

New Dean, New Place, New Time



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Every dean has been a new dean at some point—despite having enough relevant experience to convince a selection committee that he or she is capable of doing the job. I suspect there is nothing quite like taking on the responsibility and challenge of leading a business school for the first time. There is the challenge of learning a new job, and if he or she is new to the institution, they also have to learn about new practices and culture and people. Finally, I would wager that most new deans have a goal of advancing their school, perhaps along a new path. In other words, we are asking ourselves “Where am I, where do I want to go, and how to I get there?”

My intention in this reflection is to describe some of that process of setting direction for my school, and to highlight the importance of understanding the current situation of a school, and of using that understanding to set a strategic direction.

First, a little about me. I joined the Faculty of Business Administration at Memorial University of Newfoundland in January of 2010. I came with an academic background in leadership (thus many years of talking the talk), experience in academic administration, had done most of the parts of the job before (thus some walking of the talk), and had some clear objectives about what I wanted to accomplish. Starting in January, I was immediately faced with the challenge of a budget due on February 1, and a host of administrative and academic processes that were in full flow. The motto of Memorial is “*Provehito In Altum*” which means “Launch forth into the deep” and that is certainly where I felt I was swimming. My first months went by quickly, with only a little time left to ponder where I was going as I figured out where I was.

So where was I?

Newfoundland and Labrador is the eastern most province in Canada (in fact the university is a few kilometers west of the easternmost point of land in North America), and has a population of about half a million people, most of whom live on an island sometimes described as being “in the middle of the North Atlantic.” Memorial University of Newfoundland is a comprehensive university with faculties and schools in almost all major disciplines and is the largest university in Atlantic Canada, with just over 17,000 students. It grew out of Memorial University College, which was established in 1925 as a living memorial to the Newfoundlanders who had lost their lives on active service during the First World War.

In 1954, the university approved a Bachelor of Commerce (BComm) undergraduate degree offered by the Department of Commerce. In 1973, it was renamed the School of Business Administration and Commerce, and in 1981 the school was granted faculty status, reflecting the growth and diversity of our academic programs.

In 1973, the Faculty of Business Administration established the first co-operative undergraduate business program in Canada. In 1978, we launched our Master of Business Administration program. Our business program also was one of the earliest in Canada to offer courses in such areas as ethics, business communications, small business, international business, and women in management. In 2002, the Faculty of Business Administration became the first in Atlantic Canada to be accredited by AACSB International. We currently offer Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and International BBA degrees in addition to the co-operative education based BComm and the MBA. In 2006 we launched a PhD program, and we cooperate with other faculties at Memorial to offer specialized graduate degrees, including a Master of Employment Relations. We are very active internationally through exchange agreements and international joint degree partnerships.

Our students boast one of the best records among Canadian schools in business competitions. Our undergraduate SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise) Memorial team won the SIFE World Cup in Singapore in 2008 after placing second in 2007. The team has won numerous regional and national awards, including four consecutive national titles from 2006-2009. In undergraduate case competitions students have received numerous awards, including the Network of International Business School Case Competitions and the Intercollegiate Business Case Competition. At the graduate level, our MBA students hold the record as the most successful team in the history of the John Molson International MBA Case Competition.

Over the past decade the Faculty of Business Administration has increased its emphasis on research, following the path taken by other business schools, and as part of the natural evolution of a business school. We have developed particular research strengths in a number of areas and the research output of the faculty in top business journals ranks first among universities in Atlantic Canada.

So what does a new dean do with all this?

My background in leadership, my own orientation, and my many years of experience leading my previous school's accreditation activities had positioned me well to know what kinds of things we should be doing. In my previous institution I was kidded for always talking about "process." In my presentation for the dean's job I had described the creation of a virtuous circle where resources fed quality of people, and programs which fed quality of graduates, which fed reputation and brand, which fed resources and so on. Each of those elements had sub-elements that could be improved and it would have been easy to develop a plan around those things. However, the resulting "plan" would have been a generic list of good things that a business school (or any academic unit) should do to become better. The plan would have been sound, but not particularly strategic.

Now, I would not call myself a strategist (I am not an accountant either, but I do spend much of my time worrying over budgets!). My academic background in leadership was grounded in organizational behaviour and thus emphasized the "how" of organizational leadership rather than the "what" of strategic leadership. My naive view of strategy is that good strategy happens when actions take advantage of internal capabilities, pursue external opportunities, and to manage threats. This means that strategies should be different when capabilities, opportunities, and threats are different. Strategies should be different in different places and at different times.

And I was in a different place. Perhaps it was my personal experience of moving to a city and province that was unlike any other place I had lived before that made the uniqueness of Newfoundland and Labrador so salient. Yet despite this uniqueness I saw little that was unique about the direction of my school. You could transplant us into another part of the world and we would fit as well there, and that struck me as wrong. There was little in what we were doing that reflected the character of the province, the composition of its economy, or the needs of its society.

There are, it seems to me, many reasons why a business school should have some unique identity. Even as there are pressures for institutional isomorphism that come from the presence of a common body of knowledge, international competition, accreditation standards, and so on, schools must be connected to their communities. Often this is where our funding comes from, whether it is government or the business community. For many of us it is where most of our students come from and where many go for employment. It is where our faculty find sites and application for their research. It is where clients for our executive development programs operate. Our communities are where we add value and thus where we can claim a share of that value. So we are smart to be connected locally because our local communities are a resource. And we have a social obligation to contribute locally. This is especially true for Memorial University of Newfoundland, which recognizes this special obligation in its charter.

Where this thinking has taken us is to a recrafting of the mission for the Faculty of Business: *We prepare our students to succeed globally, we engage in scholarship with global reach and local relevance, and we serve as a catalyst for the success of organizations and individuals. In this way we fulfill our special obligation to the people of Newfoundland and Labrador.*

The strategy that I have proposed to achieve this mission is founded on two principles: quality and relevance.

Quality means establishing strong processes to continuously improve what we do, optimizing the size of our programs to ensure that what we do we do well, and capitalizing on our strengths. In teaching, for example, this means taking advantage of our experience and capability in cooperative education, in experiential learning, and in internationalization. In research, it means building on our strengths in such areas as corporate governance, employee well-being and performance, information management, and value chain management.

Relevance means ensuring that our teaching and research and outreach meet the needs of stakeholders. On the one hand this means providing our students with the knowledge and skills to succeed wherever they choose to pursue their careers and in every aspect of business. It also means ensuring, for our graduates who remain in Newfoundland and Labrador, that they have locally relevant skills that contribute to the success of local businesses. It means offering expertise through our research and outreach that contributes to the development of our local communities.

For the Faculty of Business Administration at Memorial University we have articulated four ways of thinking about what is strategically important to us. These recognize the uniqueness of our time and place. They recognize that the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador is based on the extraction of natural resources, even as we have a thriving small business community and emerging sectors. They recognize that tourism and culture are areas of growth. They acknowledge that in partnership with public and private sector stakeholders we can address mutual interests. They recognize that we are an island of entrepreneurs and explorers. They capture our obligation to help our stakeholders pursue opportunities, as well as meet the challenges that are particularly relevant to who and where we are. They are:

- Dominant and critical sectors of the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador, such as Energy Strategy, Natural Resource Management, Entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Enterprise Development, Tourism and Cultural Management, and Management of Public Institutions;
- Areas identified by government or business leaders as critical to future economic growth, such as Rural Development, Social Entrepreneurship, Information and Communication Technology;
- Business processes that facilitate economic development, such as Commercialization, Innovation, Global Trade and Internationalization, and Project Management;
- Business challenges particularly relevant to Newfoundland and Labrador, such as Small Market Dynamics, Transportation and Logistics, Labor Market Challenges, and so on.

In summary, for the Faculty of Business Administration at Memorial University the process of setting our direction has paid particular attention to our time and place. For us this has meant considering our internal strengths and the opportunities and challenges present in our environment. In the coming months we will be developing specific action plans and targets to move our teaching, research, and outreach activities toward quality and relevance as we have defined it.

As I look back on the past year I am reminded of a question that I would pose to my leadership students. I would ask them to imagine being in a small boat and lost in fog (not an uncommon sight in Newfoundland) and ask what they would need to navigate home—no GPS units allowed! The most common answers would likely be a map or compass. A less common but equally important answer would be the need to know one's destination. The rarest answer, and I would argue the most insightful, would be the need to know one's current position. Developing a strategic direction is like that: it is important to have a vision of your destination and to have a sense of direction and the route, but if you don't know where you are starting from you will likely go the wrong way.