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MSVUFA Response to the Report on the University System in Nova Scotia October 1, 2010

This document¹ was drafted by Dr. Karen Blotnicky on behalf of the Mount Saint Vincent University Faculty Association (MSVUFA) based on her analysis of the Report with input and suggestions from many members of the MSVUFA.

The Report on the University System in Nova Scotia (the report) provides an analysis of a future that may face universities across Nova Scotia. The report presents a series of recommendations for due consideration by the university community, government, and other stakeholders, as potential measures to deal with a reduction in the undergraduate student core over the next several years.

The report on MSVU contains statements and presents issues that do not reflect the current state of the university, or potentially, its future state. The goal of this response is to communicate faculty views regarding the report and to recommend an alternative view, based upon updated data and a more thorough understanding of the culture and capabilities of our university.

Recommendation 5(g) of the report (p.114)² recommended that parties “explore the potential for merger or significant affiliation of MSVU with either Dalhousie or Saint Mary’s University, to mitigate declining enrolment risks at MSVU.” This recommendation was made based on the prediction that MSVU would be at risk of low enrolments and therefore, of financial risk. The MSVUFA takes issue with these basic premises.

There is little evidence that MSVU is in financial difficulty. The university has a balanced budget and actually enjoys a surplus. It has been managed in a fiscally conservative manner and it is in a very strong financial position to go forward to meet future challenges. Could financial risk result due to low enrolments? Certainly, but there is no evidence to indicate enrolments are at risk, or that MSVU will not be able to manage its programs as demographic shifts occur over the next several years. Indeed, as noted in the report, MSVU has the lowest expenditure per full-time equivalent student of all of the universities in Nova Scotia (p.20). This demonstrates that fiscal prudence has allowed the university to continue to grow and develop new programs and educate students while also keeping costs in check. However, this achievement was criticized in the report as making the university more vulnerable. The rationale for lower costs being a weakness and not a strength is not logical and it was not explained in the report.

The report focuses on two key trends impacting the MSVU student body. These trends are an emphasis on the full-time undergraduate student and what the researcher considered an over-reliance on part-time attendance. While the student body consists of primarily undergraduate students, that is typical of all of the universities in the report. It is the young undergraduate cohort that will experience declining numbers in Nova Scotia over the next several years.

As of October 1, 2010,³ MSVU’s enrolments had grown significantly. The full-time student contingent had grown by 3.8% and the overall student complement had grown by 1.7%. All universities experienced some enrolment decline in the last five years. The decline experienced by the MSVU was less than that experienced by other schools. Also, the enrolment decline has ended and the university has turned the corner towards healthier student numbers, as have many other institutions in Nova Scotia. There are some exciting success stories in enrolment growth. All of the undergraduate degrees enjoyed enrolment increases and most of the

¹ The intent is to focus on the inaccuracies in the Report as they apply to MSVU. The recommendation to raise tuitions is also of considerable concern to MSVUFA as well as to students but is beyond the scope of this document.

² Unless otherwise indicated all statistics are taken from the O’Neill report.

³ University statistics obtained from University Administration, effective October 1, 2010.

graduate degrees also showed healthy increases. In addition, over half of MSVU's degree programs, both graduate and undergraduate, are full and closed to further enrolment for 2010-2011.

MSVU offers four graduate degrees and ten undergraduate programs via distance education, including four bachelor degree programs. Distance learning courses showed growth of approximately 23% over the previous year,⁴ indicating the university's ability to tap into markets that extend far beyond the local community and that provide needed access in remote and rural areas.

The argument that MSVU relies heavily on part-time enrolments does not accurately reflect the fact that the majority of undergraduate students are registered full-time. Most of the graduate students registered at MSVU are part-time students, which is the norm for many graduate schools. These results show that MSVU is not overly reliant on part-time students and that it very capably attracts both undergrad and graduate students.

The report indicated that there would be little opportunity to attract part-time students in Nova Scotia if the traditional full-time high school cohort were to contract. The report noted that typically only 1% of mature adults in Nova Scotia attend post-secondary institutions and that their attendance is typically spurred by the need to upgrade for employment purposes. The report made an assumption that the mature cohort would primarily consist of individuals between the ages of 35 and 49. There is no reason, based on current practices, that MSVU could not reliably attract and service this demographic.

While the typical MSVU student is the traditional high school graduate, the university has a variety of programs and delivery systems dedicated to increasing accessibility and flexibility of education for mature learners. The report stresses that in order to effectively attract the part-time "mature" student, course schedules and teaching methods would have to be redesigned to reflect their special needs compared to the status quo which is geared to educate younger students (p.56). MSVU has already implemented such changes which is why its enrolments reflect higher percentages of part-time students. These approaches have been very successful in attracting the part-time student.

The inclusive nature of the MSVU community and faculty mentorship have made the university very welcoming to mature students, women, visible minorities, people with disabilities, and those with limited financial means. There is no reason to believe that the university will not be able to continue to rely on these strengths to continue to attract the part-time market as the full-time student market contracts.

While the report questions the growth of the part-time market, other sources indicate that the graduate study market is expected to grow. Graduate study in Canada increased 57% between 1996 and 2006. Over half of the graduate students in Canada during this increase in enrolment were women.⁵ The 25-39 age cohort which accounts for most graduate enrolment in Canada is expected to grow 7% between 2006 and 2016, and continued growth is anticipated between 2016 and 2026. This demographic trend is expected to result in increased enrolments in graduate programs across Canada.⁶

MSVU was criticized for attracting fewer out-of-province students than other institutions. However, the university has an international student cohort of 10% in addition to attracting students from out-of-province. The university has crafted a large number of articulation agreements with universities and colleges locally, nationally, and internationally. These articulation agreements will continue to grow the cohort, ultimately resulting in more out-of-province and international students attending the university.

MSVU is well known for its focus on providing opportunities and empowerment for women. What the report referred to as the Mount's *raison d'être* is contained in its mission statement, which confirms its "enduring commitment to the advancement of women." However, it makes little sense that this core value was presented in the report as a weakness, in that the Mount's "*raison d'être* of educating and empowering women no longer provides it with a comparative advantage in attracting students" (p.113). This is a confusing statement

⁴ IBID., 2010

⁵ Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2007). *Trends in Higher Education: Volume 1*. Retrieved July 22, 2010 from www.aucc.ca.

⁶ IBID. (2007)

because MSVU has many advantages that attract students. As a core value its commitment to the advancement of women is an important statement of the university's focus and purpose, but it does not limit the university's ability to attract qualified students from both sexes.

There also appears to be a limited understanding of what this core value means. The report continues by stating that the number of female students exceeds the number of male students in most universities. This is a well established fact, however, it does not diminish MSVU's role as an educator of women, nor does it render less important related research undertaken by its faculty. This core value has informed and shaped university curricula and research agendas, while also helping to create an inclusive culture which is highly valued by Mount students, faculty and staff. The unique culture of the university has attracted highly motivated students, faculty, and staff, for decades, and there is no reason to perceive it as exclusive or limiting when it comes to recruiting traditional undergraduates or graduate students.

The report argues that a merger or significant affiliation with another institution would benefit students by offering them a broader range of courses to choose from. This would be of limited value to MSVU students who already have the option of taking courses at other campuses, including universities outside of Canada. Students can transfer up to 50% of their degree from other institutions.

The report states that MSVU would be attractive to potential partners due to its expansion capability, as well as its sizeable undergraduate cohort and its attractive education program. If these are strengths for a potential partner, then they most certainly must be strengths for the university to remain as a separate entity.

The premises put forth in the report for merging MSVU with another larger school, which decidedly does not share its core values, are not valid. MSVU is strong, it is growing, it is financially sound, and it is unique among universities in Nova Scotia and across the country. Therefore, MSVUFA members question why the suggestion was made that MSVU, in spite of its success in meeting all of its goals, and its exemplary management, should be used as a pawn in a scheme to reorganize institutions that are currently experiencing financial shortfalls or other challenges. Members also believe that if MSVU was located outside of the Halifax area such a recommendation would not have been made. In conclusion, MSVUFA members do not endorse the findings of the report, and they firmly oppose a merger with another university now, or in the foreseeable future.