooms and are now leaders in academia, government, industry and non-profits. It’s in the expansion of the university’s research community and the important, paradigm-shifting ideas and discoveries by our faculty and graduate students.

It’s in the increasing number of outreach activities and community-based projects that take the knowledge generated inside these walls and connect it with the people throughout the world who need it most.

And Dal’s strength and success is represented here today, on this stage, in the presence of these eight exceptional university leaders who’ve travelled from around the globe to join us. Your presence here speaks to the importance of global partnership and Dal’s increasing role on the international stage. Thank you for your insight during this morning’s panel discussion and for sharing in this special day with us.

As a university, we exist to both serve and stimulate our communities locally, nationally and internationally — that’s our responsibility. As a university president, my role, my responsibility, is to serve this community in achieving its goals. In that capacity, I have big shoes to fill.

For 18 years, Tom Traves led this institution with great integrity and character. He left Dalhousie in a far stronger position than he found it, which is, to me, a fundamental test of leadership. He has been both generous and gracious during my transition here at Dal. Tom, thank you
for all of your support and for helping guide this university to the enviable position it finds itself in today.

And it is, indeed enviable. Over 20 percent increase in enrolment over the past decade. More than $140 million in sponsored research annually. $280 million raised in the transformative Bold Ambitions campaign. Dalhousie is not just celebrating potential, but real accomplishment and incredible promise for our future.

That future is unwritten and, certainly, there are many challenges ahead: from constrained government funding to the impact of technological change. But throughout my 100 Days of Listening so far, I’ve been immensely inspired by this community and its hopes for that future.

And while I still have much to discover, what I’d like to share today are five ideas that have inspired me most — five ideas that define the Dalhousie of today and will guide us as we work together to write this university’s next chapter

1. The transformative power of education

The first of these ideas, and perhaps the foremost, is the transformative power of education: the power of education to transform the lives of individuals.

We’re all here today because at some point in our lives we were inspired by the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Maybe it was in a classroom, or perhaps through an individual professor, peer or mentor. But something clicked in each of us, a spark of curiosity illuminating the path ahead: This is why I am here. This is what I am meant to do.

For me, one of those initial sparks was my grandmother, Therese Polard. As a young francophone girl growing up in rural Saskatchewan in the 1920s and 30s, she was only able to achieve a fourth-grade education. But her commitment to life-long learning, her relentless pursuit of opportunities to better her condition, defined our family in many ways. My love of learning owes much to her example, and the 10
university degrees that my parents, siblings and I claim is part of her ongoing legacy. She was a spark that started so much, and I’m so honoured to have her with us here today.

That same spark lives in Dal within our outstanding faculty — professors like Kim Brooks, our dean of law, who I will have to introduce to my grandmother before this weekend is out; I’m certain they’re kindred spirits. Kim is one of several nationally recognized 3M Teaching fellows on campus, together with peers like Srini Sampalli, Joan Conrad, Robert Summerby-Murray (our Dean of Arts and Social Sciences) and Tom MacRae. They’re just a few examples of the incredible teachers and support staff who, together, represent the most powerful impact we make as a university: creating a spark, enabling personal discovery, and imbuing a sense of meaning in individuals’ lives.

We welcome our students at important life transitions: undergraduates on the edge of adulthood, graduate students on the cusp of discovery and understanding. Here, they encounter and are often challenged by new ideas, new ways of thinking, a new global perspective on the world.

Two-thirds of our undergraduate students say that when they leave Dalhousie to join the ranks of more than 120,000 Dal alumni, they do so as fundamentally different people than when they arrived here.

Our responsibility is to sustain this university as a place where those transformations are made possible. We do this by attracting and supporting outstanding professors; by increasing opportunities for experiential and applied learning, as well as innovating in our academic programs as with our College of Sustainability; supporting exchange and study-abroad opportunities; and working together with government, donors and other partners to increase access to higher education. Because every student deserves the opportunity to find that spark, to be transformed by the quest for understanding.

2. A place for careful pause

The second guiding idea is the university as a place for careful pause and reflection.
The ability to pause, reflect and challenge is what makes universities unique compared to other sectors of society. Academic freedom, with its right and responsibility to question orthodoxy, gives us the ability to ask the questions no one else is asking. It enables us to pursue discovery research that may well pay off in something extraordinary, and to start uncomfortable conversations that need to be had.

The late, great Ransom A. Myers, one of the most acclaimed researchers in Dal’s history, came to the university from government in part because, through his innovative studies of marine populations, he was compelled to challenge unsustainable fisheries policies. Here, at Dalhousie, he was able to do so, becoming one of the most influential oceans scientists of his time. Today his legacy lives on in the work of those who have followed him, individuals like Boris Worm and Heike Lotze.

We have countless examples of researchers and professors changing the way we understand the world around us: Jock Murray with Multiple Sclerosis; John Cullen with ozone depletion; the late Peter Aucoin in Public Administration; Mary Anne White with material chemistry; and the late Malcolm Ross with Canadian literature.

If we don't ask the hardest questions, who will? Other private and public sector entities certainly have a role to play, and are very important partners for the university. But companies are often time-bound by quarterly and annual results, and governments by four-year electoral cycles. What we offer society is a longer-term view, with a mode of inquiry that seeks to solve today’s problems while also building the knowledge and capacity for an uncertain future.

A vivid example of this is to think back to September 11, 2001. The field of Middle Eastern studies suddenly became very important that day. What may have looked like an obscure or less relevant field the day before was now there for society to draw on, having been nurtured over decades within our universities. Focusing on the long term created the capacity to respond in the short term.

This focus on the long term can make universities slower to adapt and respond to society’s current needs. Overall I do believe that universities
can benefit from being more responsive and more market influenced. But we must not become entirely market driven, or else society will lose an essential capacity — the capacity to nurture and develop the kind of long-term knowledge that is required to address unforeseen events, and to seize opportunities not yet imagined.

3. Where the world comes together

The third idea I want to talk about today is diversity, about the university as a place where the world comes together, as we’ve done here today.

Our story is strengthened by our diversity: in our ability to be a gathering place for ideas that transcend nationality, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation.

At Dal, diversity has been part of our DNA from the very beginning, when Lord Dalhousie sought to establish North America’s first non-denominational university.

It’s right there in the Dalhousie Act of 1863, which stated: “No religious tests or subscriptions shall be required of the professors, scholars, graduates, students or officers of the College.”

Religious belief seems like a rather narrow notion of diversity by today’s standards, but in the 19th century it was downright radical.

The definition expanded in 1881 with the admission of women. One of our most distinguished alumni, Eliza Ritchie, graduated in 1887 with a Bachelor of Letters, before completing her Ph.D. and becoming a professor of philosophy at Wellesley College. She found Dalhousie to be a welcoming place, saying that, “no fight, inch by inch, had to be fought as in other places.”

The principle behind Lord Dalhousie’s idea continued into the 1930’s, when Dal welcomed, with open arms, Jewish students from Europe who were fleeing persecution during the rise of Nazi Germany.

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1 P.B. Waite, The Lives of Dalhousie University, Vol. 1., p. 134
This principle of embracing diversity, of bringing the world together at Dal, continues to this day.

You see it in our Transition Year Program, which for more than 40 years has been addressing systemic disadvantages by empowering African Nova Scotian and Aboriginal youth to pursue higher education. You see it in South House, formerly the Dal Women’s Centre, started by our students, which plays a leadership role in our community around issues of gender and sexuality.

You see it in our international student enrolment. The number of international undergrads at Dal has doubled in the past four years alone, and today more than 13 per cent of our student population comes from 112 different countries around the world. And you see it in our international research and teaching partnerships, including our 2+2 programs in China, which brings hundreds of Chinese students to Dal to study Agriculture, Economics, and Computer Science.

At the same time, we know Dal’s record is far from perfect. We have further work to do to make Dal a truly welcoming place for our indigenous Black and Aboriginal Nova Scotians, and for international scholars and students.

This is a wonderful opportunity for Dalhousie and our region more broadly. A diverse and global campus is a stronger campus. An inclusive and global community is a stronger community. For the Atlantic region to grow and prosper, we need to open our doors to the world. Dalhousie should serve both as an example and a leader in diversity and as a place where the world comes together.

4. A catalyst for our communities

That word — “serve” — is one I keep coming back to when I think about the university, and it brings me to my fourth idea, which is this: A great university should serve as a catalyst for the intellectual, social and economic development of it’s communities.
There are challenges and opportunities in Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada today, and Dalhousie has an important role to play in addressing them.

To be sure, Dal, like other universities, serves its communities through the three ideas I’ve already discussed: by transforming lives through education, by being a place for careful pause and by being a diverse and global institution.

But I am also inspired by Dal's unique capacity to respond to the needs of our communities.

Seventy-five per cent of all the dentists working in Atlantic Canada, and more than half of maritime physicians studied at Dalhousie.

Dalhousie researchers are crucial and credible voices in public policy discussions: like Law's Wayne MacKay on bullying and cyberbullying; Social Work's Michael Ungar on children and youth in challenging contexts; Planning’s Jill Grant on urban development; Criminologist Don Clairmont on urban violence; and Ingrid Sketris on medication management.

Dalhousie faculty, students and staff reach out into our communities through services like the Dental Clinic, Dalhousie Legal Aid, the Imhotep’s Legacy Academy and the outpost nursing program.

Our newest faculty, Agriculture, is establishing a seed lending library making rare and not so rare seeds available to anyone.

Dalhousie is home to a proud civic-mindedness. 6 in 10 of Dal employees volunteer in the community. And we welcome thousands on to our campus each year through the public use of facilities like the Arts Centre and the Dalplex.

And Dalhousie has been a strong partner in nurturing some of this province’s most significant recent economic opportunities including the play fairway analysis which has led to significant renewed investment in offshore exploration in Nova Scotia; the establishment of IBM’s only Canadian Global Delivery Centre, here in Halifax; and the formulation of
Irving Shipbuilding’s Value to Canada proposition, which formed part of their successful bid.

Today, ocean science and technology and ICT represent 5 per cent of Nova Scotia’s GDP, and Dalhousie is contributing vital capacity to drive this economic activity.

This is only a small number of examples, and for me it is only the beginning.

I believe the future of Atlantic Canada and of Nova Scotia holds great promise, and I am encouraged by the enthusiasm I find within Dalhousie to build further on our tradition of service.

Our communities serve us well, and at Dal we take seriously the aim of serving them well in return.

5. No one does anything alone

Here is the fifth and final idea I want to share with you:

Nobody does anything alone.

I have some pride in what I’ve achieved in my life and career, but with each passing year I have a deeper understanding and appreciation for the support I’ve received from others.

I’ve already mentioned my grandmother. My parents Aline and Lionel Florizone are also here today, along with my wife Mona Holmlund and my daughters Zoe and Elinor, who are such a source of love, inspiration and energy.

I’ve benefited greatly from the mentorship and friendship of colleagues and friends like President Emeritus Peter MacKinnon from the University of Saskatchewan, Vice-President Karen Chad, and former Dean and Provost Ernie Barber — all of whom are here today as well. The list goes on.
The truth is that none of us achieves much of anything on our own, and that is as true for universities as it is for people.

The ideas I’ve discussed today— the transformative power of education, a place for careful pause, a gathering place for the world, our ability to catalyze communities — these are the things that make the story of higher education so compelling. But what makes our mission possible is the support of others.

Without public support, without students, without donors, and without research and scholarly collaborations at home and abroad, Dalhousie would simply fail to exist.

Within our research enterprise, for example, Dalhousie now receives funding from 237 distinct organizations, representing a rich array of public, private, and non-profit partners from across Nova Scotia, Canada, and the world.

As we look ahead to the opportunities and challenges facing Dalhousie, we must strengthen and build upon these partnerships, discovering shared interests, securing support, and increasing our connections and relevance to all levels of society.

I’m confident in our future. I’m confident because over the past few months, as I’ve embarked on my 100 Days of Listening, I’ve witnessed the spirit, the generosity and talent of this community. I’ve seen, already, the impact of the Bold Ambitions campaign — that $280 million investment in Dalhousie from our community. I’m confident because I believe in Dalhousie’s story. I believe in our ability to inspire even more support for our mission.

And I’m confident because I believe in you. No one does anything alone. The Dalhousie story is your story, with each of you serving as authors and as storytellers. As we work together to write that next chapter, let us continue to be pioneers, guided by the strength of our mission; inspired by the values that shaped it; supported by those who share it. I truly believe that Dalhousie has more great accomplishments — your great accomplishments — in the unwritten pages ahead.
There’s a fresh Atlantic wind in Nova Scotia. It blows almost continuously, and it is filled with tremendous energy and potential. Let it inspire us together to strive for bold new achievements for Dalhousie, for our region, and for the world.

Thank you.