

# Certosimo speaks out on OFS

**OFS Chairperson Matt Certosimo, on a province wide tour of the university campuses, visited York last Monday and spoke to Excalibur's James Flagal and Lorne Manly. Certosimo, determined to make OFS' presence more visible, outlined a number of new services being introduced as well as its strategy for lobbying the provincial government to alleviate the problems of underfunding.**

**EXCALIBUR:** Why did you decide to run for OFS Chairperson?

**CERTOSIMO:** When I got involved with the students union at Laurier, I was in first year. Instead of a council, we have a board of directors. This 17 person body is divided into arts, business, music, and other faculties. So I ran for Arts Director first year, and I did it because I ran on the slogan that the students union had to be more than a 'beer and pizza fund'. I felt that it was important for social activities to be organized. Meeting people is a big part of university, however issues affecting the student's education like OSAP and housing deserved a voice from the student perspective, and students union should play that role, and it wasn't.

Second year I ran for president, because as a member of the board, I was only able to have so much input into the philosophical decision: I could only be one out of 17 members of the board. So, I went to the students asking for a mandate to implement a balanced agenda, that balance being between social activity and political representation, and the students supported me. I realized then that a lot of the work needed a broader base of involvement, it needed more than individual campuses lobbying their respective MPPs, although that is important. It also required more students across the province who have similar concerns to work together to try and influence that system collectively.

I had a choice at this time, (as) I was already a member of the OFS Board of Directors. I could have stayed on the Board of Directors or I could have run for full-time chairperson. I felt strongly that there needed to be stronger coordination of a province-wide lobby which a collective like OFS provides. So I was elected last January and took over the position last June.

**EXCALIBUR:** What do you feel the relationship OFS should play in the province-wide university lobby, and with respect to the individual student campus associations?

**CERTOSIMO:** OFS serves as a council of all student associations, by having it co-ordinate lobbying at the local level. We also hire people through our central fund, the OFS budget, to continue it (lobbying) on an ongoing basis, and also to monitor it (the government and policies) because if every student association had to submit a paper on every particular issue that affected them, then the student's association would be constantly doing that.

So what we do is we hire people whose role it is to do nothing but monitor the situation and provide the submissions that are necessary within the parameters of the policy that is determined by OFS members. This way, when York has to put in a submission, they'll be provided with the instant research they need to put that submission in.

**EXCALIBUR:** How can a central body like OFS truly represent all members when many competing interests exist in this forum?

**CERTOSIMO:** It's inevitable that when you bring together a number of organizations or individuals, a balancing of interests must take

place. But perhaps the most important thing about a democracy above ensuring that people have an equal voice through a system, is protecting the minorities. One of the things that York has found is that the other associations can be sensitive to the minorities' needs. York, Trent, and other universities most adversely affected by the present funding formula have a responsibility as the minority to voice their concern through the process to see their policies adopted, and their research mandates fulfilled. So York voices its concern about the present funding formula, and its need for a more sensitive formula.

Now the mandate exists to develop a policy on the issue which will be passed at the June plenary and then our research staff is responsible for taking the funding formula and developing a package of information. So, the locals can come back together in October or January, to see how we can, in terms of policy and lobbying, affect that funding formula without hurting those other members.

**EXCALIBUR:** You allude to the funding formula, a primary concern for York since over the past decade we have been greatly underfunded compared with other institutions like Queens and Western. How can OFS be sensitive to York's needs without impeding on Western and Queens' interests?

**CERTOSIMO:** Traditionally, the argument has been that what we really need is the 20 percent that Western gets, and transfer it over to York since Western receives 120 percent while York receives 80 percent funding. But I think what we must realize about Western's 120 percent is that 120 percent is not 120 percent of what they need, it's 120 percent versus the base level (100 percent) that was established in 1976. In other words, it's grossly unfair to even Western, because the basic dollars that are required are not there.

Thus we have a common goal of increasing funding. We also have the goal of ensuring that accessibility and quality are not impeded upon on any of these campuses. The goal then is common, but the way we implement the goal will vary from university to university. If there's that will to keep the federation together, and there is the overall goal of quality and accessibility in post secondary education, then giving and taking among the members becomes possible.

Perhaps an infusion into the operating grants of York would also be very effective. For instance, Trent University receives a differentiation fund because they are a liberal arts school and their research level is lower than any of the other universities which receive extra funding because of research. They receive an annual grant which is above and beyond the actual operating grant. And that may be the kind of deal York could work out with the government because like Trent, York has been more affected than other institutions by the underfunding of the last 10 to 15 years.

**EXCALIBUR:** How can we really achieve the government's endorsed accessibility goal of allowing all students with high-school averages of over 60 percent a chance to attend post secondary education while retaining quality in the system?

**CERTOSIMO:** First of all we do what we did, namely make post secondary education funding for both quality and accessibility issues in the election. We ensured that the parties spoke to those issues, and that the parents of those students were concerned about those issues so that the politicians had to respond to them regularly. Then we saw a party elected that made some very specific promises concerning funding for post-secondary education; they spoke about the \$91-million that the Bovey Commission recommended be infused immediately into the university system, and the \$90-million into the colleges. They also promised some specific funds for capital and research. And they also promised that there wouldn't be an increase in the student contribution level.

They made these promises and also won the election, now we've been making sure that they are held accountable for these promises. As a result they did make some positive steps. They did put a four percent increase which was half of what they promised, but then they topped it off with the Excellence Fund, (a special fund created by the Liberals for faculty renewal, research, and library enhancement). It's important to note that this fund is not included in operating grants, and that they needed an eight to nine percent increase in operating grants to live up to their commitment. And many institutions like York didn't receive a lot more than four per cent because they didn't receive a lot of the Excellence Fund money since these alloca-

tions were targeted toward research-intensive institutions, which York is not. So thus far they haven't lived up to their promises.

Yet they have just less than a year before the next election, probably in late spring or summer depending on the NDP accord. Now it's the students, faculty and administrative staff's responsibility to get our message out to the communities directly around the campuses because they are the ones who will benefit from a funded education. There are a whole series of short-term economic benefits which would encourage the community to want better funding such as students having more money to spend on services around the campus and more employment opportunities offered by that institution, just to name a few. In the long term, of course, the province has a wider knowledge base (and) then we'll be able to meet those technological challenges our province will be forced to meet. So once we get the rest of the community enlisted which we are starting to do, for polls are showing that the issue is becoming a little bit more of an important one, then can we start making progress in achieving our goals.

Thus when the government moves towards an election they will have to make a choice now that this political will exists. Either they live up to the promises they made last time before the election or they make sure the promises they make in this election relative to these issues can compensate for the fact that they didn't fulfil their promises. And when they do that, they will have to fulfil their promises for they won't be able to fool the public twice. I think that full lobby effort for the two weeks immediately preceding the November pre-budget announcement where 100 students from across the province will be coming to Toronto lobbying government in meetings will be one of the most important events of this year in placing pressure on the government.

This political pressure is well timed with the reconvening of the legislature, and I am very optimistic that post-secondary education will

cians can say "look at what we built" and people see it and say "oh, they're increasing funding." But this is called the 'edifice complex; you build these edifices while taking the operating grants away from the rest of the system. It has to be both, it has to be dramatic increases in operating funds to ensure that the basics to our education system are helped at a time that they are underfunded, and then we also have to say that where classes are overcrowded too much, new buildings must be built.

**EXCALIBUR:** Do you still think that many people in the province see universities as an elitist institution, and how can we change that attitude?

**CERTOSIMO:** I do think people are seeing that universities don't have to be the ivory tower they once were, so long as institutions ensure that students' contributions do not go beyond a point which only allows certain people to go, because they can't afford it. There should be no economic barriers in obtaining a post secondary education. It's no longer good enough to get just a high school degree, and people are starting to recognize this. Around 100 years ago, and I may be wrong, but high school was perceived as that ivory tower. However when high school became a part of the public school system that image disappeared and our society advanced due to a wider education base. I feel you can draw that analogy to universities in that as we change the attitudes in accessibility to universities and colleges and ensure that more people are going, more people will benefit as a result of it.

**EXCALIBUR:** What problems did you perceive with OFS which stimulated referenda last year not only at York, but on other campuses in deciding whether or not to retain their OFS membership?

**CERTOSIMO:** In terms of problems with the federation I saw two which I wanted to overcome. First, I felt that student associations were passing the buck too often in terms of the structure of organization. OFS is a cooperative



STEPHEN WISE

**THE METS ARE GOING TO WIN!!** Certosimo tries to find time from his busy schedule to watch his favourite team in action. Being a Mets fan is very similar to his job as Chairperson of OFS for until recently neither got much respect. The Mets are in the midst of gaining this respect, battling the Astros in extra innings as we write, but whether or not OFS can succeed remains to be seen.

be high on the government's budgetary agenda. Basically we should never allow quality to come up against accessibility, the two have to go hand in hand; it's got to be a proper balance of the two.

**EXCALIBUR:** But doesn't economics dictate how many students an institution will be able to admit, and that the more students a university accepts, the more it places its quality of education in jeopardy?

**CERTOSIMO:** Most of the time economics will dictate that the quality and accessibility of an institution, doesn't mean we have to sit and accept it. That means we have to work harder to ensure that economics does not put us in a position of having to set harder arbitrary requirements that cut people out who actually are qualified.

**EXCALIBUR:** What about the increase of capital funds to build more buildings and alleviate the extensive overcrowding taking place on campus?

**CERTOSIMO:** There are some serious problems with just getting capital funding when you already have depleted operational funds. There's a famous saying that if we just keep building buildings, politically it's great for the politicians, for come election time the politi-

of student associations made up of students on campus, and too often we were distancing ourselves from the decisions made at the provincial level because we didn't like them or we were to have to politically take a certain amount of flack for them at the local level.

For instance, York may lobby for a motion in OFS's annual plenary to change the funding formula, yet this request may be voted down. The Council of York's Student Federation may come back and say "look, OFS is sensitive to our needs," but in a democratic system you try again. You don't again. You don't pass the buck, you discover new ways to achieve your objectives by more effective lobbying and persistence. I want to get the locals and students on the campuses more actively involved.

For a month now I've been travelling around the campuses to get student associations to set up committees to work on this underfunding problem and basically urge them to do more for themselves. The second thing I thought was really important was developing some very tangible services for students on campus to show for their three dollar contribution.

For example, we are working on legal services for student associations, and a new glossy magazine that will be distributed to the cam-