

# Drop-in applicants a mystery

By SARAH SCHMIDT

(CUP) — As the number of applications to Ontario university continues to drop, those in the education sector can't seem to explain the trend.

According to preliminary data released by the Ontario University Application Centre, the number of high school students who have applied to Ontario universities for next September has dropped by 2.5 per cent from last year.

Northern universities in particular show a significant drop in applicants — Thunder Bay's Lakehead University reported a 20 per cent drop, Laurentian University in Sudbury a 15.8 per cent drop, and applications to Nipissing

University in North Bay dropped 8.6 per cent.

Top administrators of these institutions cannot agree as to why the numbers are not only down, but at their lowest point in nine years.

"I'm not sure if tuition fees make a big deal. Students may not be deterred because of tuition. [But] they may be deterred by the panic created in the media about tuition fees," said David Marshall, president of Nipissing University.

Nipissing could become the first university at which more than half of its revenue, 52 per cent, comes from tuition fees if the president's recommendation to increase tuition fees by 10 per cent is passed by their board of governors at an upcoming meet-

ing.

But Robert Rosehart, president of Lakehead University, says it would be irresponsible to ignore tuition fee hikes as a key variable.

"I can't ignore the fact that the difference from last year to this year is a 20 per cent increase in tuition fees," said Rosehart. "Twenty per cent in one year is pretty traumatic."

The 20 per cent fee increase for the 1996-97 school year marked the largest single-year increase ever in Ontario.

While Rosehart sees a link between tuition and applications, many people involved in postsecondary education say there is no positive proof that higher tuition fees make universities unaccessible.

One study into the relationship, conducted by York University between 1991 and 1994, linked rising tuition fees to the significant decline in undergraduate students from low-income families.

In 1991, an estimated 17 per cent of York undergraduates came from families whose income was less than \$20,000. By the 1994-95 academic year, the number had dropped to 10 per cent, the study shows.

Nevertheless, Greg Marcotte, executive director of the application centre, says it is too early to discern a negative trend or conclude that economics are at play.

"Nobody has done any empirical research to say there's a correlation. There's no evidence, anecdotal or em-

pirical, so I can't confirm it or deny," said Marcotte, pointing to demographic trends, some students delaying entrance to university so they can work to finance their education and others entering the less-expensive college system to explain the decline.

But Coline Gardhouse, a guidance councillor at Riverdale Collegiate, a high school in a working-class neighbourhood in Toronto, says students are aware of rising fees and do not apply to university as a result.

"They're scared of them," said Gardhouse. "We see it here. The kids of the unemployed or the working poor are just not going or they're delaying it . . . We're saying, 'As long as you have the money, you can come to university.' That is wrong."

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