

"Shut 'em down!" — Government's latest solution to high education costs

By Dale Jack

With files from Canadian University Press

Colleges and universities aren't as proud as they used to be. The pressures of government underfunding have created an aura of uncertainty and a recognition that governments now call the shots; they are redefining the goals of higher education.

Institutions must now put energy into justifying their existence, expounding their value to society and to their communities.

But even so, two schools recently suffered the ultimate indignity at the hands of restraint minded provincial governments — closure.

In August, 1981, the Nova Scotia Tory government closed a degree granting institution for the first time in its history. The Atlantic Institute of Education, with its unique masters and doctorate courses for working educators, was wiped off the map without advance warning, in one swift move.

The simultaneous cut of \$4.9 million in post secondary funding four months into the fiscal year, was a cold reminder that education is low on the list of the Nova Scotia government's priorities.

But when the B.C. government made its stunning announcement last January that the David Thompson University Centre will be closed this May, the Nelson community vowed to join DTUC in the fight for survival.

Demoralized at the loss of time and energy in the wake of B.C.'s aborted general strike, DTUC's students and staff face an even harder spring term. Coupled with already challenging course work, they must also deal with an uncertain future, possible relocation, and organizing to keep their university alive.

"Everybody is pretty depressed," said writing student and media coordinator Jeff Derksen. "You ask people how they're doing and it's just, 'Oh well ...' People work so hard here. I've never been in a place where people work as hard as they do here."

"And now there's the added obligation of doing work for the media centre."

"There's plenty of apathy," said writing student Jane Torrance. "After all we had to go through in the fall, and now to be taken unaware by this. It's very hard to get up the energy to fight."

And many students are not prepared to relocate.

"There's no way I'll go back to school in B.C.," said Torrance. "You have to have a certain number of courses completed at the institution where you graduate. Why should I bother getting into third or fourth year when they can just shut down an entire university?"

"There are people who left behind relationships and good jobs to come here." Torrance left a job at a cancer research

laboratory to pursue a writing career at David Thompson. She plans to continue her education overseas in the fall.

Aside from ruining many students' education plans, and eliminating faculty jobs, there is the cost to the Nelson community. David Thompson is the second largest employer in a town saddled with 27 per cent unemployment.

Of Nelson's 9,000 residents, 600 unemployed workers collect welfare. The main cause of the region's economic slump is the B.C. government which over the past eight years has dismantled the forest industry in the area. It has moved out government offices and stripped away substantial tax revenues by declaring B.C. Hydro dams on the nearby Columbia river tax exempt.

The DTUC closure will put 100 paid staff and 500 students on the streets and remove \$3.5 million in operating funds annually from the community.

Bev Mill, organizer of the Nelson community store front office that coordinates fund raising for the fight to save DTUC, said Nelson is being punished for voting NDP.

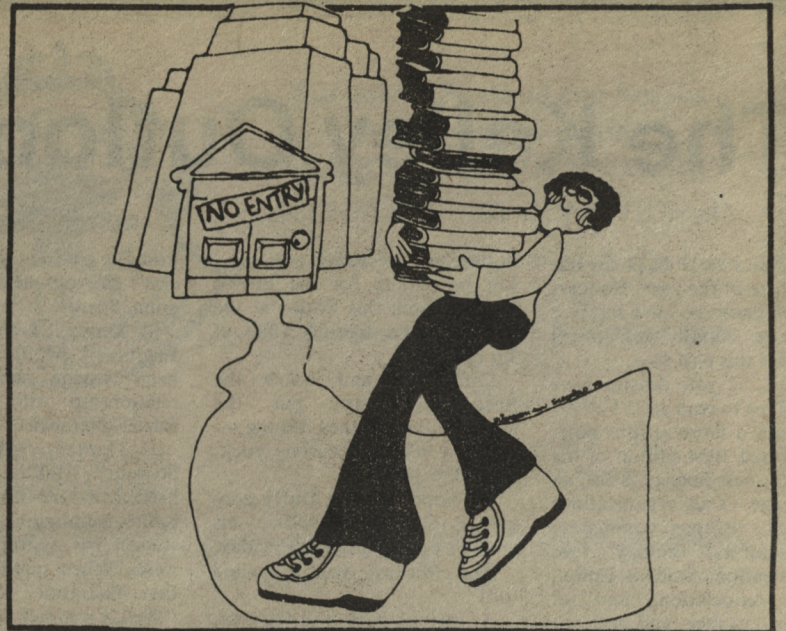
The protest campaigners point to statistics that bear out DTUC's case for survival. The government currently provides the school with \$2.7 million annually, not counting the \$1.5 million spent in the past year for advertising and capital expenditure. Projected costs to shut down DTUC total more than \$5 million — which does not include the cost of maintaining campus buildings, a cost the government agreed to pay indefinitely.

But the town ... There aren't that many country towns where famous authors and artists come to share their work, or you can find a capuccino bar, used record shop, and even some people walking the streets in long black coats and purple scarves. It's hard to conceive of Nelson without the cultural input DTUC gives it.

After all, the town created the institution in the first place. Even when the Socreds tried to change the situation by putting DTUC under outside control, it was the local community that turned David Thompson into one of the best art schools in Canada.

"People being what they are, when they form a community, they have to define themselves," said author and DTUC writing instructor Colin Browne. "They agitate, they become unique, they liberate themselves. It's a natural thing."

And of DTUC's writing program, Browne said: "I like the practical training writers get working with other writers and musicians. Students here are working artists. It is the only place where student script writers can work with student directors and actors."



Graphic/Arthur

"Many universities don't seem to trust their students. There are so many places where talent is kept as potential. Here you are realizing that potential," Browne said.

May 1 will come and go, and if the Socreds hold their plans, DTUC will close. A similar struggle more than a year ago in Halifax, to salvage the Atlantic Institute of Education wasn't as bitter, but the end result was just as final.

Although Halifax residents did not rise up to defend the little-known institute, reaction within the education community soon exposed the government's ignorance of AIE programs.

No plans were made to allow the 69 students to complete their degrees. Many students were employed school teachers and principals who could not leave their jobs to enter residency programs at Dalhousie University, the only school with doctoral programs in education.

Peter Kavanagh, then executive officer of the Students Union of Nova Scotia, said the government didn't realize AIE taught students in addition to its research activities.

The students' plights embarrassed the government, which proceeded to scramble around for placements in other institutions. Part-way through the academic year Dalhousie grudgingly agreed to host the students, but their unique studies will end as soon as they graduate.

The threat of closure is nothing new to Ontario colleges and universities, and it lurks behind all the government's recent policy announcements.

In the fall of 1981, following an education ministry report, rumours that some institutions would be weeded out were so strong that Brock University launched a \$6,000 advertising campaign to counter speculation it would be the first to go.

Currently, four northern Ontario institutions are protesting a plan for amalgamation under one administration.

A report released Oct. 19 advised that Sudbury's Laurentian University, Algoma College in Sault Ste. Marie, Nipissing College in North Bay and College Universitaire de Hearst be combined and named Champlain University.

But that plan has been put on hold pending a far more comprehensive review of Ontario's education system, with a mind to restructuring.

Colleges and universities have been put on the defensive. And if trends continue, DTUC's little-known story will become a common Canadian experience.



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