

Students caught in bursary backlog

by Samantha Brennan

It isn't hard to find people left hanging by the recent changes in the Nova Scotia Student Bursary program. Either you know someone who's been affected, or you have been yourself.

Don Campbell, a journalism student at the University of King's College, is just one of the many hit by the Program's recent toughening up. With several strokes of a bureaucratic pen, the \$1700 bursary Don qualified for last year was reduced - to nothing.

Don relied on the bursary when planning his finances but was shocked to discover midway through second term the money was no longer available. Don was forced to borrow more money to complete his education. He must now face an uncertain job market with the responsibility of even greater debts to repay.

Don's problem stems from a perplexing Catch-22 in the Student Loan Program. According to a new system of guidelines implemented by the provincial government, Don is no longer eligible for Nova Scotia government bursaries. Unfortunately, Don, whose parents are in Vancouver, lived in Nova Scotia long enough to come under this province's bursary program but not long enough to be declared "independent" for his bursary evaluation.

A mandatory parental contribution based on income is now deducted from the assessed expenses of a "dependent" student regardless of whether or not the student receives this support. On the other hand, "independent" students are judged without reference to how much their parents earn.

For this reason financially independent students like Don are disadvantaged by new regulations which make it increasingly difficult for them to establish independent status.

"The monies we are talking about in the Bursary Program are non recoverable monies. There is no return realized by the general tax paying base." - Terry Donahoe, Minister of Education.

Having only spent four months of the last two years with his family and being in his fifth year of study, Don feels the change in his status from independent to dependent is "absurd".

Don's chief complaint is the government's failure to notify students of the change in policy. Counting on receiving a bursary, Don chose a summer job related to his career over a more profitable venture.

"If I had known about the change in advance, I could have planned around it," said Don regretfully.

Echoing Don's sentiments, Provincial Leader of the Opposition A.M. "Sandy" Cameron is critical of the way the provincial government handled the changes to the bursary program, without notifying students or

discussing the matter enough with students.

"I think that any changes of that nature should have come with longer term notice," said Cameron. "They should have allowed ample time for students to have input in the decision making process."

Student Unions of Nova Scotia (SUNS) Executive Officer Peter Kavanagh also voiced concern over the haste of the decision to change the policy.

"There are factors over a number of years to be considered. A trend this year may affect someone in grade nine, and it may be impossible to change that person's attitude," said Kavanagh.

Kavanagh recommends the government use "more foresight and planning" in decisions concerning student aid in the future.

Under the Canada Student Loan Program students who prove need may borrow up to \$1912 under the federal plan. Additional aid, if necessary, is then provided by the provincial government in the form of a bursary not exceeding \$1700.

While in previous years the Canada Student Loan and the bursary shared the same criteria, this year the provincial government has made the two programs distinct by creating a more stringent set of criteria for the provincial bursary.

In effect, what this means is even if you can demonstrate financial need beyond that provided by the student loan, a provincial bursary is not guaranteed. An application form? Yes. Support? Maybe.

The new set of criteria for Nova Scotia bursaries is based on the following changes:

- the elimination of maintenance allowance for students living at home;
- the reduction of the weekly miscellaneous allowance;
- the deduction of all scholarships at full value from assessed need;
- independent status is granted only if the student has no parent or guardian, the student is married or a single parent, or has spent twenty-four months in the workforce for periods of at least twelve consecutive months;
- no allowance is allowed for field trips, graduation fees, typing fees or the like;
- all dependent students are considered to be living at home if their parents reside within fifteen miles of the university regardless of where they actually live.

Now, not only can students expect to receive less aid from the provincial government, they also can't be sure when to expect it.

As a result of the extra paperwork involved in the changes to the criteria early last fall, the Student Aid office is months behind in processing bursary applications.

Director of Student Aid J. Knickle estimates there is a backlog of sixteen hundred uncompleted bursary applications.

"We're working as fast as we can," said Knickle, "and hopefully we'll have them finished in a short while."

In contrast to Knickle's optimistic attitude, students as yet unable to pay the second installment of tuition due at the end of January aren't quite as cheerful.

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