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UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY: SOME PRESENT CONSIDERATIONS

What is UNAC anyway? The way the words universal accessibility are bandied about in the student press and student government offices, you would think that it was a widely understood concept. However, the actions of students and student government in the past indicate that very few people have a comprehensive appreciation of the real meaning of the term.

Universal accessibility has generally been defined as the elimination of all barriers to continuing education to the extent of one's abilities. These barriers may be financial, environmental, or motivational. In most cases they are not a product primarily of the student's own incapacity but are mainly a result of external factors beyond his direct control. Thus, statistics prove that the burden of paying tuition fees falls more heavily on those whose parents are in a low income bracket. The desire to quit school early is cultivated by inadequate curricula or teaching methods which fail to overcome the deficiencies conditioned by a student's own particular cultural and socio-economic background.

Some people, especially those who see only the financial barrier, cherish the naive illusion that universal accessibility already exists in Canada. With supreme confidence they argue that "anyone" can afford to go to university if they "save for several years ahead of time, work in the summer and are willing to take out a loan."

But this simply isn't true.

First of all, two-thirds don't even make it to the end of high school.

The causes of "dropping out" are complex and various; but it is clear that those who leave are not adequately stimulated or developed by the school system to resist the rival pressures and attractions. Some feel the pull of a full-time job which might give them independent financial status and a sense of achievement they rarely experienced in the classroom. Others have no clear alternative goal but have lost all interest in ideas as presented in our schools.

But even for the one-third who do finish secondary school and are confronted by the financial barrier, universal accessibility is a myth.

The average savings from summer earnings for a male student in Canada is $418. Some people earn more: coincidentally enough, it is usually those whose fathers have friends in businesses that are willing to hire students. But most earn less. Girls in Prince Edward Island can expect to save less than $281. after 4½ months work.

The remainder of the $1,750.00 estimated average total cost of a single year's tuition must come from somewhere.

Are government guaranteed loans the right answer? As many students know, not everyone passes the multi-page means test to qualify for one. The provincial governments require parents to contribute a fixed portion of the educational costs before the student is even eligible; this percentage is determined on a rigid scale tied simply to both student and parental income and assets. In return the parents are going to want to have a say in what their child studies, especially when they are "paying for it". Dependency on one's parents is not only encouraged but required by existing aid plans.

For those people unfortunate enough to be in the kind of family which can more easily see the benefit of an immediate job after high school than the considerable sacrifice of saving up several thousands of dollars to send Johnny to college, the loan is no help. Besides, Johnny might not adjust well enough to the huge impersonal middle-class campus to pass his first year, and he could face a debt of more than one thousand dollars in six months. If he does go, he will be sure to pick a course on the grounds of the salary it will bring him. He knows even better than the student with rich parents that anything with a price tag is to be considered a commodity and evaluated accordingly.

And the girl who is thinking of getting married some day is not too eager to run up a $5,000-plus debt to present her husband. Nor is the theology student even eligible under existing laws. And the would-be social workers or philosophers, and other people who aren't interested in making big money right away will find repayment quite difficult. Many then resign themselves to another course - commerce or law - and promise themselves that they will do what they really want later or "in their spare time".

The 1966 Canada Student Means Survey and the Atkinson Report contain some pretty frightening statistics.

The latter survey estimated that for every student presently in an institution of higher learning there is another person of the same age who has dropped out with the same intellectual capacity.

The fact that one-quarter of the students come from the 6% of Canadian homes with incomes of over $10,000 or that a matching 28% represent the 52% of Canadian families which make less than $5,000 a year is no accident. Nor should it be surprising that only 9% of those from rural non-farm areas ever make it past high school.

There can be no question that equality of opportunity to higher education does not exist in Canada. Loans, bursaries and scholarships just don't do the trick.

But although the economic arguments are conclusive in themselves, the real cause of inaccessibility to post-secondary education has little to do with money. The causes are embedded in the framework of our society and the public education system which is an integral part of it.

Every citizen in a democratic society has a right to be educated to the fullest extent of his ability. The community provides formal education for its members because it realizes that people are not born free and equal but can only become so through a process of "educing" or drawing out the inherent potential of every individual to contribute to the fulfillment of himself and his society.

The learning process can be the agent of liberating people from the limitations imposed by their particular narrowing environments - material, social and mental. It should broaden their consciousness of the realities of the physical and social world in which they live and make them more aware of themselves and of other people. Education must emancipate people from a passive acceptance of their domination by an alien environment by enabling them to understand it and then act freely in mastering it as self-realized and self-determining beings.

A society which is concerned with the quality of life enjoyed by its members as well as the quantity of goods they consume will establish a public educational system geared to both individual capacities and community needs. There is no logical reason why an arbitrary line can be drawn between "private" post-secondary "finishing schools" and "public" secondary institutions of learning if continuing education is to be a reality. The same arguments which were used against making high schools accessible financially are being employed against free post-secondary education.

Society dies when it ceases to revitalize its own process through the development of new ideas, talents and techniques. Students are hopefully encouraged to join their professors in exercising the critical function of the university or institute by actively participating in intellectual dialogue which creatively challenges old ideas, probes beneath our own and other's prejudices and redefines social, moral and scientific values and hypotheses as objectively as possible.

But if the university is to perform its crucial analytical and creative function, it cannot be a private preserve serving the needs of the corporate establishment. It cannot go on training merely the scions of our socio-economic élite who adapt easily and too often uncritically to the demands of the establishment-oriented educational system.

Instead of stifling the intellectual initiative of the majority in order to give highly specialized training to a select few, the goal of public education must be to maximize the education of all students. This may well mean that primary and secondary school curriculum will have to be varied in content and presentation and new types of post-secondary institutions will be imperative.

But what can the Canadian Union of Students, student governments and movements and the individual student do to further the achievement of universal accessibility? First, the student who has a pragmatic awareness of all the ramifications of the accessibility problem will realize that change within the educational system cannot be made in isolation from the society of which it is a product. The principles of the market and the methods of organization developed by private corporations pervade virtually all organizations in North American society. As post-secondary institutions become more integrated with the community around them and serve the productive and consumer interests of society as defined exclusively by the industrial and bureaucratic élite more directly and immediately, the pressure to adapt its structures to fit into this corporate system increases. The inevitable culmination is the realization of Berkeley's president Clark Kerr's dream of the "multiversity" of completely separate disciplines united only by an all-powerful administration becomes a reality.

Even now Canadian universities compete with one another in the education market by offering scholarships (academic and athletic), fringe benefits, and a calendar listing famous "published" professors who don't teach. The student soon learns that it is more "practical" and realistic to conform to the dictates of this kind of system and compete for marks and jobs against this background of a market mentality. It is easy to see why Canada's self-styled "liberals" usually offer such substitutes for a radically reformed free educational system as loans, bursaries or scholarships, tuition fee abolition, or more of the same kind of post-secondary schools; all are extrinsic materialistic "incentives" and bonuses suitable in a market situation but which are irrelevant to social and motivational barriers to accessibility.

Students who want to make UNAC more of a reality cannot avoid confronting and dealing with the problems of their society. Although education can overcome some of the inequalities of social and cultural environment which exist in our present society, it is only by eliminating these inequalities at their roots that any long-range solution to the problem of accessibility will be possible. South African universities will never be open to non-whites until students and others do something to get rid of <u>apartheid</u>. Finally, before the government will be willing to act to implement the policies suggested above, public opinion must be educated by active programming and lobbying in the community and with its leaders.

But taking our case to the public and acting upon the problems of society are not enough. Academics must be convinced to commit themselves again to the creation of a democratic community of scholars dedicated to the pursuit of excellence and the real education of its members.

You must undertake activities geared to the achievement of fundamental reforms within institutions of learning at every level, realizing that the nature and quality of post-secondary schools are directly related to the kind of education which their new students will have received. And changes in the learning environment will affect the motivations of all would-be post-secondary students which, in turn, will expand the numbers of people who will qualify to participate in higher education.

This means developing joint programmes with high school students so that we can better understand the problems they face and do something about them.

It also means pushing for democratization of post-secondary institutional structures and reforms in curriculum and teaching methods which will enable students to participate in their education more responsively and directly.

Ultimately, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the cause of inaccessibility is the same for those who quit for financial reasons after high school and those who dropped out in between. Universal accessibility will not be achieved until we change the aspects of our society and educational system which militate against the process by which all members of society can learn, develop and emancipate themselves from their particular mental and material bonds.