

**differentiation**

**excellence**

**focus**

**flexibility**

**Dalhousie University's Strategic Focus  
2010–2013**





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Becoming Canada's  
best university.



# The challenge

*Three years ago, Dalhousie's strategic focus laid out a bold ambition — to become Canada's best university.*

*Reaction across campus was mixed.*

Some colleagues doubted our capacity to hit this target, others wondered about the definition of “best,” and still others cheered our audacious plan as an exciting goal. Looking forward, our ambition remains the same and we are closer than ever to realizing our aspirations.

Admittedly, threats to our ambitions abound in our operating environment, but with foresight we can address all of them. Nova Scotia's fiscal situation is precarious and this could undermine the province's operating grants for higher education, but we expect changes in the distribution formula among universities that will boost our share of the education envelope. Our defined benefit pension plan presently is in deficit, but with the cooperation of our employee groups we can revise the plan to achieve a sustainable pension at current levels for all employees. Finally, the number of Nova Scotia's high school graduates will decline by 30 per cent over the decade, but our aggressive recruitment strategy across Canada and globally promises to provide enrolment and financial stability, even modest growth, as we look forward.



Success will depend on strong academic programs that attract the very best students in growing numbers. In our highly competitive environment, we must focus steadily on answering the following question: “Why study at Dalhousie rather than any number of other universities?”

Four principles must underpin our answer to this question: **differentiation, excellence, focus and flexibility.**

*We must develop a learning environment that sets us apart from our comparators.*

*We must meet our students’ demands for a world-class education.*

*We must target our resources to where they can have the greatest impact.*

*And we need the flexibility to support innovation and advance our collective priorities.*

This document outlines how Dalhousie will strategically apply those concepts across our academic programs, research activities and campus operations. You can also download a PDF of

the complete strategic plan as well as our progress on key performance indicators over many years at my website: <http://www.dal.ca/president>. I hope that you revisit these documents in the years ahead as we strive to become Canada’s best university.

Think of that challenge as the equivalent of the Olympic decathlon; you don’t have to finish first in every event to win the prize so long as you have the best performance across the board. We have excellent students, great faculty and staff, steadily improving facilities, a clear strategy and effective execution, generous alumni and a supportive government.

Given all this, why not aim for the gold medal? We owe it to ourselves to strive for nothing less than the top of the podium.

Tom Traves



## A strategy for success

### Differentiation

Many universities offer the same academic programs as Dalhousie. To compete effectively, we must offer something special. In limited numbers, we can offer unique academic programs, but such opportunities come along rarely and quickly disappear as others copy successful innovations. That said, every Faculty and academic department should anticipate emerging themes and topics in their area and develop flexibility within their existing resources to innovate as those opportunities mature. We can also differentiate our programs by our pedagogy and program structure: special learning environments for first-year students, experiential learning, exposure to research and study abroad opportunities, integration of online learning features, flexible degree combinations and so on. None of these features are unique, but we can create attractive combinations of such elements to set our programs apart.

### Excellence

Differentiation makes sense only in combination with excellence. Once you attract attention, you must deliver the goods. Students demand excellence both inside the classroom and across a wide range of co-curricular university experiences. Failure in one area depresses

the value of success in the other. Moreover, student demands evolve with changes in their larger environment, so we must evolve with the culture and its expectations. In these circumstances, effective performance measures will help us define excellence, improve our efforts and create new marketing opportunities to advertise our best qualities.

### Focus

Given the breadth of our curricular offerings, Dalhousie lacks the resources necessary to sustain excellence across all areas. We need to focus available resources on our priorities and ensure that our organizational arrangements concentrate our abilities rather than dilute them. Every Faculty at the university needs to assess the way it uses resources and organizes efforts. If we conclude that we lack crucial resources in a critical area, we must examine our practices to identify ways to divert available means to higher-priority areas.

### Flexibility

The university needs financial flexibility to support innovation and advance our collective priorities. Some needs – say, additional residence buildings to house students recruited from outside Halifax – have few campus



champions, but they must be addressed to ensure the success of other priorities, such as the requirement for additional tuition income to support academic programming and student services. To meet all our obligations to students and ensure that we deliver essential services to faculty and staff, we must maintain our capacity to shift resources from one function to another as circumstances and opportunities dictate. University budget practices will be a crucial component in the success of this strategic plan.

### Research

Our research activities must operate under these same four principles. We produce solid results from a moderate-sized faculty complement, but we face demands for global excellence and the push to address major government or social priorities. In this climate, we must focus the university's research agenda and build substantial, broadly-conceived centres of excellence that measure up to all assessments. This does not eliminate individual autonomy to pursue personal inquiries, but it does require an institutional focus that directs resources to support research opportunities for excellence on a global stage. Excellence in research also creates another means

to differentiate our educational programs by attracting outstanding faculty and establishing opportunities for stellar students to participate in the research process.

### Campus operations

Education and research lie at the heart of our mission, but institutional success requires outstanding enabling agencies that facilitate mission-critical achievements and provide essential services. Without reproducing the entire list of departments in our campus telephone book, clearly Dalhousie's success requires effective student services, campus housing, an excellent library system, human resource policies and services, information technology services, facilities management, strong financial administration, successful fundraising and alumni engagement, communications and marketing, government relations, and effective enrolment management. Each of these areas requires its own strategic plan, properly aligned, to help us achieve a successful Dalhousie.

Strategic success depends upon the alignment of a myriad of activities across the university. Purposeful action requires context; this institutional strategy provides the broad framework within which everyone can appreciate the importance of their activities and contributions.



## Dalhousie's mission, vision and values

### Mission

Learning, discovery and innovation, and social engagement.

### Vision

Dalhousie will become Canada's best university, committed to advancing provincial and regional development by attracting and offering a diverse student body an outstanding personal experience at a national university built around an excellent learning environment, acclaimed research strengths, broad program choices and successful career preparation in cooperation with supportive external stakeholders.

### Dalhousie's values

- **Growth and achievement** through creating an environment that provides the support, challenge, flexibility, resources and recognition individuals need to flourish.
- **Larger lessons** taught and learned by using processes that facilitate the acquisition of wisdom, lead to learning more than what is taught, and challenge and transform hearts, minds and actions.
- **Meaningful contributions** made by responding to needs that truly matter in a way that strengthens and gives a sense of importance and worth to those we serve.
- **Community building** by stimulating an enquiring perspective, imaginative thinking, meaningful inclusion and high levels of collaboration within the university and larger community.
- **Exemplary leadership** through principled and ethical actions that reflect a respect for people and a commitment continuously to expand our capacity to achieve our collective vision.



### Our strategic focus

In preparing this strategic plan, many good ideas emerged through the consultation process. Some are most appropriately dealt with at the academic department and Faculty level or within administrative units, and we will pursue them in that context. Others became components of broader innovations reflected in our university strategy. Innovation is a continuous process. While opportunity and timing are critical in setting priorities, good ideas eventually find their day.

*Our strategy focuses upon eight areas:*

- Fostering academic innovation
- Enriching student experience
- Strengthening enrolment
- Supporting research excellence
- Developing outstanding human resources
- Sustaining campus renewal
- Ensuring financial stability
- Engaging our community

We also need to introduce performance measures or project targets to assess our progress towards achieving our goals. Universities are complex institutions and no single measure, like a bottom line or a return on investment, sufficiently captures the reality of our experience. But if you have goals, you must measure how far you've come to achieving your vision with the best data available.



## Foster academic innovation

To remain competitive and ensure program excellence, Dalhousie must foster academic innovation continuously, whether in pedagogical practice, program objectives, curriculum design or degree structures. Though innovation has occurred in all these areas over the years, we need to look at the larger picture and imagine Dalhousie as our students see us: a single academic experience that blends all aspects of their learning encounters.

We need to strengthen our academic experience in ways that differentiate a Dalhousie undergraduate education from other institutions. The Dalhousie Undergraduate Education Initiative, organized by the Vice-President Academic, will focus on the larger overarching learning objectives that many programs share and then determine processes through which they can be strengthened. It will consider and evaluate rubrics that address student learning outcomes with the goal of achieving academic excellence through innovation.

Information technology innovations continue to change the way we teach and learn, as well as perform administrative tasks. To prepare us for ongoing transformations and create a flexible technical environment within which to experiment and learn, Dalhousie needs an academic information technology strategy to complement the evolution of administrative computing developments.

Over the past several years, Dalhousie has implicitly pursued a priority to maintain a very low student-to-faculty ratio, which normally should be a cause for celebration in an academic community. But when this effort drains Faculty budgets of most of their resources, it comes at a steep price. Arguably, we could increase our ratio by 20 per cent and still claim national leadership. We need a clear academic staffing plan for every Faculty to ensure a strategic distribution of resources to support our goals.



**Objective 1: Establish the Dalhousie Undergraduate Education Initiative****Target:** Establish a task force by Fall 2010 and receive report by Spring 2011**Objective 2: Align technology and support resources to enhance academic innovation as well as renewing our administrative processes****Target:** Establish IT strategy working group by Fall 2010 and receive report by Spring 2011**Objective 3: Develop Faculty strategic plans that balance faculty appointments, appropriate administrative resources and other academic needs such as student services and research support***Performance measures of academic innovation***Percentage of undergraduates satisfied with the quality of teaching**

Current (2008): 82% satisfied or highly satisfied • Target (2012–13): 85% satisfied or highly satisfied

**Performance on National Survey of Student Engagement – active and collaborative learning**

Current (2008): 1st year students – 36.0 index; 4th year students – 45.9 index

Target (2012–13): 1st year students – 39 index; 4th year students – 49 index

**Performance on National Survey of Student Engagement – student-faculty interaction**

Current (2008): 1st year students – 25.7 index; 4th year students – 35.8 index

Target (2012–13): 1st year students – 28 index; 4th year students – 48 index

**National academic awards per 1000 students over five-year periods**

Current (2004–2008): 4th in Canada • Target (2012–13): 4th in Canada

**Highest quality university national reputation ranking**

Current (2009): 9th in Canada • Target (2012–13): 7th in Canada

**Dalhousie students studying abroad**

Current (2008–09): 513 students annually • Target (2012–13): 600 students annually

**Participation in experiential learning**

Current (2008): 1st year students: 49.0%; senior year students: 83.3%

Target (2012–13): 1st year students: 50%; senior year students: 85%

**Student-to-faculty ratio (university-wide full time equivalent students per FT faculty)**

Current (2008–09): 13.5–1 • Target (2012–13): 18–1 within the next five years

## Enrich student experience

The value of the Dalhousie experience encompasses both the curricular and co-curricular components of students' lives. Dalhousie scores well on student engagement surveys and the proportion of students reporting satisfaction with their university experience.

Paradoxically, though, we also hear frequently about the need to enhance “campus spirit,” an elusive but important quality of the desired Dalhousie experience. We need to improve these outcomes. Extensive surveys of students indicate overwhelmingly a desire for better athletic facilities on campus and more access to leisure and fitness programs. At the same time, while student participation in extra-curricular activities at Dalhousie is equal to the national average among similar universities, we should do much better.

To improve participation rates and enhance the experience, we need to support student societies more effectively at both a university and Faculty level. Appropriate organizational communications and financial support will strengthen local identities within various academic milieus and foster engagement with numerous university objectives. These activities should balance fun with leadership and learning opportunities for students. We also need to develop methods to recognize these activities formally, perhaps through a co-curricular transcript.

Finally, we need to create more venues for our students to speak to us directly about their academic and social concerns. The best place to do this is at the Faculty and department level, so our academic leaders need to create informal forums to facilitate more dialogue.



**Objective 4:** Create a partnership with Dalhousie students to renew the Dalplex and upgrade fitness facilities

**Target:** Achieve partnership to proceed with Dalplex renewal by Spring 2010

**Objective 5:** Support the capacities of Faculty student societies to create stronger local identities and stronger campus spirit

**Target:** Develop local plans by Spring 2011

**Objective 6:** Develop increased student leadership opportunities and ways to recognize these experiences

**Target:** Develop student leadership plan by Spring 2011

**Objective 7:** Create department and Faculty student forums to enhance communication with academic leaders

**Target:** Establish forums by Fall 2010

*Performance measures of student experience:*

**Percentage of students who say that Dalhousie met or exceeded expectations**

Current: 1st year students (2007) 84.8%; graduating students (2009) 81.5%

Target (2012–13): 1st year students 90%; graduating students 85%

**Percentage of students satisfied with their decision to attend Dalhousie**

Current: 1st year students (2007) 89.2%; graduating students (2009) 85.2%

Target (2012–13): 1st year students 93%; graduating students 90%

**Percentage of undergraduates satisfied or very satisfied with university services**

Current (2008): 82.8%

Target (2012–13): 86%

## Strengthen enrolment

Dalhousie's enrolment is now 16,000 students. If we grow at a rate of two per cent each year – a realistic growth pattern – we will reach 17,000 students in September 2012. The university is prepared for such growth, with most of our infrastructure and our faculty and staff capacity requiring only modest adjustments.

In addition to recruiting more students directly from high school, there are three other important elements that should underpin our enrolment strategy: retain students once they are here; attract and support more international students for academic success; and increase transfer students from other universities who enroll at Dalhousie in substantial numbers.



**Objective 8: Expand total enrolment to 17,000 students by September 2012**

**Objective 9: Reduce undergraduate attrition rates**

**Objective 10: Increase international student enrolment with appropriately supportive student services**

**Objective 11: Increase the number of transfer students to Dalhousie**

### *Performance measures of enrolment*

#### **Total enrolment targets**

Current (2009–10): 12,169 undergraduates; 3,830 graduate students

Target (2012–13): 13,200 undergraduates; 3,800 graduate students

#### **International students as % of total enrolment**

Current (2009–10): 8.9%

Target (2012–13): 10%

#### **Average entering grade for new students**

Current (2009–10): 85.4%

Target (2012–13): 86%

#### **Retention rate for 1st year students**

Current (2008–09): 82.1%

Target (2012–13): 87%

#### **Number of transfer students**

Current (2009–10): 542

Target (2012–13): 600

## Support research excellence

Given the fiscal circumstances facing our federal and provincial governments, it is likely that the growth of research funds will be constrained temporarily and governments will seek greater focus and alignment of their grants with their priorities. If this becomes the case, Dalhousie needs to review our strategic research plan to ensure we have the capacity and flexibility to move ahead in this environment. Some initiatives already underway – our proposed Health Policy Research Centre and an emerging Dalhousie/Halifax Marine Institute proposal – are great examples of connecting research activities with government concerns.

The case for increased funding rests ultimately on public support for the social value of our research. The work of our Office for Industry Liaison and Innovation helps create such support and we must ensure it continues to expand its efforts effectively. We also need a more effective strategy

externally to communicate our capacity as a research intensive university and differentiate ourselves from other universities in Nova Scotia.

Such initiatives require substantial support from the university, so the capacity of the Vice-President Research to provide leadership on many fronts needs to be enhanced. Similarly, we need to increase our ability to attract outstanding graduate students who play a crucial role in the quality of our research and teaching endeavours.

Dalhousie currently spends many millions of dollars to support our faculty members' research activities, but a recent employee survey indicated substantial discontent with our efforts. The survey did not provide details of the underlying dissatisfaction, so it is important that we deepen our understanding of these concerns and improve our communication about the kinds of support provided.



**Objective 12: Review Dalhousie's strategic research plan in light of the evolving external environment**

**Target: Complete review by Fall 2011**

**Objective 13: Enhance the Vice-President Research's capacity to support major funding applications**

**Target: Budget enhancements by 2012–13**

**Objective 14: Reallocate funding to support graduate students and build our endowment for scholarships through our capital campaign**

**Target: Increases in graduate scholarship endowments by 2012–13, funded through the university's capital campaign**

**Objective 15: Develop a clear analysis of faculty expectations concerning research support**

**Target: Complete focus group discussions by the end of 2010**

**Objective 16: Begin using appropriate bibliometric measures to assess output and impact of research**

### *Performance measures of research excellence*

#### **Total sponsored research awards and grants**

Current (2008–09): \$129 million

Target (2012–13): \$140 million

#### **Faculty achievement awards per 1000 faculty over five-year periods**

Current (2004–08): 4.4

Target (2012–13): 6.5

#### **Funding from external sources for Dalhousie graduate students**

Current (2008–09): \$14.8 million

Target (2012–13): \$16 million

## Develop outstanding human resources

Universities attract outstanding people with talent and commitment, but it requires leadership and sound organizational practices to create a work environment that encourages everyone to work together towards agreed objectives. Our recent employee survey identified a number of issues that require our attention to meet this goal.

We also need to ensure that those selected for academic or administrative leadership roles at Dalhousie can develop and refine the skills they

need to perform effectively on behalf of our community. Our human resource policies, processes and practices must serve our strategic objectives.

Two particularly pressing issues in the next few years will be the establishment of more flexible employment options for a community where mandatory retirement no longer exists and a faculty complement plan that suits our academic and financial goals.



**Objective 17: Enhance Dalhousie's positive work environment**

**Target:** Follow up on 2009 employee survey issues and launch the 2011 survey

**Objective 18: Increase initiatives to develop leadership skills among university employees**

**Target:** Develop plan for additional initiatives by Spring 2011

**Objective 19: Improve Dalhousie's human resources policies, processes and practices to meet our evolving needs**

**Target:** Launch the Human Resources Strategic Plan, Spring 2010

*Performance measures for human resources development***Employee morale in the workplace: Responses to the statement "I am proud to work at Dalhousie"**

Current (2009): 79%

Target (2012–13): 82%

**Percentage of first-choice candidates hired into tenure stream positions**

Current (2008–09): 94.4%

Target (2012–13): maintain above 90%

**Annual turnover rate among administrative staff**

Current (2009): 2.3%

Target (2012–13): maintain below 3%

## Sustain campus renewal

The transformation of Dalhousie's campuses proceeds rapidly, improving the quality of our learning and working space and enhancing our appeal when recruiting new students. Our new Campus Master Plan will create a framework for future developments, but new space is expensive, so it is crucial that we use available physical resources efficiently and that we maintain them well. Regular space audits and increased investments in deferred maintenance projects are essential.

Several new projects are moving forward quickly, assuming our finances allow. In particular, we need to add additional residence space on campus to house new students, renew our capacity to heat buildings in a more sustainable manner, and build new learning spaces where enrolment pressures are greatest and growth cannot be accommodated easily within existing facilities. In all our efforts, we must take care to maintain the strongest commitment to environmental sustainability.



**Objective 20:** Make improved student experience space a priority wherever feasible

**Objective 21:** Use our new Campus Master Plan to guide campus renewal

**Target:** Campus Master Plan approved by Fall 2010 with processes and organizational arrangements in place by Spring 2011

**Objective 22:** Develop a space management process that ensures assigned campus space is used efficiently and that the use of classrooms, labs and meeting rooms is optimal throughout the day

**Target:** Report annually on classroom utilization during normal working hours and complete space audits of all buildings on a rotating schedule

**Objective 23:** Ensure all campus operations proceed with strong consideration for environmental sustainability

### *Performance measures for campus renewal*

#### **Learning space at Dalhousie as percentage of Ontario space standards**

Current (2010): 91.7%

Target (2012–13): 93%

#### **Percentage of classroom utilization during normal hours (Studley Campus)**

Current (2010): 70.66%

Target (2012–13): 73%

#### **Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions**

Current (2008–09): 103,187 metric tonnes

Target (2012–13): 87,708 metric tonnes

## Ensure financial stability

Financial stability is essential for academic progress; so are clear strategic priorities to guide institutional financial planning. To differentiate ourselves from other universities in a highly-competitive environment, we must adjust our budget allocations regularly (albeit moderately, on an annual basis) to facilitate strategic spending on university priorities over time.

Many universities look similar on the budget page. At Dalhousie, two problematic areas stand out. Our pension plan, in its current form, is unsustainable unless we drain the

university operating budget of its vitality. The second is our unusually low student-to-faculty ratio, which is enviable, but must be viewed in the context of other important opportunities to serve our students and the rest of our community more effectively.

To ensure the success of this strategic plan we must create a more sustainable pension plan that maintains our ability to recruit and retain the best faculty and staff. We also need to secure additional resources to support new initiatives through successful fundraising campaigns.



**Objective 24:** With the mutual agreement of our employee groups, develop a pension plan that is financially sustainable and meets employee expectations

**Target:** The Pension Advisory Committee must recommend agreeable pension changes before pension actuarial valuation on June 30, 2010

**Objective 25:** Successfully complete a \$250-million capital campaign within the next five years

*Performance measures of financial stability*

**Administration expenses as percentage of total expenses**

Current (2007–08): 6.8%

Target (2012–13): 7%

**Market value of endowment assets**

Current (Dec. 31, 2008): \$267.4 million

Target (2012–13): \$350 million

**Total value of financial gifts to the university**

Current (2009–10): \$43 million

Target (2013): complete \$250 million campaign

**Total number of donors to the university**

Current (2009–10): 7,651

Target (2012–13): 9,000

## Engage our community

Universities engage their communities on several levels: global, national and local. Our teaching and research activities take us into the world just as we draw worldly experiences back into the classroom. Dalhousie needs a clearer strategy and additional organizational capacity to engage these processes effectively, including coordinating our voluminous international activities to ensure efficiency and purpose within a strategic framework.

Closer to home, we do not present a clear enough picture of the impact our students, faculty and staff make on their communities. We need a new communications effort to bring greater public attention to the benefits of our substantial activities as a university.

In all of these efforts we enjoy strong partnerships with community groups and companies with whom we work to advance our shared

development. Our most enduring partnership, of course, is with our alumni, especially the thousands of Dalhousie graduates who continue to participate in university events and generously support many of our projects. Traditionally, we have connected with alumni primarily through social events. These occasions continue to have their place, but alumni want, and deserve, more from us. We are a community united by learning and we need to develop a strategy to engage with our alumni more substantially throughout their lives.

Active and dedicated alumni also want to help Dalhousie continue to grow and develop. Our alumni program should create more opportunities for alumni volunteers to help us in recruiting, mentoring students and opening doors during fund raising campaigns.



**Objective 26:** Develop a coordinated international education and research strategy for Dalhousie

**Target:** Present proposal by Fall 2010 for implementation during the 2010–11 academic year

**Objective 27:** Develop an external communication strategy that effectively characterizes Dalhousie's contributions to the long term development of our province and nation through our educational and research activities

**Target:** Implement new communication campaign by 2011

**Objective 28:** Develop a comprehensive alumni advancement strategy

**Target:** Develop strategy by Spring 2011



## Conclusion: strategic change for success

Universities are complex institutions filled with talented people eagerly advancing competing ambitions. It is a challenge to reconcile these ambitions, but we happily acknowledge also that such ambitions are essential for great universities to thrive. To meet this challenge and make necessary choices, a handful of basic questions drive our analysis: What are we trying to do? How are we trying to do it? How do we know it works? How can we improve?

As we move forward, everyone at Dalhousie must routinely ask themselves over and over again if their purposes and actions answer

these questions in a way that supports our shared priorities. This strategic plan provides a context within which to frame our answers and understand our individual purpose in the bigger picture of building a better university.

Our record of change and progress over the past decade is extraordinary and the Dalhousie community should take great pride in these accomplishments.

But, assuming we meet the objectives laid out in this plan, assuredly the best is yet to come.







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