

Will you be coming back?

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Amber N. won't be back at school next year. The burden of owing six and a half thousand dollars in student loans and of scraping by financially year after year, has become too heavy. "It's a big thing having all that money over your head," she says. "It's depressing."

It's the middle of November, and she checks the mailbox every day for her student loan. To make matters worse, when the cheque finally does arrive, it will carry with it the financial penalty of Amber's "dependent" status, even though "I haven't lived at home for five years and my parents won't support me."

"I don't think I'm an extreme case," she says. "I've been able to borrow money from friends, and get an emergency loan. I know lots of students who can't even do that."

The stairway at Mount Royal College doesn't lead to Heaven...it leads to a dead end on the fourth floor.

She isn't an extreme case. One out of five students was unemployed last summer according to Statistics Canada. At least that many again were underemployed, and worked only part of the summer or earned wages too low to save an adequate amount for school.

Without summer jobs, students from well-off families are more likely to stay in school. An Ontario government survey in 1973 showed that 87 percent of high school students from the highest economic bracket went on to post-secondary studies. Only half of those from the lowest bracket continued.

Since then, inflation has increased the financial pressure.

In "Student Loans: Making a Mockery of Equal Opportunity", the National Union of Students (NUS) points out that the gulf between the cost of living for a student, and the average student resources, has grown significantly

between 1972 and 1978. While the average student resources (accounting for inflation) has increased 72 percent in that time, the cost of living for a student has increased almost twice that much, up to 134 percent.

Inaccessibility to education is just one form of cutbacks. Wait a minute, cutbacks, what cutbacks? The government says there aren't any. Funding to post-secondary education has increased substantially every year, they say. What they don't say is that inflation takes away more than the increase, resulting in serious underfunding.

Some student leaders can't find any evidence of education cutbacks either. Bruce Ramsey, for example, couldn't. He was president of the Students' Union at the University of Calgary last year. This year he's the special assistant to the Alberta Minister of Advanced Education.

There's a thirty-five percent failure rate in Lake Sagaris' second year biology class. "Why?" she asks. "I do not think it's that students are stupid. Those people were screened out long ago." It's not the lecturers, who are on the average "very good". It's not the teaching assistants or the labs, which she says are also very good. It's because students in her class feel alienated and uninvolved with the course, because there are 400 of them.

The stairways at Mount Royal College don't lead to heaven, and they don't lead to another floor of classrooms. The stairways lead to a dead end on the fourth floor, that at one time was slated to become student residences. Now there's no money and the residences won't be built in the "foreseeable" future. And student housing in Calgary is among the worst in the country.

Why has post-secondary education lost priority with federal and provincial

governments in the past decade?

The economic crisis in the country might pass as an answer, if it wasn't for the case of Alberta. With nearly seven billion dollars in the Heritage Trust Fund, education cutbacks are no different than anywhere else.

It's also hard to answer the question of where students would be now without the provincial and national student organizations who have fought on students' issues. Critics of these organizations say they are ineffective and not worth the money students pay in membership fees (several dollars per student per year).

NUS claims to have won concessions in student aid, and helped force the government to provide summer jobs for students. They have worked with provincial organizations to oppose tuition and education cutbacks. In 1978 fifteen thousand students protested in demonstrations. In Alberta, where two years ago the education minister swore it would never happen, student representation has been legislated onto the Students Finance Board (which sets student levels).

But one of their biggest problems is getting students involved. "The level of awareness of students on campus about the student movement is very bad," says Mike Miller, a fieldworker for NUS. Agreement on that statement can be found everywhere.

"You can't be an effective lobbying force," says Bev Crossman, who has worked for the National Union of Students, "unless you're really well

student organizations, and about twice that many executive members. While 450,000 students belong to either the National Union of Students or a provincial organization, only five percent of those at the most are involved in student politics and issues. Why aren't more students involved?

It's a chicken before the egg kind of problem. Students won't get involved if the organizations aren't effective. And the organizations aren't effective. And the organizations can't be effective if the students don't get involved.

It's partly, says Lake Sagaris, who has been active in student affairs for a long time, because students in Canada, and Canadians generally, are extremely conservative. They are very reluctant to challenge the status quo, regardless of what the status quo is doing. "Students have to recognize that it's very constructive to disagree with government policies on education." Right now most of them just think it's "not nice," she says.

Conservatism was definitely the order of the day at the non-members caucus meeting at the last NUS conference this fall in Winnipeg. Delegates from the University of Victoria, the University of Calgary, the University of Western Ontario, the University of British Columbia and the University of Manitoba all expressed the same reasons for dissatisfaction with the national organization — that NUS policies are "too radical" and do not represent the students' views.

"That's bullshit," says Steve Shallhorn, staffperson for the B.C.

With nearly seven billion dollars in the Heritage Trust Fund, why are there education cutbacks at all?

organized. You have to have lots of on-campus support. Politicians must be convinced that students are well enough organized to affect their (politicians') positions."

There are presently 38 full-time staff members of national and provincial

Students Federation. "NUS policy is that students should have access to student aid, grants, summer jobs, and quality education."



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