

SASKATOON (CUP) -

The \$2 million extravaganza in Saskatoon was everything students expected it to be.

It was a meeting of minds, but not a changing of minds. It was an attempt to placate students and other groups who were making too much noise about under-funding, restricted access and poor conditions. It was an orgy of wide-eyed theorizing about a nebulous future and a diversion tactic from the real and solvable problems of the present.

But it was, as expected, a good start.

The National Forum on Post Secondary Education in Saskatoon this week brought together for the first time both levels of government as well as over 600 representatives of business, labour, special interest groups, university and college administrators, faculty, and students.

The more than 50 student participants gave varied analyses.

"It was much better than I thought it would be," said Graham Flack, a Dalhousie University student who sat on the Forum's planning committee.

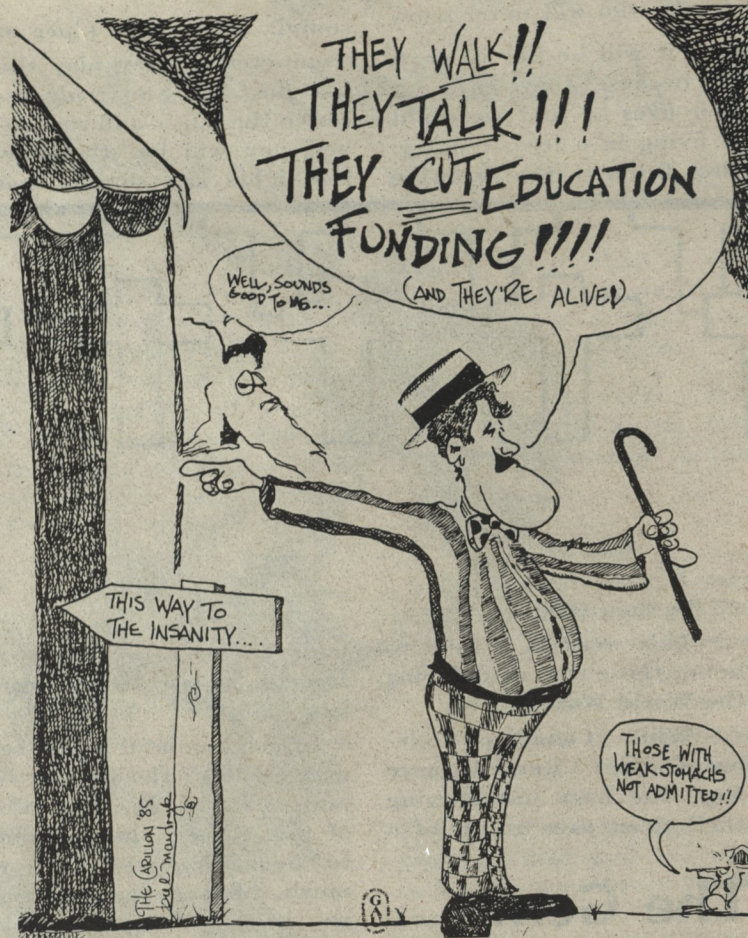
"There was always the danger that certain groups would walk out: like labour, or francophones or students," said Flack. "But we

found some central ground, and I think people really listened to each other. The participants did not necessarily agree but they now appreciate each other's positions on the issues."

Others were not so enthusiastic.

"One three-day forum isn't going to change anybody's mind," said Maxine Clarke, co-president of Concordia University's student council. "There's a business person in my group who's been reading about the stock market in the newspaper all afternoon and every once in a while he looks up to say that greater accessibility (to post-secondary education) is 'not economically feasible'. I don't think people were really listening to each other at all. It was more like mental masturbation."

"You also have to take a look at the people who aren't here and the way the whole thing was structured," added Clarke. "I am the only female black student here. There are three other black women here but they are all in the same workshop. There are very few native students here. All these people sitting around talking about how they are going to make the system more accessible to minority



groups is great, but that is not how change happens. It doesn't come from the centre, it comes from the periphery. And the periphery aren't here."

"There are so few native people at this forum," said Gina Blondin, a native of the North West Territories and a graduate student

at the University of British Columbia. "And there is such a limited amount of time (at the Forum), we don't have time to get into any depth."

"It makes me suspicious when the list of delegates to this conference does not indicate who represents whom," said Mitch Diamantopoulos, a sociology student at the

University of Regina, who attended the forum as an observer.

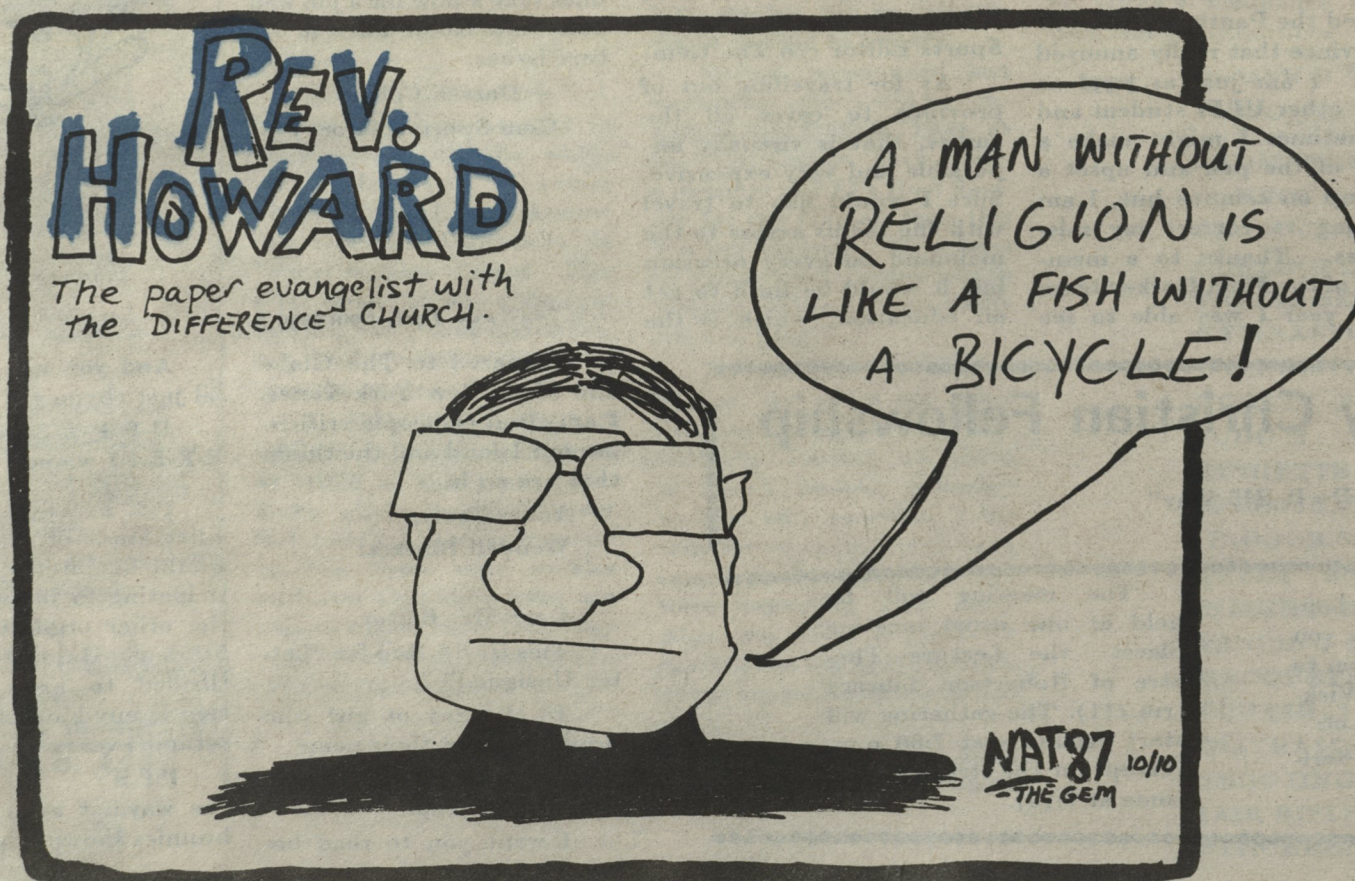
Delegates to the Forum were chosen from different sectors but theoretically attended as individuals rather than representatives of defined organizations or interest groups. Conference kits identified participants by name and city only. Name tags gave names only.

"This makes networking virtually impossible, and doesn't allow coalitions to form. This kind of forum would have been the perfect opportunity to form those networks and it hasn't happened," said Diamantopoulos.

Others were frustrated that no resolutions or specific recommendations were expected from the 21 workshops.

"When we are talking about generic problems and general solutions, everybody agrees," said Sheena Weir of the Ontario Federation of Students at a mid-Forum student press conference. "But it is much harder if we are talking about details and solutions. When the pocket-books come out, the social conscience goes out the window."

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