

# Changing perceptions

When a national study revealed that most Canadians are in the dark about research coming out of the country's universities, the AAU decided to do something about it

In October of 2004, national research firm EKOS Research released the findings of a study entitled *Rethinking Science and Society*, which revealed much about Canadians' perceptions of the role of universities in research and development. The survey revealed both good news and bad news. The good news: 80% of respondents said they recognize that universities have a great deal to do with R&D, and 86% stated they have the greatest trust in university researchers compared to governments and the private sector. The bad news: The public feels uninformed about university R&D. What this means is that institutions have to do a better job of educating the public about its research and its resulting outcomes.

Drawing inspiration from those findings, the Halifax-based Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU) has created a six-part pilot television series called *The Life Changers*, which airs on ASN on Sundays at 12:30 p.m. (Atlantic Standard Time), across the Atlantic provinces. "Universities conduct 63% of the R&D in Atlantic Canada, with a total annual value in excess of \$510 million," says Peter Halpin, AAU's executive director. "We have great stories to tell about how university research is having a real impact here at home and around the world."



NSCAD's Margot Durling and Glen Hougan: Designing new healthcare products

The series features compelling stories about university R&D initiatives throughout Atlantic Canada and the end results of that research. There are scenes from Dalhousie University's Brain Repair Centre (tele-mentoring for neurosurgery and neuro-transplants for Parkinson's patients) and Ocean Tracking Network (a global network devoted to the better understanding of ocean-resource management and climate change); the University of New Brunswick's Institute of Bio-medical Engineering (revolutionizing the world of prosthetics) and the multi-disciplinary pediatric obesity clinic (improving

Wendy Hill, University of New Brunswick, is revolutionizing prosthetics



lifestyle choices of children and their families); Nova Scotia Agricultural College's Bio-Environmental Engineering Centre (creating a more environmentally friendly family farm); and NSCAD University's product-design faculty (new products specifically designed for health care).

Halifax-based veteran broadcaster George Jordan hosts *The Life Changers*. "In my career, I had plenty of opportunities to cover many areas of daily life through current affairs and news perspectives, but this was a different assignment,"

says Jordan. "*The Life Changers* exposed me to an incredible range of stories, and I was amazed at the potential global impact of the research underway at universities across the region. For example, the work taking place in prosthetic devices at UNB—how the mechanical, electronic, and neurological elements are being brought together to benefit those who have lost or were born without limbs—is breathtaking. Also, the Brain Repair Centre's work at Dalhousie University is world class and cutting edge."

In addition to its TV airing, each episode of *The Life Changers* can be viewed on the AAU's website, [www.atlanticuniversities.ca/thelifechangers](http://www.atlanticuniversities.ca/thelifechangers). "ASN provides us with a great platform to better inform the public about what's going on in our university labs and classrooms across the region," says Halpin, "but we also know that many people today use the Internet to get information and news."

*The Life Changers* is funded by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI). The financial support of these two national granting councils enables the AAU to increase public awareness of *The Life Changers* programs through a regional print-advertising campaign prior to each show. More AAU member universities have come forward with ideas for *The Life Changers* and the AAU hopes to get back into production in early 2008.

In April of 2004, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) organized a national meeting of university communicators and researchers. "The key outcome was that universities had to do a better job of public communication about the impacts of their R&D activities," says Halpin. "*The Life Changers* is a direct response to that national call to action and a great example of our universities' commitment to creating a knowledge advantage in Atlantic Canada through research excellence, collaboration, and partnerships." — STAFF

## AT A GLANCE

**SECTOR:** Atlantic Canada's universities  
**KEY INVESTORS:** AAU members, NSERC Atlantic, and CFI  
**MILESTONE:** Pilot television series: *The Life Changers*  
**RESEARCHERS:** Dalhousie University, NSAC, NSCAD, and University of New Brunswick  
**VISIT:** [www.atlanticuniversities.ca/thelifechangers](http://www.atlanticuniversities.ca/thelifechangers)