

The real value of a university education

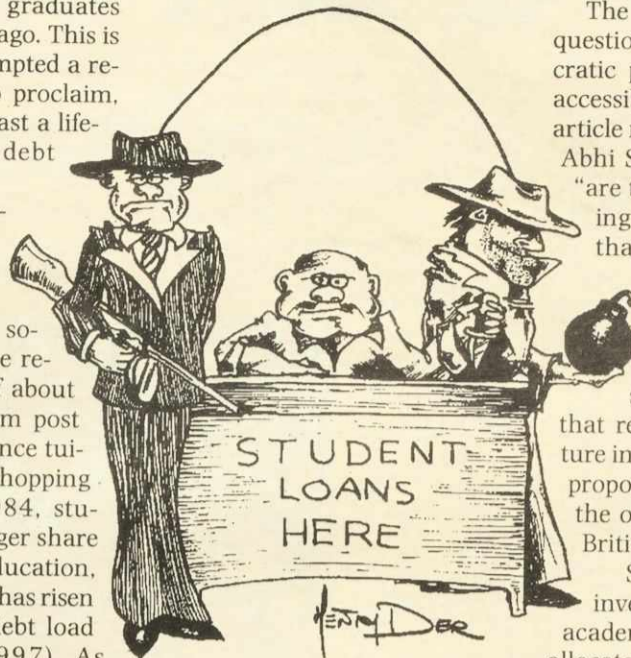
BY ZOE BOUTILIER

In terms of numbers, Dalhousie University was poorly represented at a CFS-organized march against education cuts which took place on October 22 in Halifax. This lack of attendance doesn't mean that Dalhousie students don't care about the issues. Rising tuition fees, increasing debt loads, and a bleak job market are part of every modern student's daily reality.

Reality today means that the average student borrower graduating in 1996 will owe approximately \$24,000 in student loans. Reality for this same graduate means a grim job market, with median salaries of bachelor degree graduates averaging \$32,000. Although the cost of living has risen by a yearly average of 4.2 percent since 1986, this is the same median salary

that bachelor degree graduates could expect a decade ago. This is the situation that prompted a recent CFS pamphlet to proclaim, "Your education will last a lifetime. Your student debt shouldn't."

The situation is discouraging because it seems to be self-propagating. High national debt and the resulting social spending cuts have resulted in a direct loss of about two billion dollars from post secondary funding. Hence tuition has risen by a whopping 140 percent since 1984, students are bearing a larger share of the cost of their education, and student borrowing has risen (the average student debt load in 1994/95 was \$5997). As graduates are forced to part with a larger percentage of their income in order to repay incurred



debt, the real value of a university degree is being increasingly questioned.

The reality of statistics raises questions about the basic democratic philosophy of universally accessible education. In a recent article republished in the Gazette, Abhi Samant argued that there "are too many students attending university acquiring skills that are inadequate for the workforce."

One solution proposed by the CFS involves changing the current student aid program so that repayments are tied to future income. Another suggestion proposes tuition freezes such as the ones currently enforced in British Columbia and Quebec.

Students are consumers investing in the industry of academia. If universities don't allocate resources to discovering the needs of their clients, these clients will go elsewhere. Considering that Canadian student debt

levels are increasing at a faster rate and therefore approaching American private college debt levels, we may see an increasing number of students crossing the border for an education. Human minds are a limited natural resource that our country can't afford to waste.

Maybe Dalhousie was poorly represented at the October 22 march because no one knew about it, or because we no longer belong to the CFS. Or maybe it's because a lot of people simply don't believe in the concept of student solidarity anymore. In an academic arena where bleak future job prospects induce scholastic competition, perhaps more students would rather spend their time in the library, or at improving their resume. Or maybe they are all out there working part-time in anticipation of future debt loads.

A lesson to be learned

BY MARK REYNOLDS

There was this incident at my place of work, that I can't get out of my mind, in which there is a lesson, somewhere.

It was just another boring day at my job — a place we will call Zell-mart — moving freight, helping customers, the grind. I was up near where the exit doors were when our plain clothes security officer went rushing by and said, "Follow me," which I did.

She approached this kid (greased back hair, ball-cap, U.S. sports franchise on the jacket, even a little dark-skinned which completed the stereotype nicely) who was about to get on his bike.

She identified herself, and asked him to follow me back into the store to fill out the proper forms. There, she read him his rights and asked him to empty his pockets. He pulled out four chocolate bars.

Then he started talking. He said he was only fourteen, that he was from Kuwait and he had only been in Canada for two months. He swore he'd never do it again. Meanwhile the security officer called the police, and asked me to fill out a witness report. He said he was sorry, that some other kids had told him to do it. She explained to him that we charge all shoplifters, no exceptions. He started to cry. She left the room.

He continued to ask me to please let him go, he'd never do it again. I told him I had nothing to do with it. What had been a nice change from the routine of "How could you be out of detergent? It's only been on sale three days?" was becoming extremely uncomfortable.

The security officer came back to fill out her report. He couldn't remember his phone number. He couldn't pronounce his street name (which I knew). He couldn't understand operator assistance when we told him to find out his number. Most of all, he couldn't stop crying.

I filled out my report, and the police constable arrived, so I went back to work, feeling a little sick.

Later I saw the kid following his very angry-looking father out of the store.

Two hours later as I left to catch my bus home, I saw that the kid's unlocked bike was where he had left it when we had apprehended him. In that neighbourhood there was no way it would last the night there. An eye for an eye, I thought.

On the bus ride home I kept thinking...

I'm at a young and problematic age (who likes being fourteen?), and I'm two months into a country which is as unlike mine as Madonna is to the Pope, and some people act all friendly to me and tell me it would be cool to take a couple of chocolate bars. Who gets hurt? They tell me how to get away with it, and I want to do my new friends a favour....

Then I think that this kid — who was scared out of his mind, is now going to catch all manner of shit at home, has a criminal charge hanging over his head, and is banned from all Zell-marts for six months — is also going to get his bike stolen. All for a few Caramilk bars.

And because I wanted to get home, I couldn't be bothered to

bring his bike down to my parents' place so it would be safe for the night.

So what's my point? He stole, he knew it was wrong, and he needs to be punished. No argument here. As for his "friends", if they weren't in fact some sort of pathetic attempt to shift blame, he at least will know better than to listen to them in the future.

All well and good. I know that if I had any say in the matter, I would have let him go after calling his parents and have been done with it, but I have a heart of dough. What more remorse can you achieve after making some scared fourteen-year-old beg for forgiveness in front of two complete strangers? After watching him cry?

And still, because I was wanting to get home at 10:45 p.m. instead of 11 p.m., I couldn't be bothered to spare him a little more misery. As a result, I'm implicated in the theft of this kid's bike. I've also failed in my own credo to help others when I can. Yeah, he'll learn his lesson. Again. And I think I've learned mine.

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