First-year students destined to be let down by U of A President

New students may not know any better, but Samarasekera’s Orientation speech is nothing but repetition and empty promises

ALEX KEMP

It’s refreshing to know that despite the university’s deficit and fund-raising cuts, University of Alberta President Indira Samarasekera hasn’t lost her enthusiasm. “Welcome to one of the world’s top 100 universities,” she said, as she greeted new students in her annual Orientation address on Tuesday night. The students, all dressed in matching University of Alberta alumni T-shirts, responded with screams of approval.

Samarasekera’s five-minute speech was met with resurgent focus over a thousand first-year students packed into the Heritage Amphitheater at Riverbend Park. Their zeal hasn’t yet been dampened by ever-rising tuition rates, the exorbitant cost of textbooks, or the realization that the administration is more concerned with their own salaries and the U of A status as a research institution than students’ education.

They were likely unaware that Samarasekera’s brief talk was unbelievably similar to the speech she gave a year ago. Although she only addresses students a few times a year — once at the beginning of the year, and then for fall and spring convocation — she’s apparently so busy with her other responsibilities that she can’t possibly take the time to write a new speech.

“Students make the University of Alberta one of the greatest universities in Canada and in the world [...] because you care enough to make a difference,” she proclaimed this year, replacing an almost identical statement from her 2009 address, where she said that students made the U of A a great place because they care to make a difference in their own lives and those of other students.

With 365 days between the two speeches, it doesn’t seem like too much to ask that Indira come up with something original to say to the students she purportedly cares so deeply about.

Dehod also urged students to be in touch with the SU and the U of A administration if they have any issues. “If you want to improve this community, and be a part of it, there are lots of ways to do so. Start small — start with your class, talk to your professor, your family. Email Bury Tighe, [...] e-mail myself, e-mail the president of the university,” he told them.

Indira echoed Dehod in her own address. “Are you going to let me know what I need to do in order to make this university the best place possible?” she asked. “Yes, you are.” The sentiment, which was sincere coming from Dehod, is an insult coming from the U of A president.

While I’m sure an e-mail sent to university@ualberta.ca will eventually reach Indira’s inbox, the school bigwigs doesn’t exactly make herself accessible to students. Although we by no means are eyes-to-eye on everything, I’ve had the opportunity to talk with Nick Dehod on a few occasions. Meeting the SU Executives can be as easy as stopping by the Students’ Union office on the second floor of SRB, or attending one of the biweekly Students’ Council meetings for free food — or, I mean integrating discussions about student governance.

Samarasekera, on the other hand, vanished almost immediately after finishing her speech. Should you try and stop by the President’s Office at University Hall, it’s possible you could catch a glimpse of her — but that’s the most you could hope for.

If Indira really wants suggestions on improving the university, she need look no further than those council meetings, the occasional protests, or the letters section of the university’s Journal. Unfortunately for the first year who sat in silence while she spoke, the U of A president isn’t actually interested in students — a fact that becomes blatantly obvious when you consider she can’t even be bothered to write a new five-minute speech once a year. She’s far more interested in the university’s ranking; she mentioned the university’s position as one of the “greatest in the world” four times in as many minutes.

It’s not terribly often that you’ll find me agreeing with Dehod, but in this case, I’d like to echo his suggestion: e-mail the president of the university. Please her office or stop by on the way to class. Mail her a letter.

I’m no stranger to cynicism, and the fact is that individually, you won’t make much of a difference. But it’s also a fact that things won’t change unless students make their collective voices.