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Education forum may promote students

OTTAWA (CUP) — Students are tackling some crucial questions as the country prepares for the first-ever comprehensive forum on post-secondary education in Canada, to be held in Saskatoon October 25 to 28.

Who decides what is discussed? Will students be out-

numbered and ignored? Will industry take control of our education system? Why should we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on one conference in Saskatoon? Will it change anything?

The 44-member organizing committee met in Ottawa last week to hammer out the

vision of this forum, which will bring together two levels of government, the business sector, non-governmental organizations, academics, administrators, and students to discuss the future direction of higher education in Canada.

"We don't expect all of these groups to reach consensus. We just want them to eyeball each other, to look each other in the eye and hear what the other has to say," said Forum Chair Dr. Brian Segal. "If we tried to reach a consensus it would just collapse into voting strategies."

But students are questioning the effectiveness of an open discussion approach.

"The forum has not been given any mandate to come to a consensus (on action). In my opinion, we've talked long enough," said Royden Trainor, chair of the Students' Union of Nova Scotia (SUNS).

Though administrators are generally more optimistic about the Forum, Dr. Charles Pascal, Chair of the Council of Regents, which governs Ontario's colleges, admits some concerns.

"If there is one thing that nags me (about the Forum), it's that we will all ask ourselves in the airport going home from Saska-

toon: 'So what?', he said.

"We're not perfect and we have to look at the system critically," said Forum Chair Dr. Brian Segal. "But we are not going to spend two and a half days in Saskatoon looking at how bad we are."

"We have to stop looking at the future through the rear-view mirror," echoes Pascal. "We can't go into this thing looking at how to protect what we have now."

Pascal said colleges are not worried about more private sector involvement. "Any universities fearing that participation with the private sector would be damaging to 'curiosity research' are insecure. Sure, there are dangers, but they (universities) are big boys and girls and they can guard against them."

And the business representatives on the committee claim they are genuinely interested in education.

"Corporations large and small are where students will be earning their living and (the business sector) is interested in making sure the education system is relevant to what employers are looking for," said Jill Bodkin, former chair of the B.C. Securities Commission.

"There is a growing belief on the part of the Canadian business community that the corporate sector and the government will cooperate to provide the necessary funds required to make post-secondary education available to students, and especially to provide continuing education," she said.

"There is an enormous number of people from the private sector. Hopefully, we (students) won't get dwarfed and it won't turn into a conflictual debate between these two groups," said Paul Ledwell, the PEI member of CFS national

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