

Slamming shut the doors of education

Another school year is upon us. Some lucky students have parents privileged and generous enough to pay the cost of their university education. But many do not.

Third-year arts student Shawn Whitney says university education is becoming increasingly difficult to afford by anyone but the wealthy as a result of increases to tuition and a financial assistance program that is largely inadequate.

by Shawn Whitney

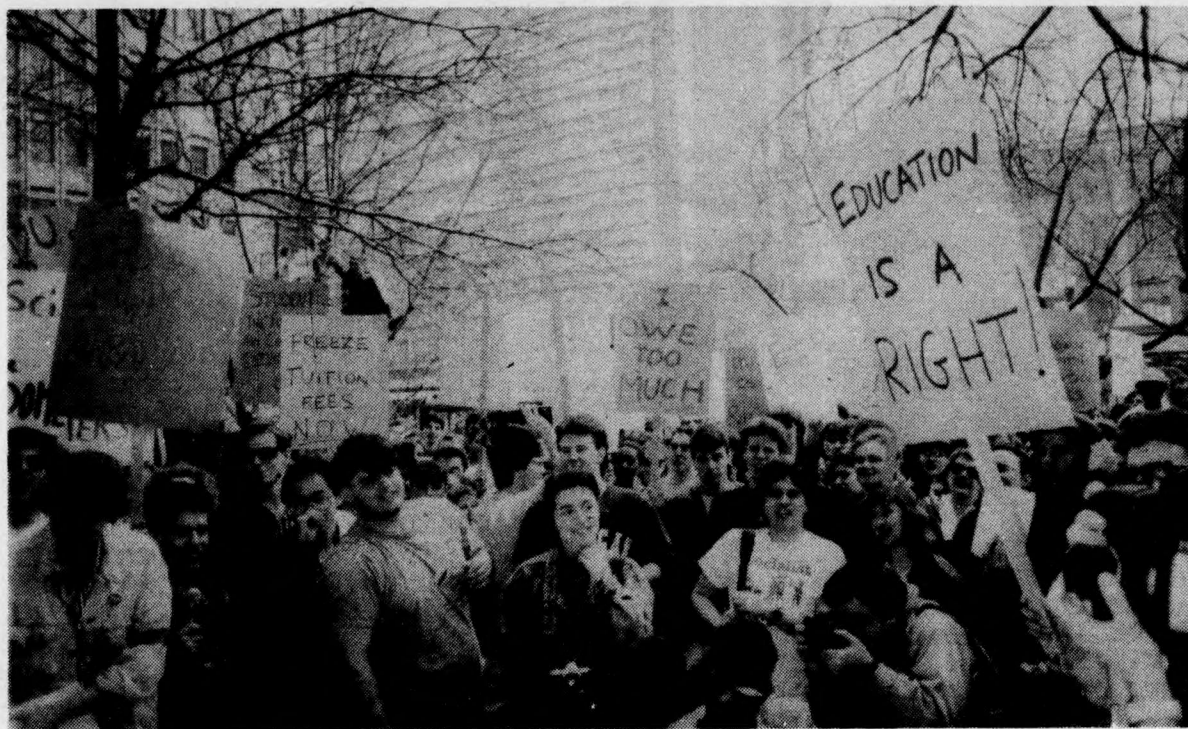
Talking to students who have been forced to leave university for financial reasons, a grim picture emerges. It is one of an unbending, rule-laden bureaucracy that does not respond to the needs of students who aren't wealthy.

"I had \$4000 saved, so I didn't feel the need to apply for OSAP [Ontario Student Assistance Plan] right away," said Grace Mazzucco, one of many students being forced out this year. "But my money ran out sooner than I expected and I was forced to drop two courses by the end of first semester while I waited for my application to be processed.

"Toward the end of the year, when I still couldn't find work and I still hadn't received my OSAP, I was forced to drop out and accept three failures...I had to look full-time for work because I was so far in debt."

OSAP gives students \$120 per week. But studies by the Ontario Federation of Students indicate that students living on their own need at least \$225 a week.

Besides being unrealistic in esti-



Students protest tuition hikes in a downtown Toronto rally last year.

mating student living expenses, OSAP is also making arbitrary judgements as to how much parents are helping to fund their children's education.

A two-parent family of four, whose combined income is \$32,000 (far less than the national average of \$44,096), is expected to contribute \$3,136 annually. Also, Ontario is the only province which includes the market value of the parent's home when calculating their contribution.

This results in the disqualification of many students who live in cities such as Toronto — where the real estate market is highly inflated — but

whose families are not wealthy.

According to the Canadian Federation of Students, almost 50 percent of full time students rely on the Canada Student Loans Program. The average debt load for graduating students is \$6,000; when combined with provincial student loans, many graduates have debt loads over \$15,000.

Both the Ontario and Canadian Federations of Students have been pushing the government to install an all-grant system of student assistance. But as of yet, the only change to the Canada Student Loans Program in the last seven years has been the in-

roduction of a three percent service tax beginning this year.

Many student observers have been sorely disappointed with the results of the NDP's first year in office.

The NDP have abandoned their longstanding policy to freeze and eventually eliminate tuition, implementing instead this year's eight percent tuition increase. They have also failed to act quickly on OSAP reform.

According to Rob Centa, external vice president for the York Federation of Students, "Any time tuition goes up a set percentage, it hits hardest

those who earn the least. It's a regressive system."

This means that women and people of colour, for example, who earn markedly less than white males, will less likely be able to afford a post-secondary education.

The example of Quebec makes this quite clear: In the late 1960s, tuition fees were frozen in Quebec in response to the popular student movement of the time. In the period between 1975-76 and 1986-87, the participation rates for women in that province increased from 7 percent to 14 percent — an increase of 100 percent in ten years!

Some student leaders are beginning say it will be up to students themselves to push the government to make university accessible.

"Students have a critical role to play right now within an already existing student movement," said Nikki Gershbnain, internal vice president for the York Federation of Students.

Grace Mazzucco said students should get organized and fight the increases.

"Otherwise low and middle income students are going to be forced to attend university part-time so that they can work enough to cover the increasing costs."

Rob Centa said universities could "return to being a bastion of white, upper-class males" if education remains inaccessible. It seems that education is fast becoming a right only for those who can afford it.

If students don't fight for their right to affordable, accessible education, it looks like no one else will.

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