OPINIONS

From the principal: Becoming a more inclusive site of scholarship and learning

By Principal Daniel Woolf

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Canada marks its sesquicentennial this year, and amid the excitement and celebrations much attention is being, justly, paid to how as a country we can improve our national record on the treatment of our Aboriginal Peoples. There is a strong feeling that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, issued in 2015 and published by McGill-Queen's University Press, has the capacity to mark a watershed in Aboriginal matters, and not simply with respect to the apologies owed for the blight of the residential schools. Educational access and opportunity will lie at the core of any initiative to empower First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people.

Queen's, along with other Canadian universities, is doing its bit. Last year we set up a committee under Vice-Provost (Teaching and Learning) Jill Scott to consult widely and recommend some specific educational actions that Queen's can take. Some are already in place or under way, as depicted in this issue of the Review. Others will be announced in the coming months.

At the same time, Queen's is also confronting wider issues of inclusivity, diversity, and – though the word is an ugly one – racism. Queen's is a much more diverse institution than it was in my day as a student: we have students from around the world, and Canadian students from many different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, and of different sexual and gender orientations.

Our faculty and staff are also more diverse, though that diversity is not evenly distributed across the university's units and its ranks. Some of our attitudes and traditions have not kept pace with this reality.

Accordingly, in parallel with our work to improve the Aboriginal experience, I have also struck a committee to implement some changes recommended by previous reports such as the Diversity, Anti-Racism and Equity (DARE) report. A few have been made since that report was issued seven years ago, but the time is overdue to execute the others.

I do not expect this committee to be long in its work – we know much of what we need to do – though some of the actions needed (including greater attention to diversity in hiring practices, curricular reform, and the modification of some rather exclusive traditions) may take a little longer. We've already done some of that – I'm very glad, for instance, that somegrossly homophobic and sexually offensive songs that I chanted as a frosh in 1976 are no longer in general circulation.

> A university is an evolving institution; if it stands still, it will not survive, let alone thrive.

One or two of you have written letters with concern that the university is being "politically correct." I thank you for sharing your thoughts. My perspective is simply this: organizations must change, adapt, and remain in tune with social standards (and, ideally, lead on their progressive reform), just as they must change and adapt with respect to pedagogical practices or areas of research. Queen's has changed, for the better, in many ways over the past quarter-century, and will continue to do so over the next 25 years. As I have said in this column repeatedly during the seven-and-a-half years of my principalship, a university is an evolving institution; if it stands still, it will not survive, let alone thrive.

2017 marks the latter half of our 175th anniversary as well as Canada's 150th. Let us recommit ourselves to preserving our values but also to updating our traditions and becoming a more inclusive site of scholarship and learning.

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Photo shoots these days take a bit more planning & physical distancing. Yesterday's shoot by @photogclark with @ajackdavies for our next issue. Look for it at the end of August!

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