

Submission to the Commission on Post Secondary Education of New Brunswick

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The submission by the UNB Student Union comes from collaboration by students on issues that are most pressing to them. With the University of New Brunswick being the province's largest university as well as the most comprehensive, students at UNB face a variety of challenges unique to our university. We see the University of New Brunswick playing a significant role in the future of post-secondary education in New Brunswick. As students of the University of New Brunswick Fredericton, we are extremely proud of the quality education we receive at our institution. However, as the province looks ahead into the future of the system, we see some significant changes that will have to be made in order for us to continue to uphold the traditions that UNB has become known for. Students at UNB are extremely proud of their institution, but there is no doubt that some major changes will have to be made in order to provide more adequate funding, better accessibility and, most importantly, increase accountability within the system. Behind all of our suggestions in this brief is the desire to see more accountability within the system. We strongly believe that students need more information while in the system as well as a stronger voice on the decision making bodies of the university. Furthermore, that the universities be accountable to the province of New Brunswick about their spending decisions

The UNB Student Union is excited for the promise that this Post Secondary Education Commission holds. We anticipate major changes to be made within the system over the coming years and look forward to working with the government on

ACCESSIBILITY

Despite higher than average accessibility numbers within the province, there is a major issue with retention at universities. The price of New Brunswick tuition as compared

to the national average is too high. New Brunswick cannot compete nationally when it has the second highest tuition nation-wide countered with one of the lowest wages. The high cost of tuition is detrimental to accessibility and will in turn affect universities' enrollment numbers. Not only will this have a negative impact on students who may have attended UNB from another province (who have the potential to become contributing members to New Brunswick society) but the impact will be felt by universities when students native to New Brunswick are able to choose less expensive educations in other locations, making it even easier for them to remain out of the province after graduation.

Furthermore, the issue of retention is of great concern to students at UNB. Students are leaving mid-way through a degree without any academic problems. The UNB Student Union maintains that any academically qualified student should be able to attend university in this province. Bursaries and scholarships to help accomplish this task are being more frequently left up to the individual institutions. The UNBSU recognizes UNB's commitment and attempts to keep tuition increases as low as possible and to continue to introduce bursaries and scholarships to help handle the rising costs, however more needs to be done.

Universities are facing a financial hardship due to the number of fixed costs as compared to the variability of income. Even a relatively small decline in enrollment numbers any given year can drastically affect the financial situation of a university. In addition to varying enrollment numbers, the current funding methods by government leave room for significant speculation during the university's budget process.

Recommendation:

An increase in the amount of provincial post-secondary education funding is necessary in order to lower the provincial tuition average. Furthermore, the funding delivery method and amount be set out in a manner that will be stable from year to year and take into account necessary increases such as those required for inflation.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The PSE system requires increases in the current funding in order to adequately function. Students both recognize and desire the need for increased accountability to coincide with the increased financial participation of the province. This accountability would apply to many areas of the university, including teaching quality, the budget process and a variety of campus-specific issues. The most expedient way to include students in these decisions is to increase participation on the decision-making bodies of the university, particularly the Board of Governors.

The University of New Brunswick has stated that; “We would welcome recommendations from the Commission about ways in which we can be more accountable and have always stated our willingness to appear before the Public Accounts Committee or other appropriate body to explain how our government funding is used.”ⁱ We take that as a positive step by the university. We would also like to see increased accountability to the students at UNB as well. Currently there are only two Fredericton student members on the Board of Governors with a total of 34 voting membersⁱⁱ. There are committees of the Board that students do not sit on, or where the university decides between either a Saint John student or a Fredericton student. In addition, adequate training is not provided to the students put on the board and because of the steep learning curve and the relatively few meetings, many students are unable to reach their full potential on the board before their term is up.

Recommendation:

We would like to see the province provide an outline for a method of accountability both to the public as well as to its students through a set of regulations that would ensure greater participation by students in the decision making processes of the university.

OUR AGING INFRASTRUCTURE

Aging facilities on the Fredericton campus of UNB have taken a toll directly on the backs of students. The university, in an attempt to deal with the approximately \$100 million dollars of accumulated deferred maintenance,ⁱⁱⁱ has introduced a deferred maintenance fee of \$175.00 per student. Not only can students not afford this additional ancillary fee, but it is not nearly significant enough to cover the increasing cost of maintenance required by UNB. The condition of the buildings and other physical structures at the university has a direct impact on the student experience.

Our physically disabled students face major challenges negotiating around this aging campus and there are also concerns about our health and safety in some of the facilities. In addition, one can imagine the impact that facilities in poor condition have on potential students. While it is UNB’s history and character that attracts so many students to the institution, no one wants to learn in classrooms that are falling apart or live in residence rooms that are sub-par.

A university campus must also be a balance of older buildings and cutting-edge technology that will make us competitive on a national scale. It is important that the university is able to designate funds to new buildings while still being able to maintain

existing buildings (when it makes sense to do so).

Recommendation:

It is evident that the accumulated deferred maintenance problem has grown beyond the university's ability to eliminate it. The government needs to address this issue by continuing to commit to pass along any federal monies dedicated towards infrastructure and to work with the universities to prevent this number from growing worse. Also, students would like to see a plan in place as new buildings are constructed that will address the future maintenance on that building.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT SERVICES

It is widely agreed that attending a university is an experience and has a greater impact on lives than solely relating to academics. Students should expect, and have readily available, a strong support system at their institution. This includes support for students' health and well being, assistance to stimulating programming outside of the classroom and preparation for and knowledge of the job market post-graduation. It is a cause of concern for the UNBSU that within the province of New Brunswick, UNB spends the smallest percentage of its operating budget on student services.^{iv}

As mentioned earlier, the financial realities in New Brunswick of higher than average tuition combined with lower wages attribute to the low retention rates. It is also evident that student services play a significant role. The Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation survey found that the top three reasons listed for deciding to discontinue with their post-secondary education included: Lack of interest (29%), 'Program not what they expected' (27%) and financial issues (22%)^v. Perhaps students have not been properly prepared for what their university education will be while still in the secondary education system. Also, once students arrive and become overwhelmed, the support system is over-taxed and cannot handle everyone.

The students who are graduating from the PSE system in New Brunswick are crucial to the future of the province. Too many of our graduates are departing for western Canada in search of better opportunities. Too little is being done when these students are in our system to introduce them to job opportunities within the province. This is seen at UNBF's annual job fair that features very little job opportunities for anyone not in the practical programs, particularly engineering. The UNBSU stand firmly behind the necessity of a liberal arts and sciences education. Our students are graduating with a very important base of knowledge that can be applied in a variety of workforces but it appears that the job market does not understand how to market itself to these graduates.

Recommendations:

That the province works more closely with university career centers to introduce the various job opportunities within the province of New Brunswick after graduation.

Career consultations can occur during any of the years of a students' degree. An increased focus on offering practical experience such as co-op during students' education and also providing imaginative opportunities for future leaders in faculties such as Arts or Science can come from the government's highlighting of such opportunities.

Partnerships and transferability between the community college system and the university system should be process that is user-friendly and advocated. We would like to see collaboration between the colleges and universities for potential programs that would involve both institutions and provide well-rounded graduates.

CONCLUSION

Above all, students at the University of New Brunswick are not prepared to sacrifice the quality of our education in order to achieve any of the recommendations outlined above. The PSE system provides well-rounded and contributing members to New Brunswick and are a crucial part of this province's quest for self sustainability.

We firmly believe that increased accountability will achieve the quality we strive for.

ⁱ University of New Brunswick, April 2007- Brief to the Commission on Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick From the University of New Brunswick p. 14

ⁱⁱ www.unb.ca/secretariat/Board/Membership/compositionboardOgoverners.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ University of New Brunswick VP Finance and Corporate Services, March 2007, 2007 Presentation to Students. www.unb.ca/vpfin/reports.html

^{iv} MacLeans

^v Joseph Berger, Anne Motte and Andrew Parkin. *The Price of Knowledge: Chapter 2 Barriers to Post Secondary Education*. Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, April 2007, 3.