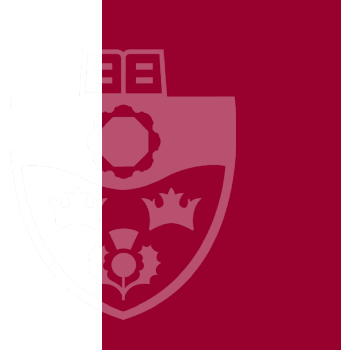# Academic Plan
2021-26

SAINT MARY'S
UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC PLAN FOR 2021-26

Saint Mary's, like all universities, is unwavering in its deep commitment to academic strength and success. With support and guidance from the university's strategic plan, the Academic Plan summarizes areas of priority for attention and broad actions, while still allowing flexibility to react and adapt to significant new opportunities that might present themselves.

It is also important in moving forward that we pay attention to the needs of the academy, particularly the students and faculty, and the way they seek support. How we are organized is secondary to being responsive to those needs. At this time too, as we look to the opportunities for the university as we emerge from the pandemic, we need to be mindful to seize on lessons learned, the creativity that has been shown by so many, and the greater awareness of the needs of different types of learners.

As we work through the next five years, we must also pay attention to our learners. We seek to improve their experience but need to hear from them as to how well we are succeeding in that goal, and where we need to improve. Our students are our primary group of learners, but we will see in the plan opportunities for faculty, staff, and leadership to all be learners – and the same need to pay attention exists with all.

In that spirit, it is important that we align the relevant support structures in the university to be engaged with and supporting key elements of the plan. Each area brings significant strengths to many aspects of the plan and collaboration is vital to the university's success. These common areas of support include (but are not necessarily limited to): the Patrick Power Library, the Studio for Teaching and Learning, the Research Office, Student Affairs and Services, Enterprise Information Technology (EIT), Facilities Management and Human Resources. In addition, the Academic Senate and its various key committees (e.g. Academic Planning, Committee on Learning and Teaching, Curriculum, Regulations, Academic Literacy, Accessibility) will also be engaged in most, if not all, of the priorities identified in this plan.

The university is also at a critical juncture in its need to not just speak to accessibility, equity, diversity and inclusion – but to act. The Academic Plan has a critical role to play there in how the learning and scholarship environment on campus must transform. In fact, the plan must help the university lead and these principles must be viewed as important to each and every component inside this plan, whether explicitly stated or not.

Key Themes

01

Student Persistence
and Success

Student success is complicated to define, but fundamentally it is about helping students find their path to achieve the goals they have set for themselves at the university – both academic and co-curricular. We need to ensure students are connected to the university even prior to arrival, have the supports in place to help guide their academic and personal plans, and the ability to appreciate the value of their degree for both their intellectual growth and career preparation.

To support this, we have begun to develop a Strategic Enrolment Management (SEM) Plan. The SEM plan will ensure we connect students to the university consistently and effectively from the point of first contact for recruitment through graduation and their life as alumni and lifelong learners. We need to ensure students for whom Saint Mary's is the right choice find their way to the university, and then persist in their studies through to graduation.

Key elements within the SEM plan include:

▶ work on coordinated care, pro-active advising and student-based peer mentorship

▶ work to expand Experiential Learning
  › more support/professional development for faculty on how to incorporate active learning pedagogy

▶ support in programs for understanding and improving student experience in the classroom *(see Academic Program and Intercultural Learning discussions)*

▶ continued efforts to update and improve the physical learning environment
  › accessibility is imperative here

▶ improving student communication and awareness of services
  › a student communication officer has been hired and charged with this
  › improve our web presence to be needs focused for students rather than organization focused

▶ technology infrastructure to support these initiatives

Action: The SEM plan is evolving quickly and will be released in Spring 2021.
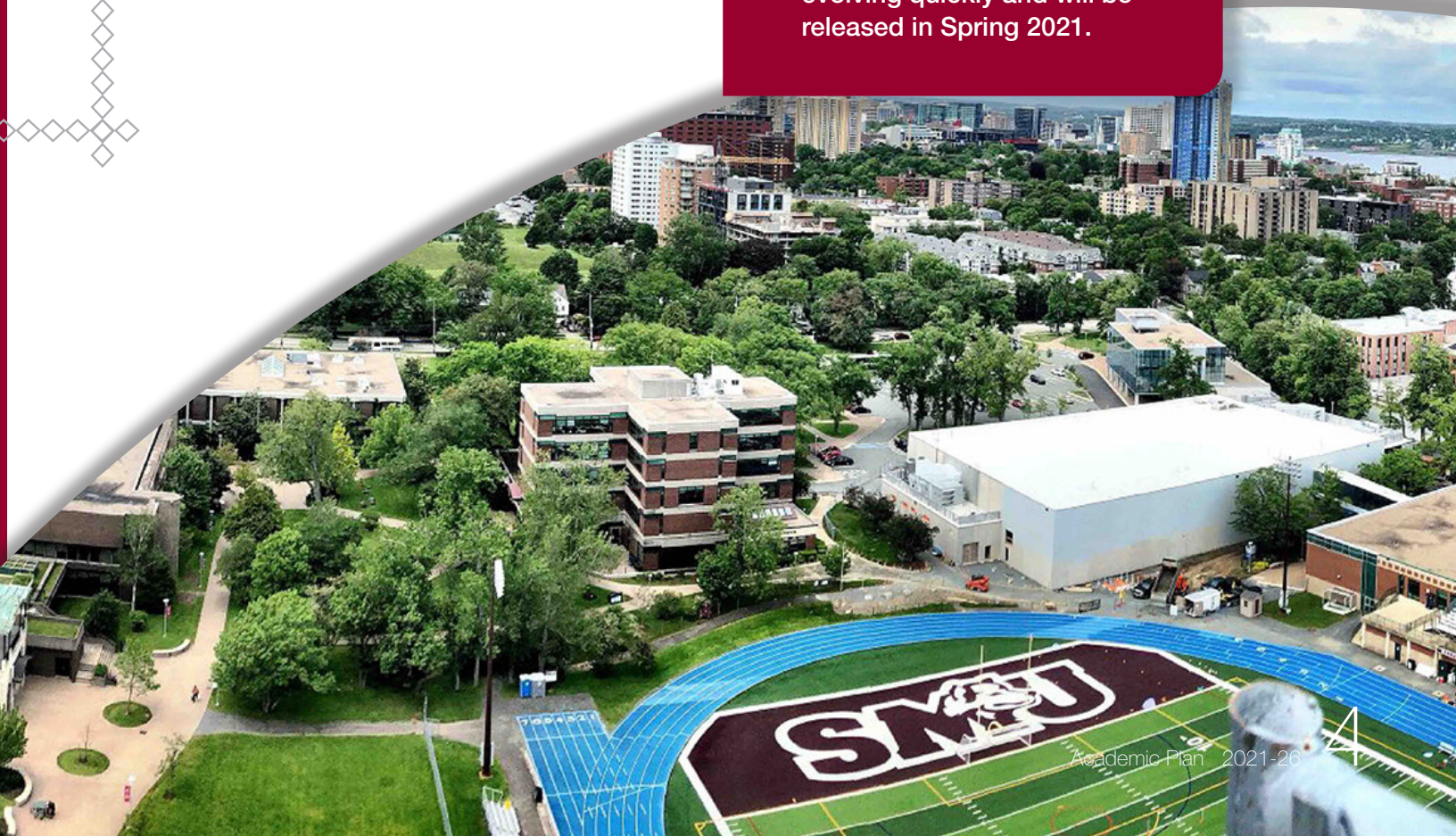
02 **Academic** Programs

Our academic programs are the foundation of a student's intellectual and personal development. They span the range of student interest from foundational knowledge and intellectual inquiry, to topics of practical import for the betterment of society, the economy and governance. We need to ensure students are provided the means to understand the importance of their areas of study to themselves and society and the intellectual, technical and human skills nurtured through their programs. For this, we must ensure that our programs reflect the excellence of our faculty and learners. Our programs are strongest when they reflect our strengths as a university – and this means there are many untapped opportunities to bring those strengths to new programs.

It is also here where the greatest lessons can be learned from the pandemic, and the greatest opportunities seized to innovate to improve learning opportunities for both our existing students and potential new communities of learners.

The role of faculty is foundational here so they must be provided the right supports to maintain excellent and academically strong programs that engage an evolving community of learners.

To support both, the following actions are required:

▶ development of a teaching and learning plan to better support courses and programs

> ❭ workshops on new approaches to pedagogy from discipline perspectives/peers

>> ⇥ these must include a focus on universal design for learning (UDL) to address accessibility and inclusion

> ❭ identification and engagement of faculty champions

> ❭ improved awareness of what resources (vs. positions) exist to support academic programs and connect those resources to needs

> ❭ enhanced and increased use of online tools (e.g. Brightspace) not just for online courses, but for blended learning and accessibility purposes

> ❭ a move beyond learning outcomes to understand the experience inside courses

▶ workshops for faculty and students on how to articulate broader skills development in courses and programs

▶ creation of an integrated network (Program Review Office, Studio, Library, Experiential Learning, etc.) to provide support to faculty and programs looking to create/renew programs

▶ transparent process to review and implement technology needs to support course and program delivery, in classroom and remotely

▶ work to determine means to provide programs to new communities of learners through micro-credentials, pathway programs and continuous professional development (CPD)

Action: Work with the Academic Planning Committee and Senate to ensure that new program proposals and program reviews can be properly assessed to consider resource needs and ensure that legitimate needs can be confirmed and committed.

Action: During and after the development of the Teaching and Learning Plan, take steps towards addressing accessible and inclusive learning through UDL, including the nature of course delivery in-person, online, and blended.

Action: Launch Teaching Innovation Awards to simultaneously recognize teaching excellence and opportunities for innovation to improve the learning experience for students.

03 Scholarship and Research

Saint Mary's has developed a culture of scholarship and research that supports a broad array of interest and inquiry, focused on the particular strengths and excellence of our faculty and students. Interest ranges from the fundamental to the applied, with the latter having a focus on community and societal impact. The Strategic Research Plan will identify the areas of research and scholarship excellence that make Saint Mary's special, including new areas of pursuit as our faculty's interests change and evolve. It is important for the Academic Plan to ensure the supports are in place to preserve and strengthen Saint Mary's work, and to ensure we are positioned to seize new opportunities that are both important and relevant to the university and its mission.

To that end, we need to:

▶ develop a Grant Facilitator role to meaningfully engage and support faculty in their efforts to secure research resources (funding and infrastructure) and will work the faculty champions in this effort

▶ create a research advisory group to the AVPR to help identify opportunities and issues impacting scholarship and research at SMU

▶ work with EIT so that the university begins to support computing and information technology needs specific to research and scholarship

▶ engage resources (e.g. Library) that can provide support for use of research tools

▶ work with communications officers across campus on improving the storytelling and recognition attached to the work going on at the university

▶ recognize our top researchers for their contributions to the university, and to building collaboration across the campus and into the community at large

ACTION: Hire the Grant Facilitator role.

ACTION: Create three new Santamarian Chairs to recognize distinguished established scholars at the university, one chair per faculty. Terms will be limited.

ACTION: Create three new Santamarian Professorships to recognize distinguished early-career scholars at the University, one professorship per faculty. Terms will be limited.

04 **Interdisciplinarity in Both**
Scholarship and the Classroom

Saint Mary's has a strong culture of supporting interdisciplinary teaching and research but, like all universities, it can be challenging to provide the space for faculty and students to connect across departmental and disciplinary boundaries to build new programs and initiatives.

▶ The Strategic Research Plan (SRP) consultations identified emergent themes. The need to provide opportunity to allow persons in those themes to collaborate. Using the SRP to create working groups and provide support for workshops and other activities to build collaborations. Reviewing our cross-appointment structure and how it serves to address the challenge of co-teaching in interdisciplinary and/or collaborative domains.

▶ Review our cross-appointment structure and how it serves to support and/or impede interdisciplinary collaboration.

▶ Address the challenge of co-teaching in interdisciplinary and/or collaborative domains.

Action:
Provide resources and seed funding (for up to two years) to support actions to develop research and academic programs in new interdisciplinary areas, with particular focus on those identified in the SRP. Up to two new initiatives will be supported each year.

05

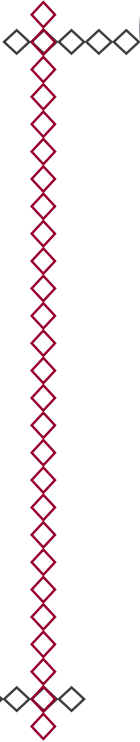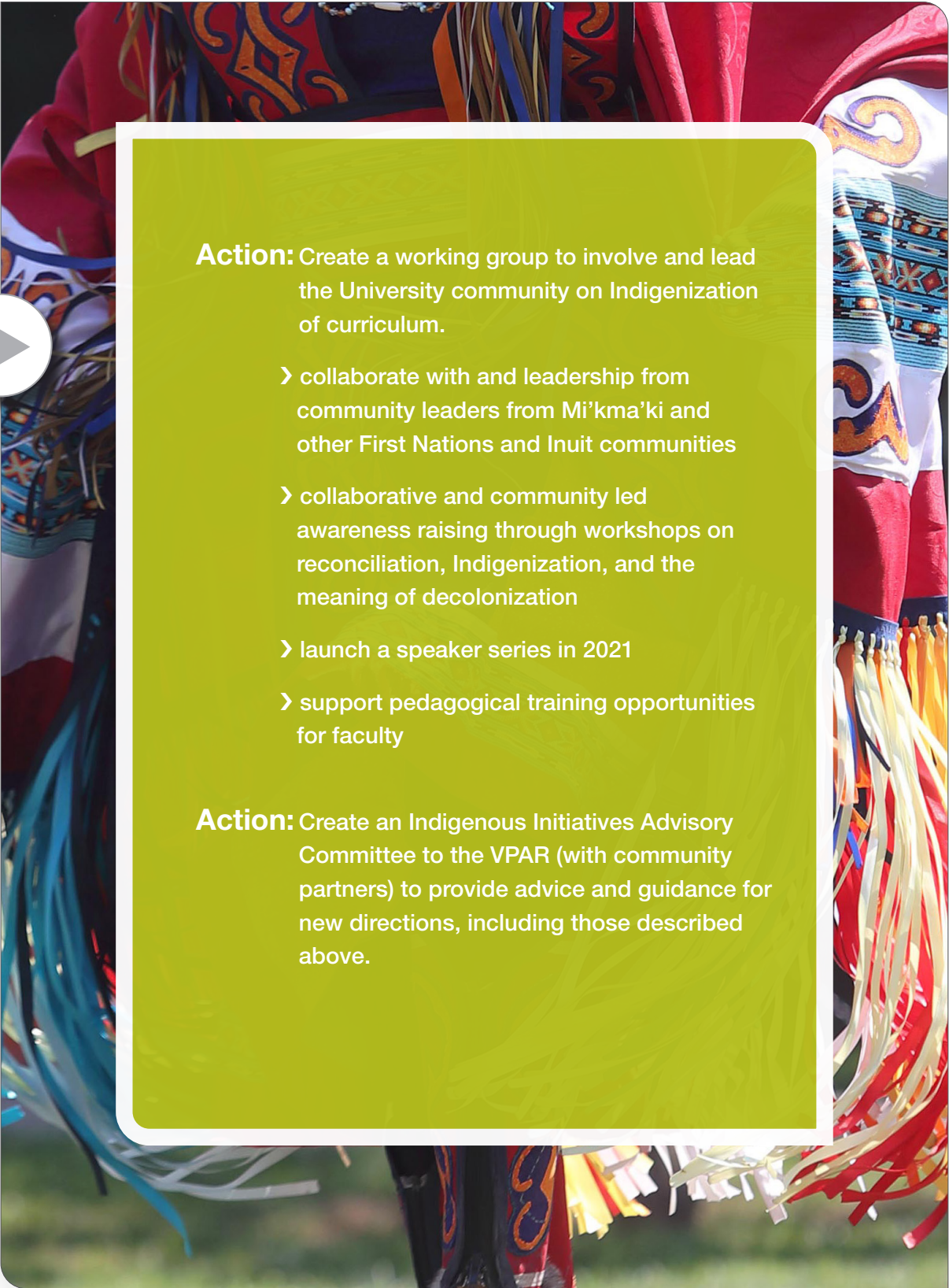## Working with
Indigenous Communities

Saint Mary's has long worked with Indigenous communities throughout Canada, and even globally, and has also worked hard to support Indigenous students. There is a collective will to do better and we must, particularly in the ways we partner with communities in Mi'kma'ki. We need to embed the principle of "nothing about us, without us" across disciplines, and to recognize that interdisciplinary research paradigms are essential to engaging with the Mi'kmaq.

To support this, we will:

▶ enhance support for Indigenous youth

  › collaborate with external partners here, (e.g. Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, The Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq and Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey)

  › develop transition programming with community partners

  › create recruitment materials with focus on services for Indigenous students

  › develop an Indigenous peer mentorship program (modelled on University of Northern British Columbia, Simon Fraser University and University of Victoria)

▶ come to an understanding as to what Indigenization and decolonization mean at Saint Mary's University, and provide the means to implement that understanding across academic curricula and scholarship

Action: Create a working group to involve and lead the University community on Indigenization of curriculum.

> collaborate with and leadership from community leaders from Mi'kma'ki and other First Nations and Inuit communities

> collaborative and community led awareness raising through workshops on reconciliation, Indigenization, and the meaning of decolonization

> launch a speaker series in 2021

> support pedagogical training opportunities for faculty

Action: Create an Indigenous Initiatives Advisory Committee to the VPAR (with community partners) to provide advice and guidance for new directions, including those described above.

06 Intercultural Learning

Intercultural learning is one of Saint Mary's strategic pillars and a historical strength. Our diverse campus community and many partnerships provide many opportunities for enhancing the learning environment. It is also important to note that intercultural does not equate to international. Saint Mary's hosts students, faculty, staff and visitors from many diverse communities within Canada – and intercultural learning also must connect with them. Further, intercultural competency is a critical human skill for graduates to take into the world, both personally and professionally.

Considering current and growing social awareness of systemic racism, particularly as seen through the awareness raising created by the Black Lives Matter movement and the need to address the relationship of the university with the African Nova Scotian community, the time has come to act in launching a diversity excellence strategy. Specifically, there is an imperative to address systemic racism, discrimination and prejudice in the university. Faculty, staff and student representation must be addressed, and that in turn will require hard conversations about systemic racism in the learning environment and decolonization. We must also recognize that this has to be a continuous effort, as we undertake to respect and work with the many equity-deserving groups that have not seen themselves reflected in, or acknowledged by, the structure, activities and leadership of the university.
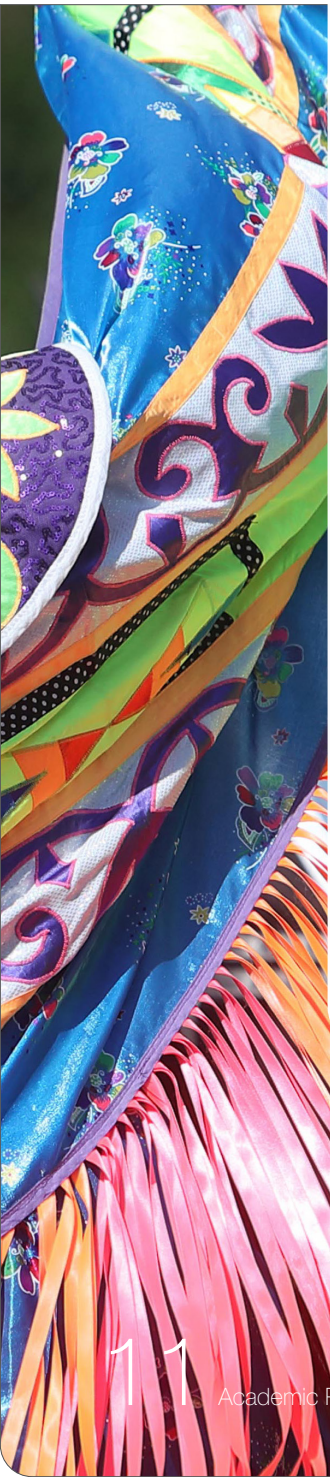
To continue our efforts to enhance intercultural learning on campus, and in turn support both our students and researchers, we must:

▶ provide advanced workshop opportunities for faculty and staff

> › foster understanding and dialogue on systemic racism in the classroom and other learning environments
>
> › foster understandings of other ways of knowing and different forms of scholarship
>
> › include a pedagogical focus addressing intercultural capacity in the classroom

▶ engage student societies in these learning opportunities and professional development

▶ better reflect the intercultural campus in activities and environment (displays, events)

▶ support meaningful collaboration with external partners

> › the work of the Indigenous Student Advisor, the new African Nova Scotian/Black Student and Community Liaison are examples of how to do this

▶ foster a better/deeper understanding of campus diversity

> › the university equity plan has a role here in supporting diversity excellence and creating a stronger environment for intercultural learning and engagement

Action: Create an African Nova Scotian Initiatives Advisory Committee to the VPAR (with community partners) to provide advice and guidance on program initiatives and priorities for community engagement.

Action: Begin discussions immediately, collaborating across the university, to create a diversity strategy for Saint Mary's University, touching on aspects of the university, including representation, access, curriculum, community and scholarship.