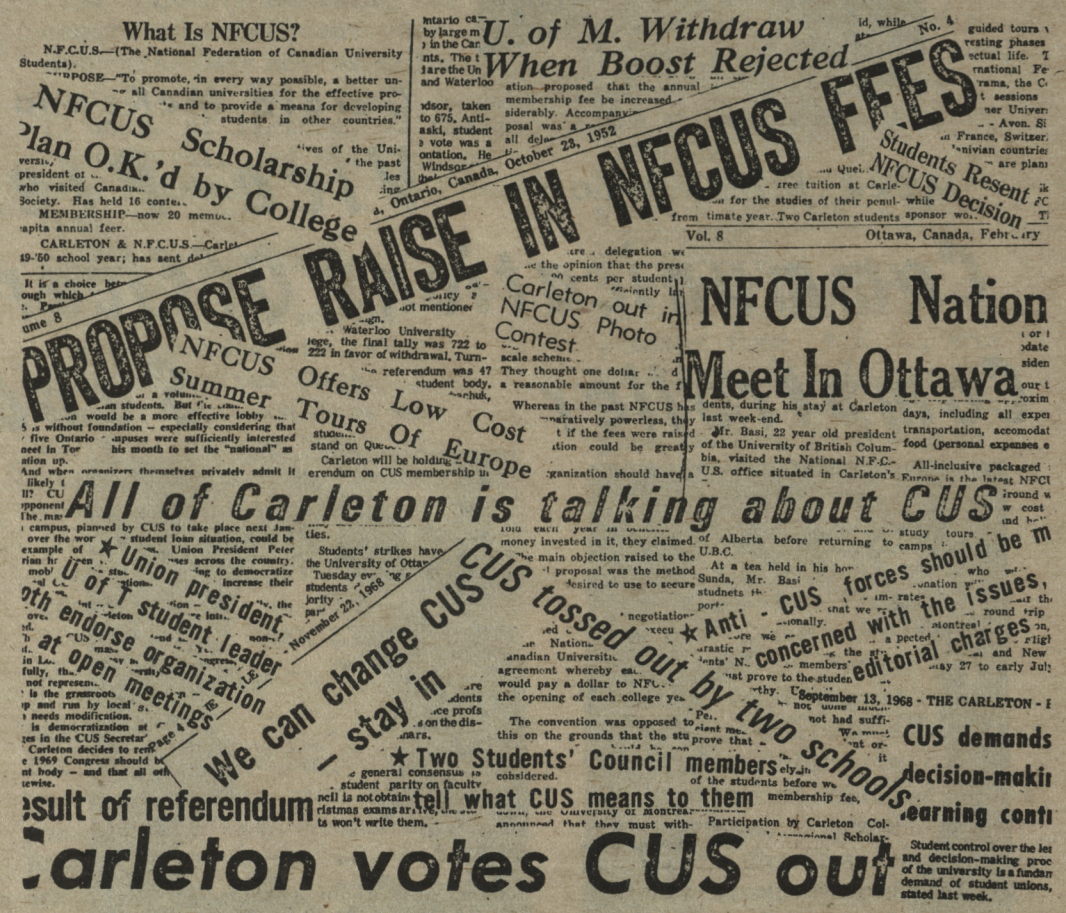
Canadian student organizations celebrate fifty years of near-cont



On December 26, 1976 it was exactly fifty years since the founding conference of NFCUS, the organization whose existence began student unionism in this country.

The organized student movement was founded in a period of calm and prosperity. Fifty years later it is in the midst of an internal crisis and must deal with the crisis in the post-secondary education system.

Discovery of where the student movement has come from may provide a perspective helpful in directing it. A fiftieth anniversary is, then, more than symbolic.

OVERVIEW

The student movement in Canada has been organized since 1926, yet the organization, while successful in many chosen fields, have proven unable, so far, to achieve the strength and stability shown by those of other countries. Certain problems and trends have been fairly constant during the past 50 years, including difficulty of administration, regional rivalries, fluctuating membership and enthusiasm for the student movement.

The size of Canada makes difficult communications and institutional relations that are necessary to build the strong sense of common action that many look for in these organizations. It often seems that the only two alternatives are a highly centralized operation which appears remote to the members and one which is so decentralized that efficient administration and decision-making is impossible.

Especially since the mid-1950's regional differences and rivalries have been a frequent source of friction. Students have sometimes been unwilling to recognize and allow for regional differences in tactics and attitudes, even when there was agreement on activities and concrete goals. Policy differences have been obscurred by preoccupation with regionalism.

There has been the sentiment that a student organization must directly represent a large majority of its constituents or else it has little credibility. This feeling goes beyond the practical problems (like low fee revenue) that accompany a small membership. The insistence upon a constantly large membership has led to virtual panic when, in any one year, several members leave an organization — regardless of their reasons for doing so.

Indeed, one disturbingly constant pattern is the rise and fall of members' interest and of actual membership. At three times in the past 50 years most student governments have watched serious problems develop in the organization(s) of the movement. Each time the first reaction of many was to withdraw until the organization(s) improved, or to conclude that no common organization was worth the effort. Each time some of the members have choosen to analyze the problems and apply additional resources to the solution. Twice this succeeded — unity was restored and with a new enthusiasm the organization(s) prospered.

In 1968-69 the rebuilding effort was too late. It faced new factions including mass media coverage and widespread rejection of all formal organizations. No "cure" for fluctuating membership is known. Its continuation may mean that Canada's student organizations will always be relatively weak.

It would be dangerous to simply forget this pattern. Past periods of strength may have obscured the problem and left organizations unprepared to deal with fluctuations when it resumed. At the same time, this pattern should not be a cause for fatalism, or the dominant consideration in planning the development of student organizations. The pattern only destroyed an organization once, and even then the vestiges of common organization lasted until 1971-72 and common organization was renewed less than three years after the 1969 collapse.

Another quality of student organizations has been sponsorship of co-operation within the post-secondary education community. The most successful of these efforts led to the creation of Canadian University Press (CUP). It was founded on the initiative of the student governments, was totally funded by the national student organization for its first two years and was subsidized by that organization for more than 20 years.

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF CANADIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Canadian students first joined together formally at that December 1926 meeting in Montreal which founded NFCUS. Within a few years most campuses had joined.

NFCUS's founders had been inspired by the British National Union of Students and the original activities included sponsorship of intercollegiate debating and travel in Europe along lines developed by NUS (UK). Another priority, gaining national student discounts, had success in the rail and sporting goods industries.

Much of the early enthusiasm was generated by an inter-regional student exchange scholarship program. NFCUS convinced universities to participate and although only a few scholarships were available each year the program was viewed as a symbol of the new co-operation and wider horizons of Canadian students.

The early growth of NFCUS was cut off by the Depression. Low enrollment meant financial difficulty for most student governments, and part of their response was to reduce the NFCUS levy and have national conferences biannually instead of annually. Some continuity was provided by having the same person serve as National Secretary-Treasurer from 1929-1939.

However, the low income and infrequent meeting led to losses in experience and continuity of office. Work began in the late 1920's, continued, but little else was begun. NFCUS came to be regarded as a purchased service rather than a meeting place of Canadian students.

EMERGENCE OF CUP

Student newspapers in North America had always exchanged issues, but aside from some western conferences the student press in Canada had not organized on an intercampus basis.

After 1935 NFCUS was revitalized by the student pacifist movement. Students responded to the danger of world war with peace petitions, conferences and model Leaques of Nations. NFCUS fees were increased and it resumed annual meetings.

The December 1936 meeting prepared plans for a national press organization. The immediate goal was full exchange of newspapers and the name Canadian University Press was adopted.

Early articles dealt with the pacifist movement and links between nationalism and fascism. CUP was officially founded in Winnipeg, December 1937. This was merely one of the events at an emotional national assembly of more than 300 students from all campuses in Canada. The assembly marked the true beginning of a politicized student movement.

POLITICAL VERSUS SERVICES

The conflict between the concept of a service-only organization and that of a political organization was never more sharply posed than at the 1937 and 1938 national conferences. The ill effects of the NFCUS depression slowdown were most obvious when a rival organization, the Canadian Student Assembly (CSA) was created. Its purpose was to provide a forum where university students discussed international and national issues, reaching decisions on the student position.

There were disputes as to which organization should represent students in Canada. The issue was settled when the CSA fell apart in the face of accusations that it was anti-war and engaged in party politics. NFCUS moved to fill the need for some exchange of ideas and the national level and heightened peace movement was forcing NFCUS into the political forum. Representations on student assistance were made to the federal government shortly before the war broke out.

POST WAR NFCUS

During World War II most NFCUS activity ceased, and it was the task of 1944 and 1945 conferences to renew consciousness of the Federation. The rebuilding was helped greatly by the cross-country tour of the 1946-47 President. He convinced most student governments to resume active membership and laid the foundations for NFCUS's first serious involvement with the international student movement.

For the most part the organization was content to continue in its pre-war path of service domination, although there was some agitation for reduction of the financial barriers to post-secondary education. Quebec desire for protection of their culture discouraged strong NFCUS activity on education issues.

A permanent office in Ottawa was established in 1951, and this served to increase the internal continuity of NFCUS. CUP moved into the office, and the two organizations shared office space and equipment until the 1969 CUS collapse. The more active role and increased political involvement of NFCUS caused some strains among the members that had not been evident previously.

Enrollment declined as veterns graduated, causing a decrease in NFCUS income. It was impossible to meet all the demands upon the organization and some student governments began to enter and leave with alarming regularity. The division was most often between larger and smaller members, although there were also differences over policy. The point came in 1956 when NFCUS leaders considered dissolving the federation because it no longer represented at least half of the university students.

The response to the fluctuating membership was a more ambitious program, stressing national unity and the need for adequate national student aid plan. NFCUS participated in the Canadian Education Conferences, and interest in the organization increased with the general growth of concern about post-secondary education. The period from 1958 to 1962 was untroubled and fairly productive. NFCUS directly represented up to 80 percent of the university students. Its members were pleased with the work of the executive and the secretariat. The public was receptive to students' desire for better aid plans.

CANADIAN UNION OF STUDENTS (CUS)

New problems arose in 1963 when NFCUS failed to find a structure and political stance that satisfied all members. Some wished NFCUS to continue largely as a service organization which lobbied for students but did not become involved in wider issues or social analysis. Others, especially the Quebecois, regarded students as members of the working class who should be paid for their contribution and