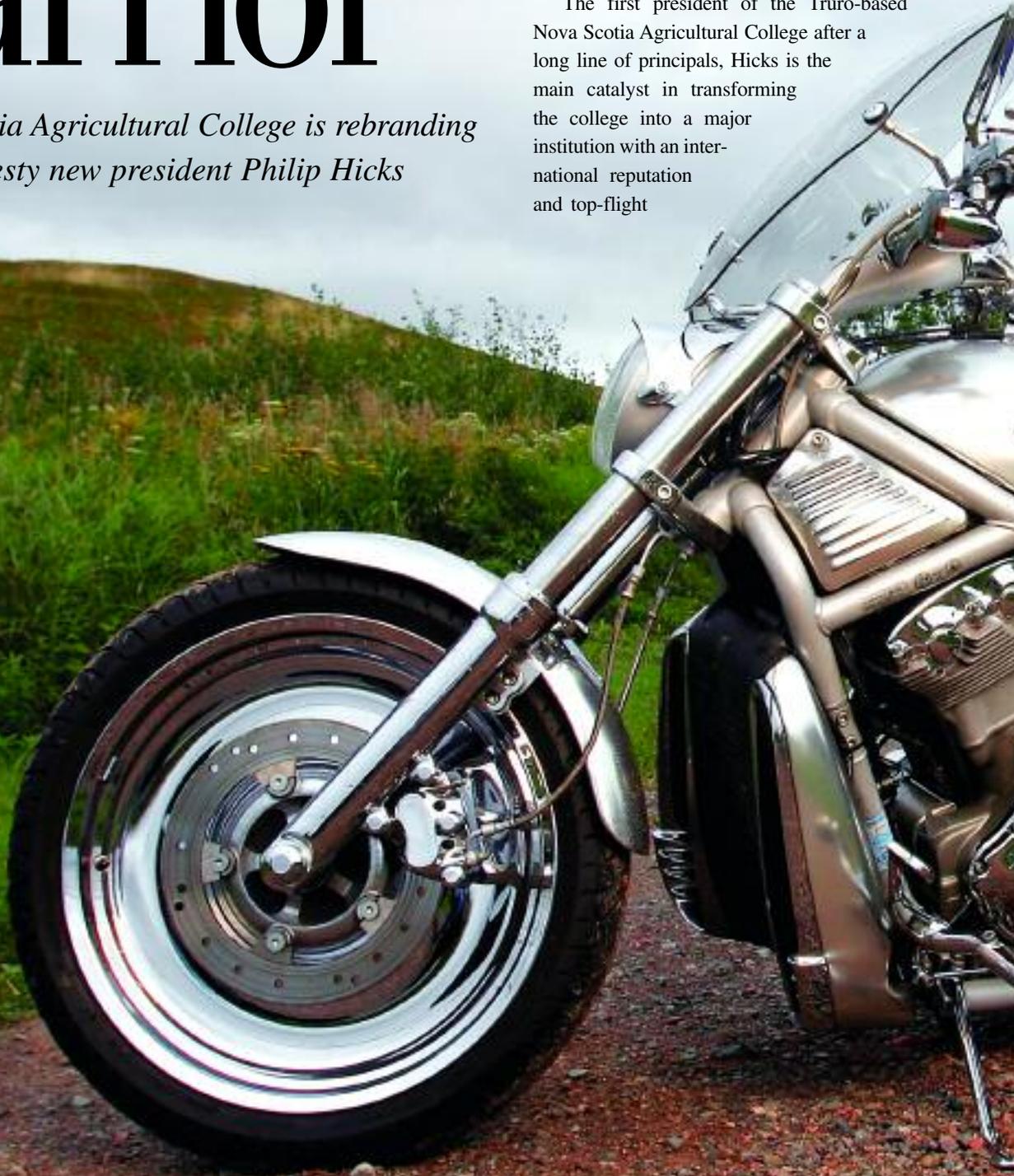


Road warrior

The Nova Scotia Agricultural College is rebranding itself led by feisty new president Philip Hicks

Philip Hicks is not your typical college president. A judo instructor with a black belt, Hicks, 52, rides a V-Rod, 1,125-horsepower, water-cooled Harley Davidson. “Maybe I just like surprising people,” he says with a grin. “You shouldn’t slot people into where you think they should be.”

The first president of the Truro-based Nova Scotia Agricultural College after a long line of principals, Hicks is the main catalyst in transforming the college into a major institution with an international reputation and top-flight





research programs. “I think NSAC has always known what it needed to do,” says Hicks, “but it felt a little bit of paralysis in moving forward.”

Robert Dykes, a professor in the faculty of medicine at McGill University, has known Hicks for more than 30 years and has worked

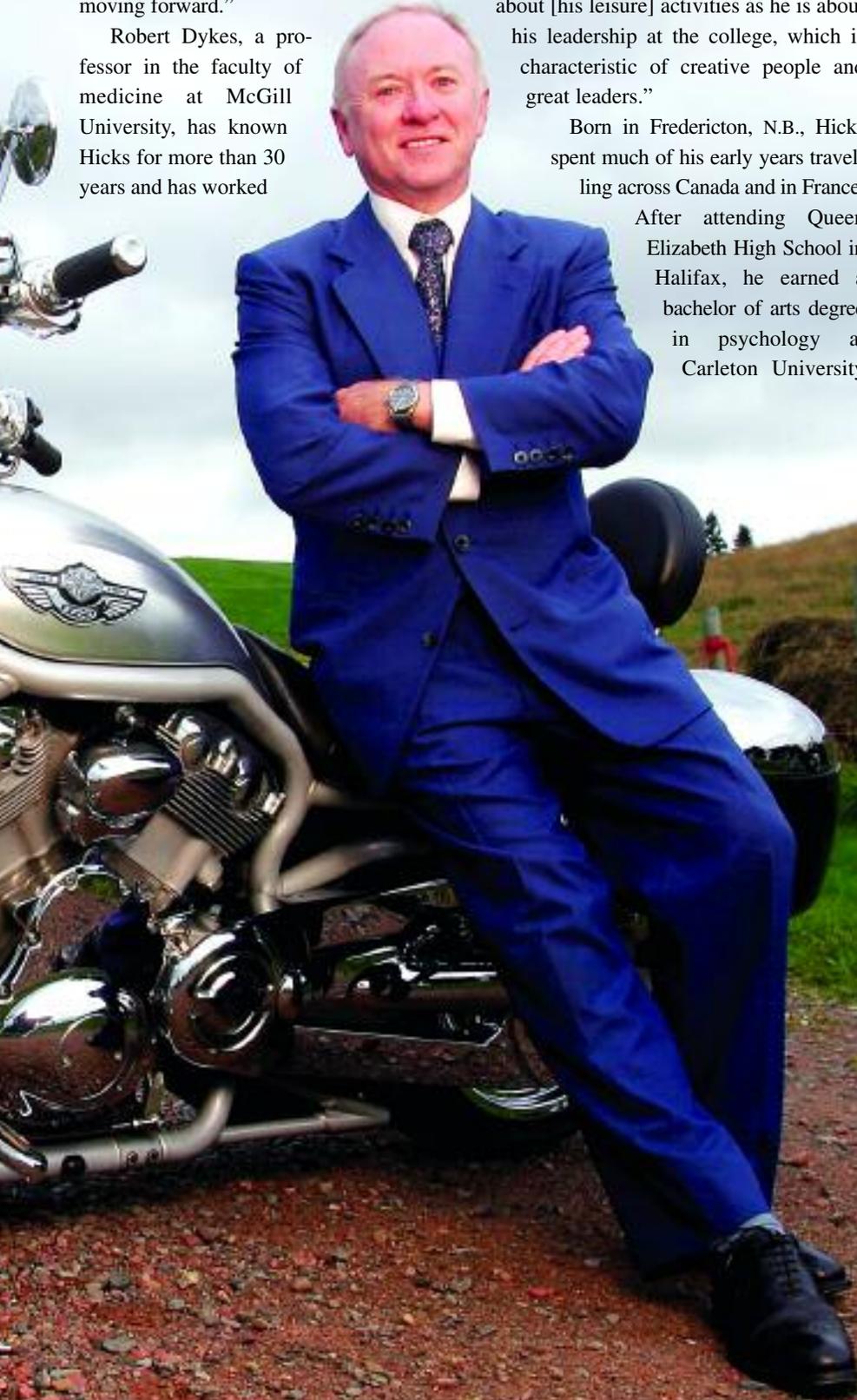
with him on many projects. “Philip has an intense pastime that is disconnected from the office,” says Dykes. “He is as intense about [his leisure] activities as he is about his leadership at the college, which is characteristic of creative people and great leaders.”

Born in Fredericton, N.B., Hicks spent much of his early years travelling across Canada and in France.

After attending Queen Elizabeth High School in Halifax, he earned a bachelor of arts degree in psychology at Carleton University

in Ottawa in 1973. “I was fascinated by areas of behaviour and brain function,” he says. Soon after, Hicks moved back to Halifax and enrolled in a science program at Dalhousie University.

After earning a PhD in physiology from the University of British Columbia, Hicks accepted a post-doctoral training position at the Max-Planck Institute in Germany. He trained under the supervision of Otto Creutzfeldt, whose father had discovered what today is known as mad cow disease, or Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. “He has a long pedigree in science,” says Hicks, “and I really thrived and flourished under his direction.”



While in Germany, Hicks met one of Creutzfeldt's long-term collaborators from Japan and expressed his interest in judo. Through this meeting, it was decided that Hicks would finish the last three months of his German contract in Japan. "I fell in love with Japan and the culture and its people," he says.

From 1981 to 1999, during stints at the University of Calgary, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and the National Research Council Canada, Hicks authored or co-authored 99 original refereed papers, served on the editorial boards of national and international scholarly journals, and won several research awards recognizing his contributions to physiology and

that the college's governance structure needs to be tweaked. "To run a university, you have to be at arm's length from the political fashions and fads that change on a daily or monthly basis," he says. "Universities exist to identify absolute truths and discover or create knowledge, irrespective of how elected officials and public servants may decide to employ that knowledge. Governments have as their highest priority serving the public good and establishing policies based on existing knowledge. These are not always mutually consistent missions."

Only 2.5% of NSAC students comes from outside Canada. Recruitment drives have been launched in Taiwan, Japan,

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neuroscience. His next move was out of the controlled lab environment and into a job with the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade as a science-and-technology counsellor back in Japan. "The job was to build bridges between researchers in Japan and those in Canada who work in academe, industry, and government," he says, "while at the same time catalyze research opportunities."

Hicks brought his skills to NSAC after the college put a strategic plan in place in 2003. "There were great goals put forward," says Hicks. "We need to internationalize and to look at our governance structure. We need to market ourselves better." For example, the college's name is an issue. "We're not exactly a college," he says. "We're not exactly just agriculture, and we're certainly not just for Nova Scotia. So every aspect of our name sends the wrong signal to potential students."

NSAC is one of the last post-secondary institutions in Canada to be controlled by the provincial government. Hicks believes

Korea, Central Europe, Brazil, and Jamaica. "I've been trying hard to recruit," says Hicks, "but you have to keep going back to the same countries and explaining what NSAC is and what it has to offer and that we have a PhD program that we want to implement in the near future." Despite the fact that NSAC has been training PhD students for many years, those students are granted their degrees from other universities. "We've always known that NSAC is a place of strong research," says Hicks, "but without a PhD program in place, it has been hard to hold our head up high."

Still, Hicks says the same things that cause students to hesitate attending NSAC are its selling points. "The strategy here is to frame the positive aspects to potential students," says Hicks. "Those include our small-town values, clean air and water, and close personal contact with professors, all of which are going to make a huge difference to international students in their educational experience." — JOE FITZGERALD