

SCIENCE / ENVIRONMENT

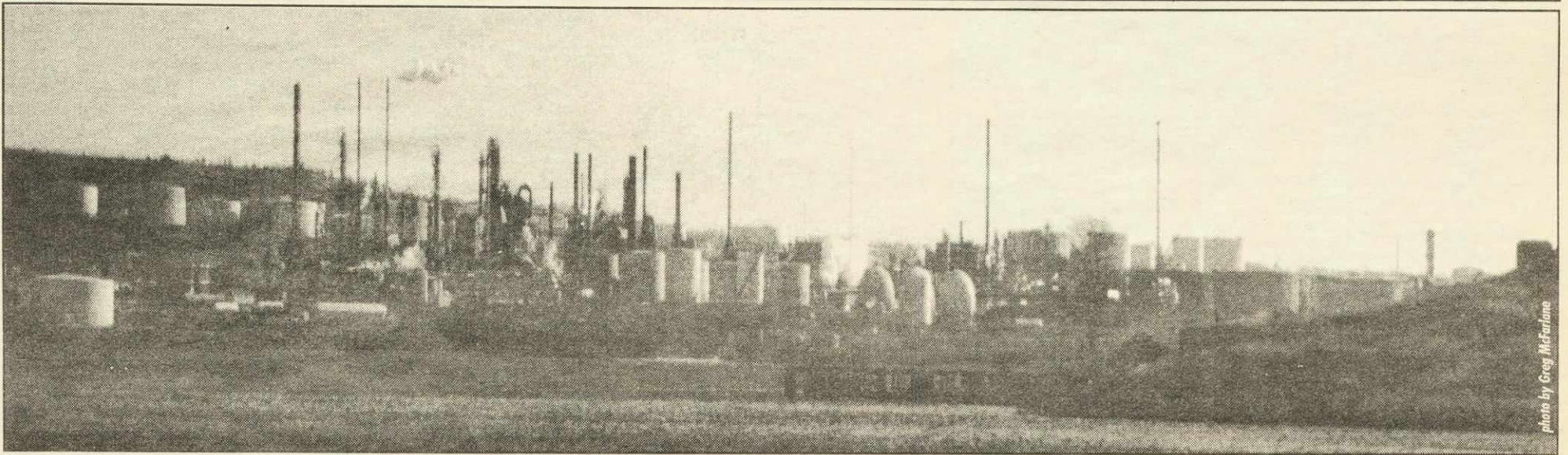


Photo by Greg McFarlane

Universities get slick donation from Imperial Oil

Student groups worry that corporate influence will govern curricula

BY DEREK CHEZZI AND
KAREN FOSTER

TORONTO (CUP) — A Canadian oil giant will donate \$3.25 million to four universities across the country in a move that's being met with both gratitude and harsh criticism.

The Imperial Oil Charitable Foundation will distribute the cash over the next five years for projects that improve math, technology and science curriculums at the schools.

The University of Toronto, the University of Alberta and York University will each receive \$1 million. The remaining \$250,000 will go to the University of New Brunswick.

Barbara Haduke, president of the foundation, says half of its donations are geared to education.

"Math, science and technology appeared as a real need and that was a good fit with Imperial Oil," said Haduke. "We recruit from these kinds of disciplines, and in general for our country, we are going to need people with these skills more in this global marketplace."

Officials from each of the four universities said they were pleased by the news.

"Because it's focused, I think it's going to have a great impact in the long run," said Dr. Larry Beauchamp, dean of the faculty of education at the University of Alberta, of the donation.

University officials were also quick to point out that the donation comes with no suspect obligations.

"We just don't take a donation from any company with strings attached," said Stan Shapson,

associate vice president of York University's strategic academic initiative. "They didn't put strings attached. We think it goes to a good education purpose."

Representatives of the other recipient universities agreed accepting Imperial Oil's money doesn't compromise their integrity.

"It's obviously fabulous because there are really no strings attached," said Michael Fullan, dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

But student groups aren't convinced the universities won't have to give something up in return for the cash. They say large donations like the one from Imperial Oil are an indication of corporate influence on universities.

"These deals are really dangerous," said York Federation of Students president Dawn Palin. "They allow corporations to have control over what will be the best-funded programs at [the] university."

She and other student leaders argue that as more university programs become funded by private dollars, the government will become less committed to funding post-secondary education.

Diane Naugler, president of York's Graduate Student Association, also criticized the universities for approaching Imperial Oil for the money instead of lobbying for more government dollars.

All four universities approached Imperial Oil separately in 1998.

"The fact that the universities approached the Imperial Oil

foundation means our infrastructure is putting money into finding money," said Naugler.

"We could be spending that same money to find money by approaching governments as well and trying to change the tide at the same time."

Still, Naugler says she understands why the universities approached Imperial Oil in the face of significant government cutbacks to post-secondary education.

"I can appreciate the bind the university is in," she said. "I think that they need to be careful that they don't singularly focus on industry to rectify the funding crisis."

The University of Alberta will use the money to fund its centre for the sciences, which it plans to rename the Imperial Oil National Centre for Mathematics, Science and Technology Education. It will operate as a linking agency for

similar bodies across Canada and continue to develop new programs for Alberta's elementary and high school teachers.

A member of Imperial Oil's management will sit on the centre's executive decision-making board.

But director David Blades says the centre's goal is not to provide Imperial Oil with employees, although he can understand the company's interest in it.

"We do not exist to promote skills for the oil sector, but people do want to hire students with basic science skills," he said.

Barbara Haduke is also adamant that Imperial Oil will have no direct influence on the centre's projects despite the representation it will have on the board.

"It [will keep] us in touch with what they want to see in the centre," she said.

At the University of Toronto, Imperial Oil's donation will be put toward developing a clearing house of teaching materials and establishing the first Canadian journal of education in science, math and technology.

Through York's new Imperial Oil Science Education Program, the donation will go toward facilitating the Internet component of the Pan-Canadian Science Curriculum Project.

Moved to York last September from Industry Canada in Ottawa, the project was created by the Council of Ministers of Education to develop national education standards.

York also plans to use the funds to establish a York-Seneca Institute for Sciences, Technology and Education and monitor the performance of students in elementary and secondary schools.

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