

# Students stomped in the long run

by Andrew Campbell and Natalie Lacey

Back in 1983, the Association of Atlantic Universities (an organization of which Dalhousie is a member) stated in a brief to the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission that:

If government funding continues to be inadequate, then institutions will have to increasingly look to students for the necessary institutional income. This would amount to rebuilding the financial barriers that have consciously and intentionally been lowered over the last two decades.

This statement certainly identifies the main reason why a university might seek to raise tuition fees, and what the consequences of such an action might be, but it fails to address the question of whether or not such an action is just.

As a corollary to the AAU statement, if there is a continuing pattern of tuition fee increases in the future, enrolment as a whole will not decline, but the socio-economic profile of the students will change.

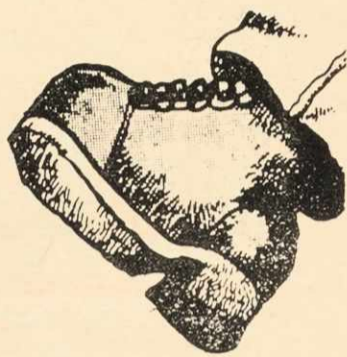
Fortunately, for the students at Dalhousie, the change in the socio-economic profile over the last few years has not been due to tuition fees. The main factors have been an inadequate student aid program, the rising cost of living, and the informal practice of streaming students according to their socio-economic backgrounds in our public schools. For example, minimum wage has gone down in real terms, meaning that a student makes the same amount of money at a summer job as s/he did almost ten years ago, while the cost of living and attending school has almost doubled in the same period of time. Add to this the fact that almost 50 per cent of students list personal income as their major resource in financing their education.

Stability in tuition fees (in real terms) has assisted in maintaining the socio-economic profile of Dalhousie's student body at pre-Tuition Fee Agreement levels. A loss of this stability will affect accessibility, but the only way to prove this is to wait a few years until enough data can be collected. By then it will be too late. To paraphrase a famous Watergate figure: "Once the toothpaste is out of the tube, it's very hard to put it back."

A good example is that of Acadia University in Wolfville. This year their Board of Governors announced a 14.5 per cent increase in tuition for the academic year 1989-90. The Finan-

cial Aid office in Halifax has been deluged with calls with requests for transfers to other institutions as an immediate consequence. One high ranking member of the Department, who asked to remain anonymous, called it a "nightmare of paperwork."

This argument is not new. The Dalhousie Student Union has held the opinion for years that tuition fees do affect accessibility, and it is a view that is held by



most other student organizations across the country. For example, when Queen's released its "Blueprint for Action," the Ontario Federation of Students soon after released a discussion paper on the subject. They objected quite strenuously to the proposed increases in tuition fees:

... many students are concerned that an above inflation increase will inhibit accessibility to Ontario's universities.

Even at Dalhousie, the administration and the Board of Governors acknowledge the fact that tuition fees do affect accessibility to post-secondary education by strengthening the financial barriers, since they have specifically stated that a scholarship/bursary program should be implemented to provide support to those in need. (Financial Strategy Committee Second Progress Report, Recommendation 2d). This is, however, only an implicit admission. They ask for proof; they ask for facts.

The fact is that people have been doing studies on accessibility for years, especially in the United States, where the question is a much more serious one, considering the absence of even a facade of fairness and equity in the area of post-secondary education.

The fact that tuition fees do affect access was investigated as early as 1975, when a Stanford Research Institute study stated that for every \$100 decrease in tuition, enrolment would increase by more than one per cent among

students from families earning more than \$12,000 per year and by more than seven per cent among students from families earning less than \$6,000 per year. (OFS — Who Goes? Access to Post-Secondary Education, February 1977.)

An alternative would be to consider the past, particularly those times when the barriers to accessibility were drastically lowered. The most useful case would be that of the veterans after World War II, whose experiences are the closest we have to a tuition-free, debt-free post-secondary education system:

The classes then were full of ordinary Joes, run of the mill guys whose parents weren't well off. We could never in a million years have gone to university ordinarily! But with tuition and living expenses paid, a lot of us took advantage of it and were the first in our families to go." (H.J. MacNeil, P.Eng., WWII veteran, telephone interview, June 9, 1988)

This is but one of many examples of this type of experience. With the financial barriers removed, the H.J. MacNeils of the time became engineers, lawyers, teachers and businessmen. They were given the opportunity; the desire to be educated was already there.

The idea that this desire and ability should be the main criteria for accessibility was echoed as late as last November by the AAU to the MPHEC:

[We] believe that a student's academic ability, combined with the will to learn, should be the princi-

pal determinants in university admissions. We do not believe that Maritimers would support a system of higher education that excludes talented minds for want of financial resources. (*The Funding of Maritime universities 1989-90 and Beyond* — November 1988 Brief to the MPHEC)

In May of 1976, the Government of Canada acceded to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Article 13 of the Covenant deals with the Right to Education. Within the Article, the state parties to the Covenant agree that: "higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education." (Secretary of State (1985), *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Report of Canada on Articles 13 to 15*)

Finally, in keeping with this philosophy, Dalhousie itself has expressed concern about accessibility. The university has stated in its *Commentary on the Mission of Dalhousie University* a sincere desire to be progressive in this area, committing themselves to:

... the objectives of equity and affirmative action in relation to employment and educational opportunities, increasing wherever possible the participation of segments of society that are at present underrepresented.

This desire is also made explicit to the community in the Mission Statement itself, a document that is meant for the public

and the university community alike:

10. to ensure the intellectual, professional and personal development of faculty, staff and students within a fair, progressive and caring environment that stimulates open-mindedness, adaptability, creativity and imaginative thinking and is committed to equity and affirmative action."

## An Ironic Postscript

When Paul Martin Jr. spoke in the council chambers in July, he made a number of very interesting statements, not the least of which was that the country's deficit cannot be reconciled by cutting our social programs. They are a sacred public trust, and they represent cases where the ethical and social needs far outweigh the economic need.

The situation at Dalhousie is analogous to that of the country at large, and the Board of Governors is using the same sort of rationalizations that the federal government is using. Dalhousie's debt must be reconciled somehow and the only way to achieve this is through cutting programs and faculty, and raising tuition fees. They do not see the University as a sacred public trust, and they say that economic need outweighs the ethical and social needs.

The cutting of social programs results in the same thing as raising tuition fees: it places a burden squarely on the shoulders of the lower socio-economic groups, and cuts off accessibility to our society to those who can least afford it.

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They are now on the Second Floor of the Killam Library - TRUE

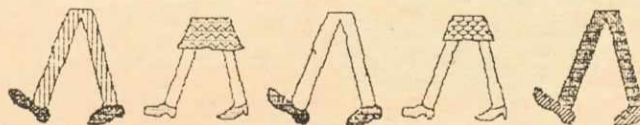
The Law Library is on the 4th and 5th floors of the Killam Library - FALSE  
It is now in the rear of the Weldon Law Building - TRUE

Newspapers on Microfilm are on the Second Floor, Killam Library - FALSE  
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