

# EDITORIAL

by Allan Carter

There is no doubt that the Student Union fee of \$99.00 provides full time undergraduate students with many necessary services and the opportunity to join various clubs and organizations on campus. However, in the last few years this fee has undergone some interesting changes. In 1991 this fee was decreased from \$96.00 to \$93.00 when Greg Lutes was VP Finance and Administration. During the same year a number of recognized student organizations, including the Health Sciences Society were understandably upset with the cutbacks made to their modest budgets. Lutes' actions were a subject of much discussion since it appeared that with a Student Union fee cutback some services and organizations would feel the pinch. Nevertheless, Lutes, who was running for Student Union president at the time, felt that given the economic climate such a cutback clearly displayed that the Union realized that student wallets were thin. One can argue that this student fee cutback was an admirable attempt to try to address the current student needs. Yet, at the same time there was the suggestion that with this cutback would come slim budgets for many student organizations. Thus, it was with surprise that at the end of that fiscal year, the Student Union had a surplus of roughly \$12,000.

But that surprise was not as great as the one in 1992 when the Student Union decided to increase the Student Union activity fee to \$99.00. Of course, this increase was partly due to the Union's commitment to the SUB expansion fund. So while the fee was hiked by six dollars, five dollars from each student was placed in this fund. Nevertheless, even after \$33,675 was transferred to the SUB expansion fund, the Student Union's total surplus at the end of April in 1992 was still \$22,330.

According to James van Raalte, VP Finance and Administration, there are reasons for this surplus. For instance, each year the Union obtains a predicted number for next term's full-time undergraduate enrollment from the University Administration. And every year this number is less than the actual enrollment number. So if the university predicted an enrollment, as it did for this year, of roughly 6567 students, but about 6871 students actually enrolled as full time undergraduate students, then the Union has roughly an extra \$30,000 to operate with. This predicted enrollment number used by the Union for budgeting is the same enrollment number used by the University when setting tuition fees. Of course, last year's enrollment prediction was off by only about 300 students. In relation to both the

institution's operating budgets, the extra amount attained through student activity fees and tuition is quite a small percentage. Nevertheless, if the enrollment prediction had been more accurate a student could have saved, on the Student Union activity fee alone, at least four dollars and the Union would still have had the sufficient funds for which they budgeted. One could also spend the time calculating how much each student could have saved on tuition, but the point is quite moot since it is impossible for the university to accurately predict the enrollment for each year. However, one could argue that while such a prediction is impossible, both the university and the Student Union must take into account the fact that the extra money obtained has been taken from the students. With this in mind, the Union and the Administration have a responsibility to ensure that these extra funds directly benefit the students. The Union, to some extent, has made that decision since (aside from the five dollars per student) surplus money has been placed in the SUB expansion fund. To refund the money would be senseless, but with a concentrated amount possessed by both the Union and the Administration quite a few existing projects could be further supported (i.e.: daycare) or new projects could be started. As van Raalte recognizes, to have a large surplus is almost as financially irresponsible as having a large deficit.

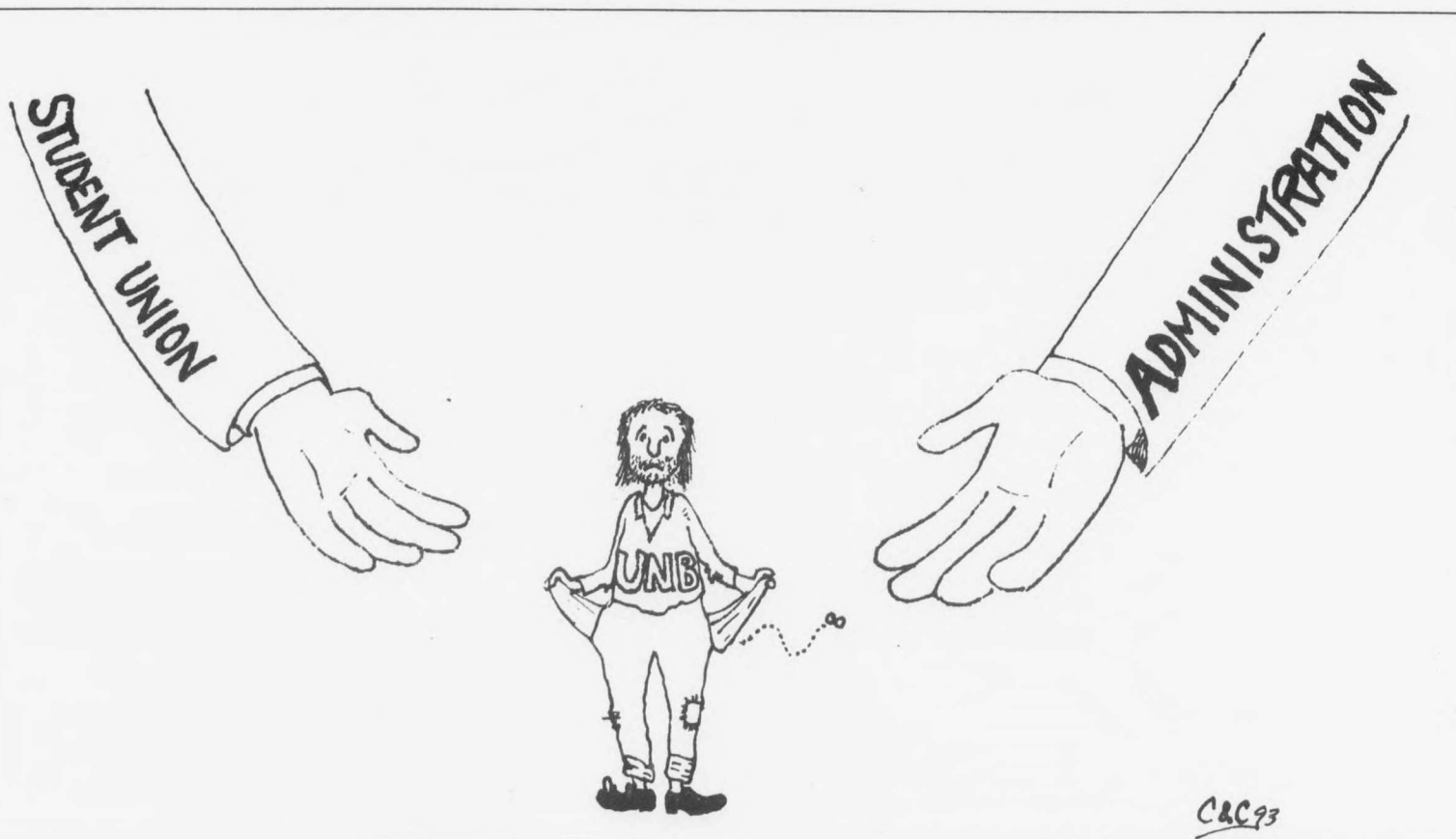
A surplus, particularly one that accumulates over a four year period as the Union's, indicates that either student needs are not being met or students are simply being overcharged. For at least the past four years the Student Union has efficiently managed the Union funds. Many would argue about how these funds are distributed, but it is obvious that funds are being handled with care. However, given the Union surplus, it is also evident that the Union must not only efficiently manage the student fees, but they also must be sensitive to student needs. With more government cutbacks, it is inevitable that student services which the university offer will either be cut back or completely eliminated. The Union does not only have a responsibility to lobby against such cutbacks, but also to ensure, whenever possible, that these services will continue to be offered. Further, there is little doubt in any body's mind that tuition at UNB will again increase. Regardless of what will be suggested in the Maritime Provincial Higher Education Commission Report, Premier Frank McKenna has made it quite clear that it is very possible that the provincial government will not raise the level of funding for the Maritime universities.

It is through projects, such as the Union's new emergency loan program (see page 3), that

the Union is recognizing and responding to the drastic changes that are taking place throughout Canada's post-secondary education institutions. As was pointed out by van Raalte at this week's council meeting such a program is only "a band-aid" solution to a much larger problem. That larger problem being that the government is not making funding post-secondary education a number one priority. What was discouraging and troublesome about the emergency loan program was the reaction from some of the councilors at this week's council meeting. Instead of welcoming such an innovative program which makes an attempt in tackling a problem that many students experience, some councilors felt the Student Union should not become involved in such projects. But if the government and the university refuse to tackle such problems, then who will? Much of the money for this loan program is coming from funds which were allocated to produce the student directory, which the Union decided not to publish this year. Given the economic climate, what service will benefit students better? Certainly, the emergency loan program does.

With the surplus and an honest look at some of the services which the Union now provides, there is no reason that the Student Union cannot address some of the educational crises students are facing. Amidst the service cutbacks and the higher tuition fees, the Student Unions may be one of the few voices left in the educational world who continue to speak out for the student who is struggling to attain a post-secondary education. Further, it may be the only hope left for students who are seeking financial assistance. Of course, one hopes that in the next few years the situation will not become that bleak. But if organizations such as the Canadian Federation of Students and Student Unions continue to lobby against cutbacks, they also need to display their competency in addressing problems within the current ongoing educational crisis.

Many will look at the UNB Student Union's surplus and wonder if the Union is simply "feathering its own nest". In other words, is the surplus a large unnecessary cushion which the Union does not need? Such a view is justified if the Union continues to collect money from students and does not put it to good use. However, if the emergency loan program is an indication of other projects which are to come from the Union, then the surplus has many potential uses, all of which can help to at least maintain the services at UNB and to offer assistance for those students who truly need it.



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