

# OFS takes aim at York membership

In October, a referendum will be held to give York students the opportunity to decide whether or not to remain members of the Ontario Federation of Students (OFS). To help students make an informed decision, *Excalibur* Assistant Editor Ira Nayman conducted an interview with Tim Jackson, OFS Chair, on Wednesday, August 1.

*Excalibur*: Tell me a little bit about OFS.

**TIM JACKSON**: We have 33 student associations that are OFS members representing just over 220,000 students in the province. This includes both college, university, graduate and undergraduate students. Every university is represented; the only undergraduates that aren't represented are at the University of Toronto and Wilfrid Laurier, but both have graduate representation. We also represent all of the graduate student associations that are autonomous. In the last few years, a couple have become autonomous — Ottawa and Carleton — who are not members, but we are in the process of developing that membership.

In terms of college membership, we do not have as many college members as we'd like. Currently, only three belong to the OFS: Mohawk, Lambton and Fanshawe. And, again, there, that's an area we're trying to expand.

*Excalibur*: What does OFS offer its members? What is the mandate of the organization?

**TIM JACKSON**: I think there are two things: First, we are the student voice in Ontario, so we lobby the provincial government on a regular basis. When the government wants a student to sit on a committee, they come to us and ask us to appoint someone. When the press or government want to know what students think, they come to us.

For example, we've done press interviews — that's all we've done for the last three days — about the provincial election. When they want the student reaction to the election, they call us. We were the student group that was involved in *Vision 2000*, the college report that was released last week. And we were the student group that participated in the press conference that announced it. That's the first thing: the representation and the lobbying.

Secondly, we provide services. We do research here that other schools use, which means their own researchers don't have to spend time doing research when a provincial budget comes out. We have fieldworkers that, go out and spend time on campuses helping the student governments: anything from setting up an OSAP clinic, where students who have problems with OSAP can come and get help from an OFS fieldworker, to helping the student administration prepare for a meeting with the university administration — helping them organize a rally — anything like that. We help schools out with our communications department. If they want help sending out press releases, we have a list of all the press contacts. So, the second part is the staff resources and the service aspect of the Federation.

*Excalibur*: What, as Chairperson, do you see as the most important issue that OFS will have to face this year?

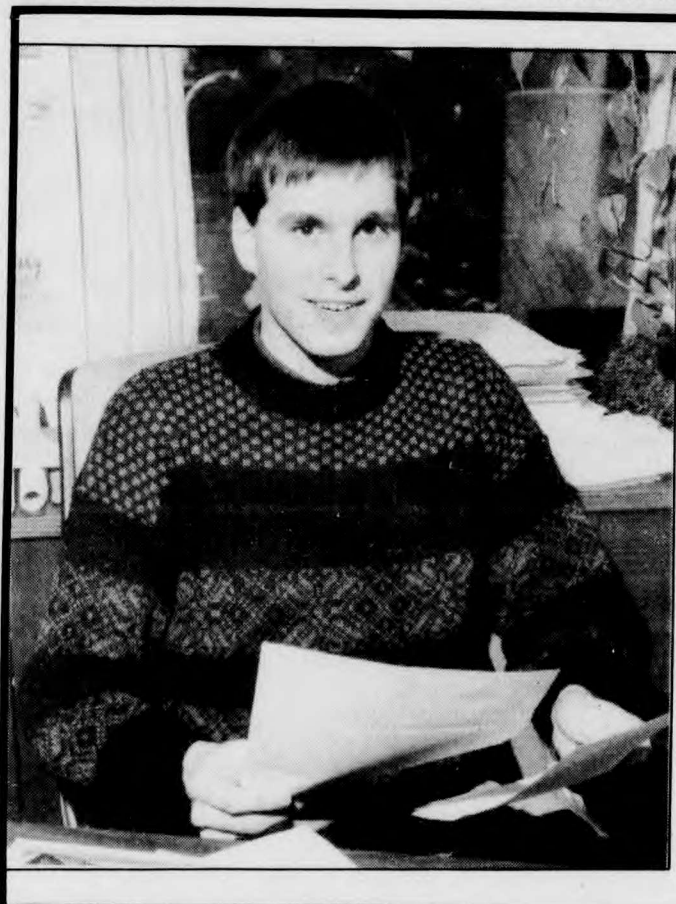
**TIM JACKSON**: Well, obviously, the most important issue is underfunding and accessibility, because the two go together. The access problem is a result of university underfunding. When I talk about access, I mean it in a very broad sense: high school students being able to get a place in a university, having access to the funds to attend the college or university and once they're in, having access to the classes that they need. Classes, as you know, are getting larger and larger, and are being cut, so students can't get into courses they require. And all that stems from a lack of funding.

Underfunding affects it [accessibility] in two different ways. First, there are simply not enough spaces for students right now in the post-secondary system, and the spaces that exist aren't always adequate or acceptable. For example, there's no opportunity for a francophone to study in a francophone university in Ontario right now. There's only

one francophone college, which is opening in September. There's not enough access for single mothers to study closer to home at universities, rather than having to move.

We met with COU hoping to address this, and we've been in contact with several members of the Council of Universities, trying to get them to reverse their decision. We simply feel that this is unacceptable. High school students have no choice but to go through the application centre to apply to Ontario universities, and we simply don't feel they should be paying for a lobby group without knowing it. That's something very specific we're working on.

We will be working on the *Vision 2000* project that just came out, trying to ensure that the recommendations in the report are followed through — that it doesn't just sit on the Minister's desk.



Tim Jackson, Chair of the Ontario Federation of Students (OFS) has been busy lobbying the provincial government on issues of university underfunding and accessibility. OFS will be involved in a membership referendum at York this October.

*Excalibur*: Could you give me some idea of what that's about?

**TIM JACKSON**: Sure. It was a comprehensive study to determine the future of the community college role within the province. It wasn't done on a consultative basis, it was done on a collaborative basis, so OFS, in conjunction with 32 other stakeholders, people like Charles Pascal, the Chair of the Council of Regents, people from labour, people from business, people from the colleges, got together and over a period of 18 months came out with a very comprehensive report on where community colleges should be going in the future.

The key recommendations, from our standpoint, were twofold. One, that there would be a new institute created to form a partnership between colleges and universities. The idea behind this would be that someone in Moosenee, for example, where there's a community college, could take courses at the community college that would lead towards something similar to a university degree. It would mean that someone like a single mother or a native student, who, for whatever reason, can't leave home, can't travel to Toronto or to Windsor or wherever there's a university, would be able to work on this degree based out of the community college.

But, I also think, if you look at the institutions that are already in place, there exists chronic underfunding within those institutions. The universities, specifically, this year are cutting their budgets one to two per cent across the board; that means that either student/faculty ratios go up, classes are cancelled, there is not the money to replace old laboratory equipment, there's not the money to hire the necessary teaching assistants or there simply isn't the capital maintenance.

When you have an underfunding problem, the tendency is to start cutting away at your capital funding line items because they're not, perhaps, as tangible as a faculty member or a TA, and, eventually, we're going to hit an extreme crisis point where, simply, the buildings on our campuses are going to start falling down. You have corridors at Brock University in St. Catharines where the roofs have leaked for years, now, and there simply isn't the money to fix them. If you walk down one corridor, there are garbage cans all along it — it just leaks constantly.

*Excalibur*: What, specifically, can OFS do, or what are you planning to do?

**TIM JACKSON**: I think we're doing two things. One is with the provincial elections. We'll be attempting to make post-secondary education an issue in both the minds of the

There will obviously be a poster, pamphlet and button campaign.

On October 17, there is going to be a national day of action for post-secondary education — National Student Day. The idea will be that, on campuses across the country and the province, each institution will be doing something. Some provinces, will have, for example, one big mass rally, such as we've done in the past. But, what we've decided to do in Ontario this year is have each institution do something different on their own campus. So, Queens may hold their own rally, York University might hold a sit-in somewhere.

Each campus holds a press conference on that day, explaining why they're having a rally — to protest the accessibility problem, the underfunding problem — and explain that while they're doing this at York, students across the province are being active in other ways. A campaign gives us credibility, because of the number of students that come out, when we go and talk to David Peterson or Sean Conway or Robert Nixon. But, it also makes students feel like they're part of the Federation, that they can participate in a rally or a demonstration. I think it gives them a feeling that they actually belong to something, and that there are other students sharing their frustrations with the lack of funding in the post-secondary system.

*Excalibur*: Is OFS working on other important issues?

**TIM JACKSON**: Right now, we're fighting a fee increase that has been levied by the Council of Ontario Universities for applicants from high school to university. They increased their fee from \$12 to \$18 because they needed money in their operating budget. Until now, the application centre in Guelph has been run at a break even basis, and this is the first time they've made this sort of cash grab.

Another suggestion in the report is that there be increased transferability of credits from college to university and university to college. We think that's extremely important, because if you have someone who graduates from York, for example, and then decides they want to go to Mohawk College, rather than having to start again in first year, they could start, perhaps, in second year and not have to retake courses similar to ones they've already taken. That means they get through quicker which, of course, creates spaces for other students, and helps alleviate the access problem.

But, the key recommendation is that an implementation committee be struck that consists of the stakeholders, those of us that were involved in the formulation of the report, to actually start implementing the recommendations. The report is useless if it sits on Sean Conway's desk. It has to be acted upon.

*Excalibur*: Is there anything else that you think should be said?

**TIM JACKSON**: One of the things that we will try and bring up during and after the election, is that the current government has been in office now for five years, and there is no real plan for universities in Ontario; they don't seem to have any long-range strategy. Each year the Treasurer comes out with a very arbitrary funding increase and an arbitrary tuition increase, but there's no thought put into where they want universities to go in the 1990s.

Premier Peterson is saying that he's running this election to get a mandate for the 90s. Well, we think part of that mandate should include some sort of future vision of university education. And, that means coming up with a long-term plan that guarantees funding for the universities, because right now they have to do their budgeting on a year to year basis, and they don't know from one year to the next how much money they will receive from the government through grants or tuition revenue. I think that's something that the government really needs to address. They've done that to the college programme, to a certain extent, with this *Vision 2000* process. Now, it's time to do it with the universities.

politicians and the general public. Tonight, for example, we are going to [Ontario Treasurer] Bob Nixon's nomination meeting which [Ontario Premier] David Peterson will be attending. The election has been called at a very bad time for students, but we're going to make sure they know that students are organized in the province and want post-secondary issues addressed in the election.

"the current government has no real plan for Ontario universities"

We'll be making our presence known on campuses across the province. Material is going out to the student administrations, and where there are all-candidates meetings, in those ridings, if David Peterson comes to the town or [Ontario Education Minister] Sean Conway or Bob Nixon, there will be students there. The slogan for our campaign is, "Vote education," and the idea is to get, as I say, not just the politicians realizing that there are students involved, but also the general public. There was a study done not long ago that showed that post-secondary education was one of the few items for which the majority of Canadians would be willing to accept a tax increase for.

And, of course, after the election once the government has been formed, our campaign for this fall is an accessibility campaign with three prongs to it: tuition fees, student assistance and racism on campus. We have several committee meetings coming up in the next while where we will decide specifically how we want to address that.