May 11, 2015

Dear Members of the Communities of the Faculties of Humanities, Science, and Social Sciences

Changes in leadership within a particular Faculty often result in some reflection on the road ahead. That reflection understandably focuses on the opportunities and challenges facing that particular Faculty, albeit in the context of the university as a whole, and the community beyond. The Deans of the Faculties of Humanities, Science, and Social Sciences would like to take the opportunity to broaden the discussion, following the change in leadership that has taken place in the first two of those faculties, and the change that will be taking place in the third.

The twenty-first century already has generated a number of opportunities and challenges for the modern research university. New technologies and globalized practices have disrupted the ways in which ideas are created, tested, applied, reformulated and passed on to the next generation. Much research and innovation—and therefore teaching—is being generated through collaboration among faculty members coming from very different disciplinary perspectives. There are exciting new opportunities for growth, and as Deans we want to ensure that our Faculties are best positioned to seize those new opportunities and respond to the changing undergraduate, graduate and research demands of the twenty-first century.

The three Faculties in question share certain characteristics. Most of our undergraduate programs are not subject to accreditation and are not designed to prepare students for a particular professional designation. Instead, we equip our students with a body of knowledge and various capabilities designed to help them better understand and engage with the world around them. We help them develop transferable skills that give them the flexibility to thrive in a competitive job market, or move on to post-graduate or professional education programs. Wherever possible, we interweave the development of skills—whether they be analytical or communication skills—with topics and subjects that they readily embrace. For the most part, we invite our students to explore a range of disciplines and topics in their first year, so that they can find those areas that suit their particular interests and talents. Even as our students identify with particular disciplines in their upper years, our Faculties continue to emphasize the importance of a broad and comprehensive university education.

Our three Faculties contribute to McMaster’s mission by seeking to integrate research and teaching. We want our undergraduate and graduate students to encounter and learn from active researchers and scholars. We seek to expose students to leading edge developments and engage them in inquiry-based approaches to learning. Offering a comprehensive education, therefore, means sustaining a comprehensive research enterprise in our Faculties. We cannot support core areas of McMaster’s teaching without also being strong research units. We know the most valuable experiences for our students involve sharing in discovery with exceptional and active researchers.

In light of these and other common characteristics, the three Deans and the Provost have agreed to strike a small task force to review all three of our Faculties, to ensure that we have the institutional policies, practices and structures that will enable our faculty researchers and undergraduate and graduate students to thrive, and to engage in new and exciting research and educational collaborations.
Specifically, we would like the task force to consider the following challenges:

1. Are we well positioned to ensure that our students (whether undergraduate or graduate) are exposed to excellence in new fields of knowledge in a high quality, personalized, engaging and comprehensive educational experience? Are we providing our students with the best mix of transferable skills?
2. Are we well positioned to cultivate new opportunities for collaboration among our researchers and among our students?
3. Are we well positioned to ensure that our resources are focused most effectively on sustaining our key research and educational goals?
4. Are there barriers – either perceived or real – to the ability of our faculty members to develop or our students to achieve our collective research and educational goals?

Where the task force concludes that we are not well positioned to meet some of our goals, or where there may be barriers to be overcome, we would invite them to consider the following questions:

1. Are there institutional policies or practices, either within or between the Faculties, or at the wider university that could be or need to be changed to achieve the above stated goals?
2. Are there institutional or organizational structures at the university that need to be significantly changed? Specifically, would we be better positioned to achieve our goals by reorganizing two or all three of our Faculties?
3. Are there other ways to support the development of new collaborative programs, courses or research units that transcend disciplines or Faculties?

We do not believe that any of these questions can be considered by one of our Faculties on its own, and that is why we have proposed the creation of a task force with representatives from all three Faculties. We encourage them to consult widely, with faculty, students, and staff, both within and outside the Faculties.

We believe that the recent or imminent changes in leadership in our three Faculties provides a good opportunity for wide ranging review of our institutional practices and structures, with a focus on ensuring that we are well positioned as a university to support the educational and research challenges of the twenty-first century.

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