

Student Unemployment: We have no jobs

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Not since the late '60s have Canada's post-secondary institutions experienced such a surge in enrolment as happened last fall. Even full-time university enrolment, in slow decline since 1976, jumped a startling 6.5 per cent.

What's behind this sudden widespread desire to return to classes? Why have so many people decided to pay rising tuition fees, shoehorn themselves into crowded classes and voluntarily take themselves out of the workforce?

After talking with several University of Victoria students, from a variety of disciplines and at all stages in their programs, a picture of the motivation behind the numbers emerges.

The most common statement from first-year students was that the dismal employment situation — almost 20 per cent student unemployment in July 1982 — made them feel they had nothing to lose by coming to university. For many it was a case of facing the dubious possibilities of finding employment or coming here in hopes that post-secondary training would better their chances of getting a job.

"Look, I'm seventeen, the only work experience I've got is at MacDonald's and delivering newspapers, and my family has got zero connections. What kind of job do you think I'd get if I stayed out there?" said one bitter undergrad. As a result of this kind of career-oriented desperation, courses such as Computer Science, Physics and Chemistry are packed with those hoping to grab onto the brass ring of changing technology. For these single-minded students, high grades in a few key courses is everything; those who have been able to achieve this approach the subject of future expectations with an extraordinary amount of confidence and even smugness.

By contrast, those who have decided to pursue interests in History, Philosophy, or English seem almost embarrassed about the fact that they have decided to dedicate several years to an area that does not readily convert into a career.

"Yeah, I'm thinking of going into English. (I) don't know what I'm going to do with it. Maybe I should have paid more attention in my math classes in high school," admitted a doubtful eighteen year old. "I mean, you look in the newspapers and you see page after page of ads screaming for computer scientists, but how many people want guys with a B.A. in English? But I think I'll still go into English. Why? ... I don't know. I guess I'm on drugs."

The overall effect that this desire for career-oriented programs will have on the structure of university courses remains to be seen. But it became clearer, through the course of interviews, that students are beginning to see university as a place to get professional training and not as a learning institute.

Older students and those closer to nearing graduation reflect a different attitude. Many of these people reveal distinct feelings of disillusionment with the whole university system.

One fourth-year Fine Arts major summed up the feeling of betrayal that she and others felt when considering future prospects.

"I'm feeling pretty disillusioned. It all comes out of spending four or five years completely wrapped up in a cocoon of courses; surrounded by profs and other students who are also completely wrapped up in this cocoon, and you never get any idea of what it might be like in the real world."

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The expectation of gaining career training was an attitude at many of the newer students and most of the older, returning ones felt. For the older students, those who have come back to finish their degrees after a few years in the work force, the motivation was rarely a positive one of working toward a specific goal. Instead, the drive to return seemed to stem from a negative source that has returnees wanting to avoid current "outside" conditions.

"I quit after my second year and I worked at a pretty good job for the past couple of years. Then the economy went tits up and I got laid off. So here I am. It seems like a good time



to be at school; I mean, I'm sure not missing any golden opportunities out there."

Of course, there are those who are here without really knowing the reasons why. These people don't seem to have any particular long range goals but are content to fill up the winter months with classes and effectively hide from "the real world." This type of student has always made up a certain proportion of the university population. For them, in this year as in the past, university is a convenient place to put their lives in a holding pattern until they decide what they really want to do.

From this percentage of the UVic student body come the terminal partyers, those looking for mates, and others who are merely carrying out their parents' expectations. It is difficult to estimate just how big a chunk of the student body is made up of these people as reasons such as those given here are seldom admitted. Instead, this category of students will often profess the most idealistic of reasons for being here, only to admit near the end of the interview that they are just killing time.

However, the greatest confusion seems to come from those students who are nearing the end of their program. For these people the almost universal response to the question of why they are here was, "To finish my degree." Yet, the purpose behind doing this was not clear in the minds of many.

"It seems like the thing to do."

"There is not much you can do with three quarters of a degree."

"Hell, if I know."

Many of these students seemed to feel that once they had started on the degree merry-go-round, the only thing to do was to keep riding until they earned their diploma. What they were getting from the diploma was often unknown.

This is not to say that the upcoming graduating classes consist of nothing but a crowd of aimless intellectuals. There were some, especially those in the sciences, who felt that they knew exactly what direction their lives were taking. Yet even among those highly confident students a certain amount of fear and ruthlessness has crept into their career plans. These people are finding themselves in a position where they feel that they have to compromise and even abandon certain ideals in order to get ahead in the working world.

"Screw ecology," said one fourth-year physics student, "I just want to get a high paying job with an oil company. What do I care if they rape the landscape."

This abandonment of what some have termed "luxury ideals" has come about as a result of the new economic reality. While many students were not openly stating the new "anything for a job" tactics, most indicated that they would probably take a job offer in an organization, even if the company's policies went against their own ideals.

An interesting aspect of this eagerness for employment was the difference between students who are about to graduate and

those who still have more years to go before they get their degree. Those nearing graduation were very career-conscious while the majority of first, second, and third-year students were more concerned with getting a job in the coming summer than their long term career prospects.

"I figure that I'll worry about applying my degree to something after I have it," said one third year psychology major. "Right now, I'm mainly worried about what I'm going to do after this year. If I can't find some work this next summer, I'm

"How many people want guys with a BA in English?"

not going to be able to come back here and graduate at all."

So what do all these things tell us about this year's students? For most of the serious students their attitude can be said to be dominated by fear; the fear of not finding a place in the work force. The younger students are fearful of not finding summer employment and the graduating class fears that their studies will prove useless in the outside world.

As a result many students seem to have developed a greater sense of competitiveness and even ruthlessness in order to further their career opportunities. In the fight for success some have even abandoned the burden of ideals which, they feel, stand in the way of their corporate climb.

Other students are leaving their interests in the arts and humanities and concentrating on the sciences. Even though many of these people expressed regret about not pursuing their interests, they still felt that it was better for their future if they studied in an area that promised greater employment opportunities.

But possibly the greatest change taking place on campus is the student's attitude toward the university itself. Instead of seeing this university as a place to expand one's horizons, today's classes seem filled with people who think of the university as a training ground for a career. While it is true that certain university programs open the doors to particular vocations, current student attitudes coupled with the social pressures for a career are creating students with single-emphasis academic records. What this means is that while this institution might turn out people who are well versed in the sciences, these students will know nothing about music, art, literature, or languages.

Today's students seem to know what they want and how to get it, but will they know what to do with it when they have it?