

Students volunteer free time, get tuition in return

BY JULIET RICE

VICTORIA (CUP) — Once again, the British Columbia government is trying to demonstrate that it cares about its students, and this time, the result is a new program that means some students can trade volunteer work for tuition credit.

Announced in June, the program is already in full swing in Victoria. According to one student who's using it, the new initiative is already working.

"It's great," says Rodney Wilps, who volunteers at the Garth Holmer Society for credit through the new Youth Community Action

program. "I get volunteer experience, credit for tuition, and it looks great on a resume."

The new program, which is the most recent component of Youth Options B.C., was created to "provide B.C. young people with education, skills training, and work experience opportunities."

Employers say they're already benefiting from the program.

"It's such a great program—it has enabled us to undertake activities which we otherwise could not have done," said Sharon Sinclair, of the Garth Holmer Society.

The program requires that

students be between the ages of 15 and 24 to be eligible. Students must also be B.C. residents, and willing to devote some of their free time to volunteer work. There are 1,000 placements province-wide, and an estimated 170 youth are volunteering in the South Island Region.

But the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), who criticized the initiative when it was first announced, said the program doesn't provide equal access for all students because not everyone has the free time to volunteer for community projects. Maura Parte, the local CFS chair, also said if new funding for post-secondary education is made

available, it should be based entirely on financial need, not on community service.

The provincial government originally invited the CFS to take part in the announcement of the new program, but the student organization pulled out at the last minute when they discovered its specifics.

The local program coordinator, however, says that students aren't required to work a certain number of hours—the amount of tuition credit given is proportionate to the time a student donates.

According to Jay Solman, who coordinates the program locally through Volunteer Victoria,

the amount of time spent volunteering is negotiable. The maximum amount of tuition credit donated by the government is \$2,400, for 300 hours of volunteer time, but the average amount of time a student volunteers is 150 hours, for a tuition credit of \$1,200.

Should the program continue to be a success, the government may not only renew the program, but may also expand it.

Solman said 50 per cent of the spaces available in the program go to "at risk" youth, who might otherwise not receive a chance to receive post-secondary education.

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