

FNBFA President's Blog # 2 – September 4, 2018
Provincial Election Campaign 2018

Public universities = Fundamental public good

When the topic of New Brunswick's public universities arises in the media, or even in everyday conversation, much of the discussion centers on their teaching activities and their impact on students' intellectual development and future opportunities. The economic, social and even health-related benefits of a university education for our citizens are very clear, and they demonstrate that our institutions of higher learning represent an invaluable common good.

Closely related to—in fact, inseparable from—university teaching is a second pillar of the work carried out by New Brunswick's professors and librarians to the benefit of our communities, and this second pillar, although less visible, is their research.

Every day, our public universities' 1800 faculty members engage in research activities that advance knowledge in a wide variety of disciplines and, in many cases, their research ranks among the best in the world. Their work has led to the development of medical devices, prosthetics, and start-up enterprises; it has advanced technologies relating to data management and security, energy production and food production; it seeks to improve resource management and environmental sustainability, teaching methodologies in our public school system, and our overall health and healthcare delivery; and it attempts to answer important questions relating to the challenges facing our youth, our aging population, our increasingly globalised world and to the histories and cultures of our communities, particularly those who have been historically marginalised such as our Aboriginal and Acadian peoples. In addition, the faculty members' research and creative activities contribute to the musical, literary and artistic vitality that are so essential to healthy human societies. These research endeavours are but a few examples of those to which New Brunswick's professors and librarians dedicate their careers; the list is endless, and particularly impactful in the context of New Brunswick where our public universities are responsible for an overwhelming 70% of the province's total Research and Development.

The invaluable contributions of research, however, tend to be largely invisible to the public and even to our students. Yet, research and the advancement of knowledge are the very cornerstones of New Brunswick's four public universities. In addition to the advances outlined above, these activities, in a university setting, are inseparable from effective teaching. They shape course content and determine the questions that we ask our students and encourage our students to explore for themselves, and they also ensure that these questions are constantly evolving. Research is also the platform from which we engage students in thinking critically, evaluating hypotheses and evidence, developing arguments and theories, and communicating clearly and convincingly. It is by carrying out research, in all areas and disciplines, that we are able to mentor our students in developing their ability to question, to analyse and to create.

This is the core function of New Brunswick's universities. Therefore, while it is true that they provide substantial economic benefits to the region (research grants and activities bring in millions of dollars every year), while it is true that university graduates have very positive and lifelong career outcomes, and while we may be grateful for these and other impacts, they are not public universities' fundamental mandates. **Rather, our public universities are primarily and above all meant to be institutions dedicated to free inquiry, *research* in all its forms, that is independent from government and private-sector influence.**

Many would argue that they are the only such institutions that exist today. As such, their unique role must be protected, their adequate funding given top priority, and we must work together to ensure that all New Brunswickers have access to this fundamental public good.