

Saskatchewan dishes out \$2M to save First Nations University

Government bailout to deal with 'acute financial situation,' Students' Union says it's not enough

By Wendy Gillis (CUP)

SASKATOON (CUP) – As a student at the First Nations University of Canada, Thomas Roussin is worried about more than papers and exams – he's afraid of losing the very institution many have worked so hard to establish.

"There is a fear in the whole community there," said Roussin, VP of communication for First Nations University of Canada Students' Association.

"The persistence of all the people who have worked for this could be wasted. We fear the loss of our professors – who are like rock stars in their fields – due to cutbacks."

First Nations University, which is located on three campuses in Saskatchewan and based out of Regina, attained university status in 2003, changing its name from Saskatchewan Indian Federated College.

Since then, it has encountered many severe financial and administrative difficulties, all of them jeopardizing the academic pursuits of the students.

In 2005, several university officials were fired or resigned following an audit of the school's financial records, which were thrown into question when two employees were accused of defrauding the university.

Janet Kurtz, a former accounting officer, and Wes Stevenson, a former vice-president of administration,



First Nations University of Canada press conference. Matt Yim - The Carillon

are charged with defrauding the university of more than \$5,000 each.

In 2007, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada put First Nations University on probation after it alleged there was political interference by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations – a body representing the First Nations groups in the province.

The probation has since been revoked.

Its most recent financial problem was revealed last month when the university announced it had a deficit of more than \$1 million.

The university has been seeking aid from both provincial and federal governments since its first deficit in 2005. This year, the federal government withdrew

\$550,000 of its annual funding to the university.

Because of the ongoing financial difficulties, the provincial government announced this month they will provide just under \$2 million to the university.

"We were alerted at a meeting, in late July, that they were in an acute financial situation, and were approaching dire straits," said Rob Norris, Saskatchewan's minister for advanced education, in an interview last week.

"We decided that, in the interest of assuring students' success, and in closing the education gap in this province, we needed to provide some relief."

Norris says \$1.1 million will go towards helping the university pay for a collec-

tive bargaining agreement with its faculty from 2005 to present.

Another \$500,000 will go towards operating costs – money that will only be received on a "conditional and incremental" basis.

"There will be a series of thresholds to overcome," said Norris.

Those include having an advisory committee comprised of several government and university players, and conducting an external operational review, which will cost about \$400,000.

There will also be external consultation through government and university administration, Norris says, adding that all this is to help ensure the money will be well spent.

For Roussin, the provincial

government's aid comes as a relief, but he says it won't help him relax about the university's future, its students' futures.

"This is such a great place, and it's a miracle that many of us have made it to university," he said.

"This money is good, it will help keep the university going, but it's been a long time coming and it's not enough," he said.

Roussin claims other First Nations universities in Canada have been neglected, and they need more attention, not only from government, but from the public in general.

"It seems like this money is just patching up the situation, but it's not covering up the wound. There is a hole that needs to be filled under there," he said.