

Dan O'Connor

opens door

to NUS

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Photo / Johnson

Gazette: Few students have a good understanding of the history of student organizations in Canada such as the national organization of students. Could you give us a brief outline of the national student unions that have existed in Canada?
O'Connor: I'll try to be extremely brief because usually this is the sort of topic that puts people to sleep.

Canada has had national student organizations longer than most other countries in this world, ours starting almost fifty years ago in December of 1926. At that time the National Federation of Canadian University Students was founded. It lasted from 1926 through to 1969, changing its name in 1963 to the National Union of Students. It had its ups and downs.

Before the Second World War it reflected the fact that there was a small and fairly well-to-do student population. It was an organization that concentrated on debating leagues, and on more contact with other campuses. It never thought of itself as a lobbying force with the governments.

After that time it began to work more on educational issues. Students began to be concerned about what kind of universities and campuses there were going to be. It accomplished a great deal in one of those things: a four year campaign by the organization resulted in the Canada Student Loan Plan, through which student aid plans exist across the country right now. None of them would have existed unless there had been such an organization lobbying for that programme.

It did a great deal in educating students, making them aware of what was happening so that they could have a say about it. Students were able to find out about the Royal Commission on Taxation and have input. Through this they were able to get tax breaks for students and have the government recognize that students faced high costs and had low income. As well, students were able to study the whole situation and organize with other groups such as workers trying to get a better taxation system in the country.

There was housing built for at least five thousand students over a two year period simply through the effort of the national organization. Dalhousie in particular benefited from this program: the married student residence at Dal was part of that whole move to build more housing. This work was done mainly from 1966 to 1969. At the time, CUS had full-time housing people who would work with campuses putting together housing programs: UNB had the two co-op buildings which are now university residences built during this period. The problem with it was that at this time the national organization went under, so a lot of the programs ran into trouble. The individual co-ops lost touch with the others across the country and once they had built their co-ops didn't know how to run them.

NFCUS, as well, got the whole student discount for travel instituted and fought to maintain that service. It also ran an extensive charter program.

In the more important area of tuition increases, the national organization ran a campaign throughout the sixties. In Halifax, in both '67 and '69, you had over one thousand students marching on the legislature house on the student aid and tuition questions. The campaign began in '65 with the slogan "Freeze the Fees" and an awful lot of work was done to make people aware of the problems caused by the kinds of student aid and high tuitions at institutions that were, and still are, keeping people from low income backgrounds out of university.

This was the first time that there was ever a survey done of Canadian University students. It was done by CUS in '66-'67, and it encouraged the federal government to keep on doing such surveys to establish just what groups are getting to university.



Dalhousie Student Union President makes good in the National Capital.

They managed to slow down the increases in tuition fees and tuitions were generally quite stable from the mid sixties through to the early seventies.

The problems of not having a national student organization are shown by what happened in those years since '69 when CUS died. The lack of a strong student organization has meant that the most populace element of the post secondary institutions have had no knowledge or say about what the government has been planning. Most obviously the faculty and government are going to work for their own interests and not student interests, so students weren't represented at all. There began a noticeable rise in tuition in '71 to '73 and it began to be clear that the government wanted the proposals that we heard of: double tuition, triple tuition, pay \$2000 a year for a BA and if you can't afford it borrow the money. People saw once again the need for students to work together, regionally and nationally. It was in the '72 era that a lot of provincial organizations began to organize. The National Union of Students was officially founded at the end of '72.

Gazette: Could you elaborate a little on the demise of CUS in the late sixties?

O'Connor: Three things came together in the late sixties to bring down the organization: the fact that the structure failed to adapt to the unique problems of the sixties, the bad press that student organizations in general and CUS in particular was suffering from (dirty-hippy-trouble-makers image) and the problems of its left-wing politics. All these things contributed not only to a bad image but a real isolation of the organization from the students at the grassroots. Its lack of responsiveness to the students is what killed it.

It is important to know why CUS collapsed. It's a good question to ask. When people were building NUS there was, at certain points, a really conscious effort made to avoid in the organization the mistakes that led to the CUS collapse.

Due to the problems of the old organization most student unions, with the exception of Ontario, were cautious about organizing on a national scale again. The Ontario student population is large and located close together geographically. They had been able to keep their provincial organization going after the CUS collapse--something no one else was able to do. Therefore, they grew rather quickly in '72. They managed a fairly good fee strike in '73 which, while it didn't turn back the fee hike then, did manage to freeze fees in Ontario. Next year they are going into the fourth year of that tuition freeze. That is something the students were able to do.

Outside of Ontario students weren't as willing to start working on regional or national organizations. They seemed to want to see if things could get done without any commitment. That was reflected in both a fairly small NUS membership (it