

## **Executive Summary**

The future of Post-Secondary Education in New Brunswick is unclear. Declining enrollment, increasing tuition fees, and insurmountable student debt are undoubtedly the biggest problems affecting it. Tuition fees have increased nearly 175% since 1995, and consequently Student Debt in New Brunswick is unsustainably much higher than the national average of \$32,000 after graduation.

The Importance of Post-Secondary cannot be underestimated as studies have shown that nearly 70% of new jobs created will require some form of Post-Secondary Education<sup>1</sup>. The establishment of this commission is a testament to the New Brunswick Government finally acknowledging the fact that there is a crisis in the Post-Secondary Education system.

The St. Thomas Students' Union is concerned that the Commission's focus will be on trying address the problem of years of drastic under funding without actually suggesting increased funds. Students are leaving New Brunswick to find high paying jobs in western provinces because of insurmountable student debts acquired from a system which has been ranked one of the least affordable in the country.

The St. Thomas University Students Union is also concerned that to the commissioners may considering downsizing the current PSE structure, including governance and funding structure, in order to save an insignificant amount of funding at the cost of quality programming, small classes and of any hope of lowering tuition fees in the future.

New Brunswick needs to be a leader in Post-Secondary Education and build off of the assets it currently has if there is any hope for self sufficiency. By establishing a standing committee on PSE, increasing mobility of credits, recognizing work experience towards relevant studies and establishing more collaboration between Universities and Colleges for programs, we believe that New Brunswick will be have the governance structure it needs. What is desperately needed for the entire system is a substantial increase in funding.

Without a substantial increase in funding to Post-Secondary Education, to lower the up front cost of an education for students, be able to provide an affordable, quality education; and increases in student financial aid to help students attend university and to be able to adequately manage their debt, New Brunswick's future will continue to be plagued with declining enrollment as well as a declining population.



## **Accessibility and Affordability**

### **Getting Potential Students into Post-Secondary and Keeping Them There**

The St. Thomas Students' Union believes that anyone who is qualified should be able to attend a Post-Secondary institution whatever their background, financial, habitual, social or otherwise. Accessibility, in relation to Post-Secondary, not only includes the ability to enter and attend a Post-Secondary Institution or program, but also the ability to be able to complete it. Barriers to Post-Secondary continue throughout every year of a students program and the Government of New Brunswick must ensure that the barriers are diminished if not completely removed for New Brunswick to remain competitive and to allow equitable access for all New Brunswickers.

One significant barrier to access is the financial barrier that students face when deciding whether to enter Post-Secondary or attaining the funds to get there. Tuition levels in New Brunswick are currently the second highest in Canada and are increasing at the second highest rate in Canada with the average tuition in New Brunswick at \$5,328 up from \$3,863 in 1992<sup>2</sup>. This currently stands at 18.4% above the national average<sup>3</sup>. Students from middle to low income families are twice as likely not to attend a Post-Secondary institution<sup>4</sup>. In 2001, about 46% of youth 18 to 24 year olds from high-income facilities had completed or were enrolled in university studies compared with 20% of youths from low income families; young people from families with annual incomes of \$100,000 or more had a rate of university attendance about two times greater than that of those from families with income below \$25,000<sup>5</sup>.

Although this gap did not change over the 1990s, more needs to be done to reduce this gap; because when the “sticker shock” of the price of a New Brunswick university education is combined with the fact that high starting wages in places like Alberta, many qualified students will continue to leave New Brunswick to either avoid New Brunswick high tuition, or to pay off the debt incurred from it. This is a factor that has not been considered in any study and specific to the critical situation in New Brunswick.

**1) Recommendation: The Provincial Government needs to address this New Brunswick specific problem of sticker shock which can only be reduced through increases in funding to cover the up front cost of education, debt reduction and grants to help students enter and finish their programs.**

Other important barriers that affect potential students and graduates go beyond the cost of tuition. Academic abilities and parental influences are major barriers for students in entering and completing Post-Secondary Programs<sup>6</sup>. Aboriginal students are the one most affected by these barriers to access. Out of youth in a



case study only 28% of aboriginal students completed or were currently enrolled in a Post-Secondary in the 2 to 3 year period immediately following High School, while 60% of non-aboriginal students had completed or were enrolled in Post-Secondary<sup>7</sup>.

Underrepresented groups in Post-Secondary such as rural, low income and aboriginal students need Government help to be able to reverse the trend.

**2) Recommendation: The Provincial Government needs to develop and invest in Programs and Grants to increase access and participation of underrepresented students, specifically aboriginal students, in Post-Secondary Institutions.**

### **A Reasonable and Manageable Cost of Post-Secondary Education**

The St. Thomas Students' Union also believes that tuition is a shared responsibility and that the Provincial Government must take a more increased role in helping students to cope with all the costs associated with education. We acknowledge that students must bear some of the costs associated with getting an education but the Provincial and Federal Governments must take on an increased role to acknowledge the contributions that qualified graduates make to the New Brunswick economy and its democratic well being. Both Provincial and Federal governments have both recognized verbally that Post-Secondary is vital for New Brunswick and Canada to stay competitive in today's information based economy. New Brunswick will have to invest more so not to fall behind other provinces economically, whereas 70% of new jobs created will require some form of Post-Secondary Education<sup>8</sup>.

Tuition in New Brunswick increases at record high rate each year. This past academic year New Brunswick was ranked as having the second highest increase in the country at 5.8%<sup>9</sup>. In the previous (2005 to 2006) year, New Brunswick had ranked third highest in the country meaning tuition in New Brunswick is exponentially become less affordable. On top of this, tuition is not the only cost students endure while obtaining an education. The Government must address the **Real Cost** of an Education. Factors such as living expenses, text books, computer costs, travel and food must all must be generously considered when determining loan limits and grant amounts. The St. Thomas Students' Union Emergency Bursary line depletes \$25,000 every academic year unable to meet the needs of applicants who are left in economic crisis when their student loans were insufficient or denied. Campus Food Banks and other bursary programs are all over used, even on smaller campuses such as St. Thomas University. St. Thomas University has managed to have the lowest tuition in the province and has managed to be comparable to the National average and at the same time managed to produce balanced budgets. This



proves that it is possible to lower tuition and still maintain a sustainable Post-Secondary Education but funds must be increased to ensure that other institutions can follow this model. Tuition is too high as the poverty of most students goes overlooked too often, forcing some students to leave school and work, and some of those to move out west to save up money hoping to some day come home to New Brunswick.

New Brunswick students currently have an average debt after graduation of \$32,000<sup>10</sup>. This is \$8,085 higher than the national average and excludes any debt obtained through private loans. With such a large average debt in New Brunswick, it is rational for students to move to other provinces with high wages and work to pay off their debts or avoid the debt all together by moving immediately after high school. If the Provincial government does not act immediately with this problem it will require more resources later as enrollments continue to decline and tuition continues to soar.

**3) Recommendation: Student debt needs to be dealt with both proactively and retroactively through up front funding and debt relief. If tuition continues to soar, New Brunswick will face more and more students considering options other than Atlantic Canada for Post-Secondary or enter the work force directly from high school out west.**

## **Quality and Accountability**

### **Maintaining Effective Institutions and Raising the Bar Higher**

The St. Thomas University Students' Union believes that the quality of a Post-Secondary cannot be sacrificed to cut corners and compensate because of inconsistency of Government funding. At the same time institutions need to be accountable for the increases in tuition so that inefficient spending or unnecessary burden is not transferred to the backs of students.

Rarely does a student group stand behind its administration in lobbying efforts but exceptional institutions must be acknowledged for their focus on students and quality teaching. It is these types of institutions which will lead New Brunswick to economic prosperity as distinguished graduates continue to add to the province through leadership and innovative thinking. St. Thomas University has managed to earn a reputation for quality teaching and challenging programs. St. Thomas allocates the largest percent of its operating budget to student services in the province, which is also a higher dollar amount than what the UNB Fredericton allocates for its student services<sup>11</sup>. The autonomy of St. Thomas also allows it to disperse the highest amount of scholarships and bursaries in the province and is



also ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the country, based on the percentage of operating budget<sup>12</sup>.

**4) Recommendation: The New Brunswick government needs to build off of the abilities of its current institutions and stop the reverse increasing tuitions through significant increases in institutional funding.**

The STUSU is concerned that the commission will focus too much attention to moving to different funding structures without enough attention paid to increase funding adjusted to inflations and increased operating costs and avoiding increasing funding.

The Provincial government needs to build off of its current assets in the New Brunswick Post-Secondary system while considering tuition cost and developing quality programs to attract students and graduates to New Brunswick, not sending them away to other provinces to find quality programs or affordable programs.

**5) Recommendation: More government incentives/initiatives for Learning and Teaching Development need to be created to help quality of teaching remain high, which will indirectly also help retention rates.**

The St. Thomas Students' Union recognizes the importance of Government funding for faculty research to aid effective teaching strategies and keep lectures innovative but it cannot come solely from the pockets of students or at the cost of classroom time by through reducing faculty.

Compositeness in NB University Programs helps develop quality programming and the diversity required for students to receive the type of education that is required for them to learn most effectively. Independent institutions are best able to develop and manage programs and student services better than large over branching institutions. This is the kind of approach needed to ensure the quality needed in our institutions to attract students and graduates to New Brunswick to study and to work.

The STUSU is concerned that the debate about the efficiency of governance structures is a distraction to the government which aims to fix the problems in the Post Secondary system without having to commit the much needed funding in order to bring prosperity to New Brunswick.

If the Government is serious about bringing prosperity to New Brunswick and becoming self sufficient, it should be looking at expanding its current system, not stream lining it.

**6) Recommendation: More funds also need to be allocated to institutional**



**funding and faculty research to support and develop a quality Post-Secondary System to attract people to New Brunswick.**

## **Leadership and Responsiveness**

### **Making New Brunswick a Leader and building off Its Strengths**

The establishment of this Commission marks a turning point for New Brunswick. New Brunswick can become a leader in Post-Secondary Education and in the country on the road to self sufficiency or it can continue along the same road it has been becoming increasingly more dependent on tuition fees and continue to see its qualified graduates decrease in number and move west.

Leadership from New Brunswick will come at the cost of allowing its current strengths to expand through increased funding and making quality education affordable so it can attract students from around the country and the world.

St. Thomas University is the leader in the Liberal Arts, and in post-secondary education in the province of New Brunswick. St. Thomas offers the province a number of high-quality opportunities which speak to its success in undergraduate teaching. The programs that St. Thomas provides are dynamic, in-depth and responsive to the needs of New Brunswickers. Most importantly, the work that St. Thomas does currently, coupled with its potential in those areas, speaks to the heart of the question of its continued relevancy in the New Brunswick system.

The University gives students the ability to think and learn for themselves: a statement that is not merely a catchphrase. Over the past 15 years especially, St. Thomas has been a model of sustainable growth in the university sector. Enrollment has risen substantially over this time frame. Through the enlargement of campus, along with the development of some of the most cutting-edge programs in the Maritimes, and moreover Canada as a whole, St. Thomas has fostered partnerships with several members of the Fredericton community to further the educational experiences that students receive. One such partnership is highlighted by the close working relationship that the journalism program has with the CBC. Students in this highly intensive program are shown the potential real-world applications that their Bachelor of Arts degree will provide them. St. Thomas Journalism is a nationally recognized and admired program, with many distinguished media personalities being able to refer to this University as their Alma Mater.

St. Thomas is responsive to the needs of students. The small classroom sizes that St. Thomas University offers students in all areas of study demonstrate a marked benefit for students to come to this institution. Furthermore, the size of



the classroom is not the only aspect of student life that is attractive to students, and to the province. St. Thomas has, for the past several years, been known for having the highest number of professors with PhD's in the classroom<sup>13</sup>. They are consistently rated amongst the highest in the country for being available to students outside of regular classroom time. This is relevant to New Brunswick for several reasons. Not only do St. Thomas professors bring in additional high-paying jobs to the province, but they also act as an excellent resource for government when their expertise in subject matter is required.

The Education Program at St. Thomas is one of the leading ones in the country. The relatively small size of this department is not to the detriment of the University; indeed, the opposite of that is true. The 90 students that comprise the Education Program are chosen from a pool of applications perhaps five times that size. It is a highly competitive program to enter, and for good reason. The BEd graduates that St. Thomas produces are arguably the best in the province. It is most certainly a demanding program and one that responds to the needs of the education system in New Brunswick. With very few exceptions, the individuals who go through that rigorous process are well prepared to enter into the classroom almost immediately.

Given the aging demographics in the province of New Brunswick, we are going to have to find qualified teachers to fill the void left by the retiring baby-boomers. St. Thomas fills that need immediately. Why, then, does there exist two faculties of (Anglophone) education in Fredericton? The answer to this is clear: choice. The work that is done within the faculty of education at the University of New Brunswick results in the same ends. The process that gets individuals to their respective degrees is different. St. Thomas, with its small faculty of education provides a more intimate environment to its students. Through doing this, students are better able to mentally prepare themselves to enter into the provincial school system.

St. Thomas acknowledges and supports student leadership in the province of New Brunswick. Starting in the Academic Year 2007-08, St. Thomas will be providing several scholarships to first-year students who have taken on leadership roles in their communities, while still being attentive to their studies. This initiative has been brought forth to acknowledge the work that a student can also do outside of the classroom. A liberal education is one that is meant to broaden and develop students' minds. The University recognizes that the various ideas and opinions that students have are essential to the continued operation of the institution. An institution that places a high amount of importance upon student engagement is one that is also relevant and responsive to the demands of the public.

Each year, the University produces a number of people, who in a relatively short period of time, go on to distinguish themselves as being leaders in society. And



our alumnus is plentiful and growing. It is difficult to visit Parliament Hill or the Legislature without encountering someone with a "T" Ring. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly more common for graduates in the Bachelor of Arts to carry on in to careers that were not commonly associated with a BA. In recent years, St. Thomas has seen several of its graduates go on to various medical schools to become doctors. Between this and the fact that people are now more likely to change their career several times during their life, it is increasingly being demonstrated that students need to be able to adapt to a changing environment.

**7) Recommendation: In order to improve the relevancy and responsiveness of the Post Secondary sector a method to give students accreditation for the work that they perform in the broader community should be developed.**

The St. Thomas University has created a new initiative to reward students who perform these tasks; however, the benefit that it adds to their educational experience must also be recognized from the province.

**8) Recommendation: The province must become more responsive to the needs of students. The Student Financial Aid System must include a student-friendly application process for loans, along with exploring the possibility of automatic provincial loan remission initiatives.**

### **Collaboration with Differentiation**

The discussion paper of the Commission on Post-Secondary Education states that: "standardization so often paves the road to mediocrity, we need a more creative, innovative post-secondary system, and that can be best achieved by encouraging differentiation among and within institutions."<sup>14</sup> This statement is very much the truth. The responsiveness of the province is also depended on the differentiation of programs and the collaboration between them.

The programs that St. Thomas offers are not standard in New Brunswick. It offers a wide assortment of unique courses within its various departments. Indeed, even though there are seemingly certain similarities in some cases, especially at the introductory level, the material that is taught provides a unique and exceptional foundation for one to carry on their studies.

The process of strategic planning is one that the Commission wishes to engage. St. Thomas is in the process of carrying out its strategic plan. This has not been, as is questioned in the document, an exercise in strategic planning for the sake of strategic planning. The University set itself a goal to become more relevant to its students, faculty, and the community as a whole. Over the past half decade, St. Thomas has witnessed substantial growth on campus, along with the





reorganization of several administrative offices. It is a process that the Board of Governors at the University takes seriously, and justifiably prides itself in. The University cannot afford to make changes occur, simply for the sake of it. Indeed, the financial reality that faces the University every day is one that is foremost in the mind of any institution or business.

Collaboration is another aspect that the students at St. Thomas University enjoy presently. St. Thomas and the University of New Brunswick are unique in that the students from two different campuses are able to take courses from either institution. This scenario provides students with the ability to network and study with their peers from another campus, while expanding the potential courses that any individual student may partake in. This same learning experience would be difficult to find at any other university in the country. It is a mutually beneficial arrangement between the two universities and one that should be continued, and perhaps enhanced. There are unique courses offered at each university that cannot be obtained in the university that the student is transferring from. This is not a criticism of the current system, as no university should offer a standard set of courses, where the potential for a broader exists. In Fredericton, that potential is presently a reality. The ability to make use of these programs should be made simpler for students, since the opportunities that exist could be limitless.

Through the fiscal transfer that exists between St. Thomas and the University of New Brunswick, the two institutions are able to share resources without unnecessary duplication. This partnership does not compromise the independence of St. Thomas, as the shared services do anything but address universal student needs and concerns. The mission of St. Thomas is not impaired by this arrangement. Rather, it is enhanced by the development of this integral bond. The University of New Brunswick also benefits from this partnership through an offsetting of costs that it would otherwise have to undertake solely.

The University of New Brunswick and St. Thomas University are not the same institution. This is seen through the choices that students make to go to one university or the other. Should a student decide to study the Liberal Arts in Fredericton, their decision is not made solely on the basis of tuition alone. Each university possesses different strengths in its curriculum and campus life, and it is on that premise that students choose to go to one university or the other. Providing a service at a relatively lower cost than UNB is indeed a strength of St. Thomas; though it is not the only factor that makes St. Thomas different. There is a spirit of competition between the two institutions to attract students, and perform at a high level. This competition gets the message of post-secondary education in New Brunswick to a broader community. The excellent product that universities in New Brunswick provide to potential students is best showcased when there are several institutions highlighting the strengths that this province has, and how the various universities will educate prospective students.



It is with regard to recruitment that the Government of New Brunswick should assist the universities. Recruitment from other provinces within the Maritimes and in the rest of Canada is only partially the solution to the problem of shrinking and aging populations. St. Thomas University has increased its recruitment efforts in international markets in recent years, as has presumably every other institution in the province. The government must work in collaboration with the universities through providing direction and a more targeted, effective method to increase enrollment and hopefully retain international students in New Brunswick. This initiative will work with the Premier's desire to make New Brunswick self-sufficient by 2026. The sole way to develop the economy of New Brunswick to such a level that it becomes self-sustaining is to increase the rate of immigration to this province. Following this, the only way to make New Brunswick more attractive to keeping these newly landed immigrants in the province is to create the framework of an economy that relies upon highly educated people to keep functioning.

**9) Recommendation: The Government of New Brunswick must help with recruitment efforts to attract more students from across Canada and around the world to study Post-Secondary here in New Brunswick. Also, more Government initiatives need to be put in place to help international students find a job and to be able to contribute more to New Brunswick community and economy.**

### **Summary of Recommendations:**

**1) Recommendation: The Provincial Government needs to address this New Brunswick specific problem of sticker shock which can only be reduced through increases in funding to cover the up front cost of education, debt reduction and grants to help students enter and finish their programs.**

**2) Recommendation: The Provincial Government needs to develop and invest in Programs and Grants to increase access and participation of under representative students, specifically aboriginal students, in Post-Secondary Institutions.**

**3) Recommendation: Student debt needs to be dealt with both proactively and retroactively through up front funding and debt relief. If tuition continues to soar, New Brunswick will face more and more students considering options other than Atlantic Canada for Post-Secondary or enter the work force directly from high school out west.**



**4) Recommendation: The New Brunswick government needs to build off of the abilities of its current institutions and stop the reverse increasing tuitions through significant increases in institutional funding.**

**5) Recommendation: More government incentives/initiatives for Learning and Teaching Development need to be created to help quality of teaching remain high, which will indirectly also help retention rates.**

**6) Recommendation: More funds also need to be allocated to institutional funding and faculty research to support and develop a quality Post-Secondary System to attract people to New Brunswick.**

**7) Recommendation: In order to improve the relevancy and responsiveness of the post-secondary sector a method to give students accreditation for the work that they perform in the broader community should be developed.**

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2006, Price of Knowledge: Why Access Matters

<sup>2</sup> The Daily, Friday, September 1, 2006, University tuition fees

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> The Daily, Thursday, February 8, 2007, Why are youth from lower-income families less likely to attend university?

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2006, Price of Knowledge: Why Access Matters

<sup>8</sup> Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2006, Price of Knowledge: Why Access Matters

<sup>9</sup> The Daily, Friday, September 1, 2006, University tuition fees

<sup>10</sup> NBSA, April 2007, Moving Education Forward

<sup>11</sup> Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities 2007, pg. 33

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities 2007, pg. 55

<sup>14</sup> CPSE for New Brunswick, Discussion Paper, March 2007



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