

# The higher cost of education

As many students visit university lecture halls for the first time today, it will be just one of many firsts they will experience in the subsequent weeks. They will feel unprecedented levels of personal freedom and independence, and as they settle into their surroundings they will be invigorated by the new world they have inherited. But for many it will also be their first encounter with the smothering weight of financial debt.

When CIBC opted out of the Nova Scotia student loan program this past summer, they cited the high number of loan defaults and personal bankruptcies amongst Nova Scotia university graduates as one of the main reasons for their decision.

As frustrating as CIBC's decision is, it is hard to blame a bank for not wanting to invest in Nova Scotia's students. With soaring tuition, high unemployment and a collection of post-secondary institutions sputtering towards the year 2000, we are not the hottest ticket in the country. And banks are not humanitarian agencies, they are calculating, profit-making machines and, no, it is not likely that a bank can, or will, change.

So the question becomes how did we get here? Who decided that calculating, profit-making machines should play such a crucial role in the education of so many students? The answer might seem to be our provincial government, but in reality student loan troubles (and the fact that

student loans are necessary at all) are a symptom of a larger federal problem.

This country's policy makers are unwilling to fund liberal arts and sciences degrees. They are so taken by the current vogue for fiscal pragmatism that they have bestowed upon us a large scale interpretation of corporate down-sizing called the Canadian Health and Social Transfer Cuts. And these cuts, which slashed the education budget (among other things), were dumped into the laps of the provinces in the middle of a five year period when the rate of personal bankruptcy amongst Canadian University Graduates rose by 250 per cent. The climate of post secondary education in Canada is unmistakably chilly.

The pragmatists just can't swallow such a large group of students "floating" through the education system. And their economists can find no redeeming value in an Arts degree so, much like CIBC, they are slowly pulling the plug.

Those programs that seem to be winning the pragmatist's praise are usually applied sciences or technology, which are the ones getting corporate funding. But as Halifax MP and leader of the federal NDP, Alexa McDonough, pointed out during her visit to Dalhousie last week, industry is "...kind of a parasite on the side of university and government programs."

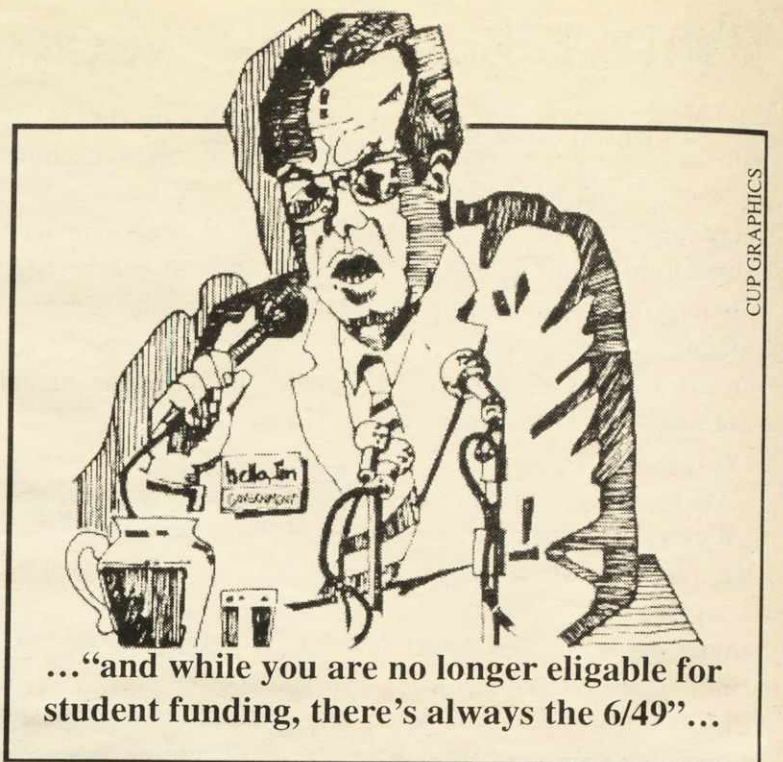
And once academic programs become dependent on the private sector, they are forced, to some degree, to pander to the corporate whim. Businesses and not educators can dictate curriculum, and as has we have already mentioned, businesses are inherently self-serving.

Canadian writer and thinker John Ralston Saul, points out in his book *The Unconscious Civilization* that "...universities, which ought to embody humanism, are obsessed by aligning themselves with specific market forces."

Saul contends that supposedly pragmatic influences push students into strictly technological fields which "...will simply produce obsolete graduates. The problem is not to teach skills in a galloping technology, but to teach students to think and to give them the tools of thought so that they can react to the myriad changes, including technological, that will inevitably face them over the next decades."

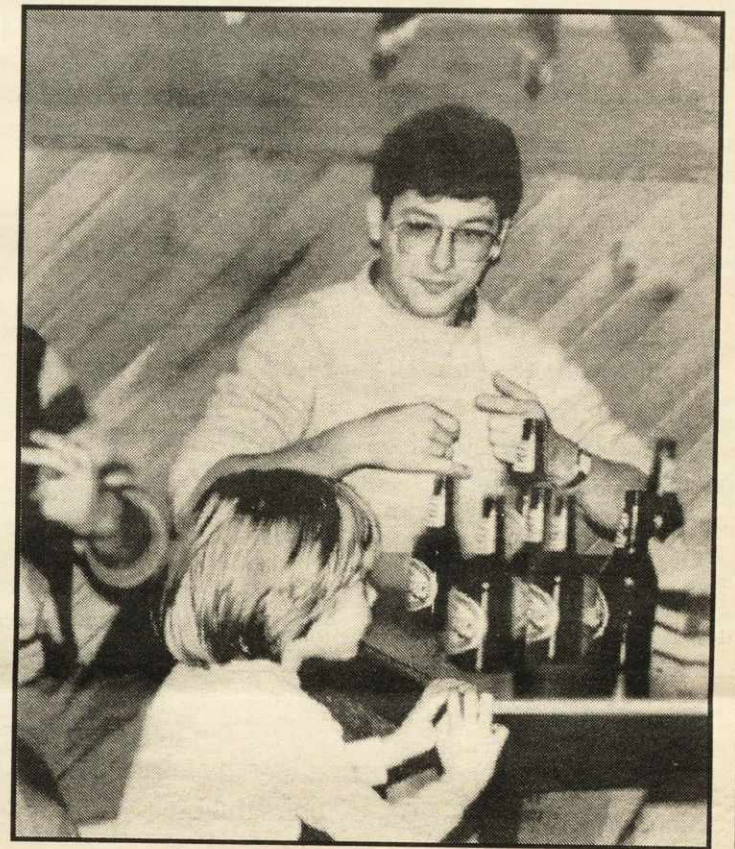
Unfortunately teaching students to think is being made increasingly more expensive by our down-sizing government, and many schools are being forced to cut programs that do not finance themselves. Money rather than brains will soon be post-secondary education's toughest entrance requirement.

Andrew Simpson



...“and while you are no longer eligible for student funding, there’s always the 6/49”...

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