

## **FWI: REFLECTIONS ON THE LANDSCAPE**

It has been two years since the appearance of my letter to our community, *Forward With Integrity*. It is in the nature of a complex institution such as ours that faculty colleagues, staff and students will differ in what they know of our achievements in the intervening period. While some—members of the *FWI* Advisory Group, for example—will have an almost panoramic grasp of this initiative for institutional renewal and reconfiguration, others will have experienced the impact of *FWI* in a more local way. They may have applied for and received seed money through one of the RFPs issued last year, or they might simply have participated in one of the many sessions devoted since the Fall of 2011 to discussion of aspects of our institutional mission.

This is natural, not merely because universities are complex and decentralized institutions, but also because of the kind of initiative *FWI* is: a reassertion of the fundamental mission of the university, a construction on existing strength yet depending upon our record for boldness and creativity, and an acknowledgement that there is neither excellence nor success except that which is planted and nurtured at the local level—however much central vision and leadership may be required to bring it to fruition.

Also critical to *FWI* is the understanding that we have embarked upon an open-ended process of self renewal which, if it is successful, will have the effect of bringing us back to ourselves, but in a new way. Whenever I ponder this paradox I am reminded of T.S.Eliot's observation in *Four Quartets* that “the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.” People who wonder what *FWI* has achieved and where it is headed should be reminded that this is an exercise intended not to make McMaster something *other* than a university, but *more of a university*, if I can put it that way.

This needs to be said because the broader public discourse within which we do our work is increasingly pushing universities to imagine and to measure themselves by a model that is alien, if not potentially hostile, to their historical and fundamental values. After a resolution last year of our university Senate, as well as a vote of unanimous support from the McMaster Board of Governors, I travelled recently to Bologna, Italy, to make McMaster a signatory to the Magna Charta Universitatum—an act which formally records our continuing commitment to the historical mission of universities, to academic freedom, and to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge according to the highest standards. The Magna Charta was established in 1988 at a time when there was intense pressure in Europe for “all educational institutions to serve [the] economy as agents of industry rather than as agencies of social development, the partners of community growth.”<sup>1</sup> That today in Canada we feel a similar pressure is so obvious it need hardly be stated.

One sentence from *FWI* that seems to have resonated across campus these last two years is the simple assertion that “we are an institution devoted to the cultivation of human

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Daxner, “Academic Integrity and University Rights and Obligations,” in *The Management of University Integrity* (Bologna: Magna Charta Universitatum Observatory and Bononia University Press, 2008), 82.

potential.” Whatever validity and reasonableness we may wish to ascribe to other claims for what it is we are supposed to be doing in a university—equipping people to earn a living and to build a career, for example—those pale in comparison with the much greater ambition of fostering the human potential of our students, ourselves, and our society. When the *FWI* Advisory Group wrote about “educating for capability,” it was this profound goal that they sought to identify—one that is perfectly compatible with considerations of employability and economic benefit, even as it far transcends them.

It was likewise this goal that the Advisory Group was reaching towards in their subtle but important reformulation of our identity as a “research-focused student-centered” (rather than “student-centered, research intensive”) university. No students, undergraduate or graduate, can achieve their potential if sequestered from the rhythm of reflection, radical questioning and risk-taking that is the heartbeat of the academy. Reaffirming our institutional commitment to research excellence and intensity, the Advisory Group went even further than this, asserting that research should not only be central to education at all levels, but that inquiry, and the proper adduction and assessment of evidence should stand at the core of *all* university processes, academic as well as administrative.

The signal achievements of the last two years are not innovations for their own sake, or harbingers of a future in which we will find ourselves unrecognizable, but acts of creativity uncompromisingly directed to fulfill the potential of our students, researchers, and the community at large. At this year’s State of the Academy presentation, to be held on Thursday 10 October, members of our community will have an opportunity to learn in both detailed and general terms what progress has been made under the *FWI* banner. There will be posters and presentations by McMaster students and faculty, and the Provost will give an overview of institution-wide trends and initiatives.

Some of the latter will be known to you: the Learning Portfolio, The McMaster Institute for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching and Learning (MIETL), and the Network for Campus-Community Partnerships, for example. The presentation will also provide an opportunity to learn more about structural changes in the Provost’s Office that have been made to support more effectively the goals and ambitions of *FWI*. In short, the State of the Academy will provide an opportunity for something like a comprehensive view of what we have been able to achieve in the last two years.

I hope you will attend and contribute to the discussion of where we are and where we believe we should be going, in a manner consonant with our history and with the values we recently endorsed in Bologna. One not insignificant achievement of the last few years has been a revitalized debate among ourselves, with ourselves, and with our broader community about the nature and value of higher education today in Canada and across the world. This must continue, but must also be understood as a way of preparing for the real challenges which mostly still lie ahead—those which, having been identified, must now be overcome if McMaster University is to retain and strengthen its position among the world’s best.

The most significant challenges are easy to name: the sustainability of current models of university education and research; the juggernaut of technological change and online learning; the “instrumentalizing” of higher education in relation to the potentially rival demands of a fulfilled society and a prosperous economy; globalization of universities and their missions; and in Canada in particular, the persisting ineffectiveness of our efforts to improve access to higher education for indigenous peoples—a challenge inseparable from the less than glacial rate at which indigenous perspectives, themes and practices have so far found their way into the academic mainstream.

In the coming year we must make far-reaching changes to our global orientation, developing a clear strategy for our institutional activities world-wide, strengthening existing partnerships in certain countries while identifying and building new collaborations in others, and doing all this in the spirit of our declaration at Bologna and our membership in United Nations Academic Impact, the latter of which commits us to work through education towards the realization of the UN Millennium Goals. Organizational changes to support this project are already underway and should be in place by the end of the academic year.

Changes to underpin a new approach to indigenous issues have already been made. Over the last year we have seen the Indigenous Studies Program moved to become part of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and what was formerly the President’s Committee on Indigenous Issues has been replaced by an Indigenous Education Council, with different terms of reference and a mandate to strengthen the integration of indigenous perspectives in the academic and broader activities of the university.

Integrity is as much about alignment and organizational structure as it is about truth to our values and mission, and the two meanings are interdependent. A critical prerequisite for progress in all areas—the student experience, research, community engagement or internationalization, to name only those singled out in *FWI*—is the appropriate structure and arrangement of resources. While the last two years have certainly seen an extraordinary proliferation of innovative ideas and new directions, many of which we will want to sustain for future development, that period has also witnessed significant organizational changes and realignments. Such change is without interest or value as an end in itself; instead, it must serve as the platform for further and perhaps more profound transformation of our work as supporters of the academic mission, as students, teachers, and researchers.



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