

Responding to criticism — clarifying the CFS

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Nova Scotia and Newfoundland went bankrupt in August, keeping students' loans and tuition fees, the CFS components in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland were the first student organizations to stand up to protect these students. I would urge Ms. MacKenzie to refer to our letters of support and press releases at that time. The CFS position on private institutions is developed in the belief that our number one mandate should be to protect students and push for quality educational programs that are also stable and accessible. Students should not have the additional stress of worrying whether their school will suddenly go bankrupt, or if it will actually deliver the programs advertised in glossy brochures.

The fact is that getting an education from a company which is primarily accountable to its shareholders and not to its students is a risky business. The Career Academy was rated one of the best businesses in Atlantic Canada by *the Financial Post* the year before it took students' tuition fees and then locked its doors. The same year as the Career Academy received *the Financial Post* award, a number of students were suing the school for failing to deliver the educational

program they had paid \$34,000 per year to receive. Many private institutions use the promise of certain employment after graduation to persuade students to pay their hefty tuition fees — and many students are left high, dry, unemployed, and hugely in debt when they graduate from these institutions. Government statistics show that at many private institutions up to 100 percent of students with loans have difficulty repaying them, proof that the rosy employment promises offered by many private schools don't pan out. Certainly, there are well-run private institutions, and there are poorly run private institutions. However, in a world where students are offered few guarantees, the very least we can ask for is the protection of publicly accountable government bodies when we make the huge commitment of getting a post-secondary education.

Third, I would like to respond to Ms. MacKenzie's criticism of the supposed CFS boycott of the Red Cross. CFS does not have a Red Cross boycott. At the May general meeting, the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual student caucus of CFS raised concerns about the Red Cross blood collection questionnaire which implied that all gay, lesbian, and bisexual students were

disease-ridden. It was the students' belief that the best way to ensure the safety of Canada's blood supply is to rely on scientific tests, and not discriminatory questions. The Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual student caucus felt that when their student unions hosted blood collections which promoted negative stereotypes of gay and bisexual students, they were endorsing this discriminatory attitude. CFS leaders were asked to express concerns about the questionnaire directly to the blood collection agency, and CFS members were encouraged to welcome blood collection agencies onto their campuses, once the discriminatory question was removed.

The campaign on the blood collection questionnaire has nothing to do with the international relief work that the Red Cross does, and as Ms. MacKenzie correctly pointed out, it no longer has anything to do with the Red Cross, as they no longer collect blood. It is also completely up to individual student unions to decide how they wish to deal with the issue.

Ms. MacKenzie's accusation that the CFS is self-centredly working against the best interests of the Nova Scotian community, to the point that we would advocate cuts to social assistance or health

care to fund education, is frankly insulting. We have always been an active part of the Halifax social justice community. At the Day of Action, representatives of the Nova Scotia Citizens Health Care Network and the Canadian Health Coalition were given a chance to express their concerns, and to publicize their rally this Saturday. Many social justice organizations endorsed the CFS Week of Action, including Oxfam Canada, the Action Canada Network, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the Canadian Labour Congress, the National Pensioners and Senior Citizens Federation, Low Income Families Together, the Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group, and Youth for Social Justice.

I do find Ms. MacKenzie's concern for community social justice issues heartening, and would be overjoyed to meet DSU representatives at any Halifax social justice coalition meetings. If the DSU is interested in showing "the government where they can get the money that we have given them to run our society properly", I would also encourage them to begin participating in the Alternative Federal Budget process.

Finally, I would like to deal with the accusation constantly

levelled against the CFS by the DSU, that being that we only rally, and don't research or lobby. This is simply untrue. If Ms. MacKenzie is looking for credible, well researched policy on student issues, I would suggest that she refer to recent briefs that CFS Nova Scotia has produced and presented to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance (which sets the federal budget), the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (which sets national education priorities), the Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education (which advises the Minister of Education on funding for Nova Scotia's universities), the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (a regional research and policy body, which also approves academic programs), the Nova Scotia Director of Student Assistance, and the Minister of Education.

I hope that this will clear up some of the confusion that the DSU seems to have about the CFS, and I look forward to maintaining a good working relationship with Ms. MacKenzie over the year.

PENNY MCCALL HOWARD
Nova Scotia Chair,
Canadian Federation of
Students.

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