

# Economics and University Accessibility

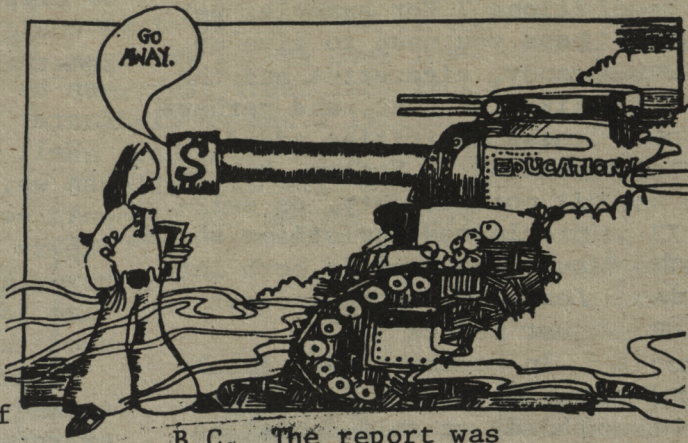
## Can only the rich attend?

EDITOR'S NOTE: No matter what part of the country we live in, the question of accessibility to post-secondary education and the effect student's economic backgrounds have on their ability to attend a post-secondary institution confronts us. So the report discussed in this article -- from the Universities Council of British Columbia, the body which handles government finances for BC universities -- has relevance outside the province.

By Heather Walker  
VANCOUVER (CUP) -- If you're from a working class family in Spuzzum, B.C., you probably won't be reading this.

That's because your chance of attending UBC or any other BC university is lower than if, for example you come from a professional high-income family in the Lower Mainland.

This is one of the conclusions of a Universities Council report on accessibility to post-secondary education in



B.C. The report was commissioned by the council two years ago and presented to council chairman William Armstrong Jan. 4.

According to the report, of the 26 per cent of Grade 12 students going immediately to university or college after graduation 50 per cent were the children of professionals, while only 15 per cent were the children of miners, loggers, fisherman, and farmers.

And 33 per cent of students completing grade 11 in North and West Vancouver went on to university or college, while only 13 per cent of those in the Prince Rupert to Dawson Creek area went on to College or University.

And, says the report, the differences are even greater if dropout rates are taken into consideration.

According to the report, students are discouraged from entering post-secondary institutions because of their personal finances -- lack of money was the main reason given by students who had decided not to go on to college or university -- difficulty in finding information on the institutions, distance of

institutions from their homes, and a feeling of not belonging in the institution.

"One of the major barriers to accessibility, perhaps the most awesome barrier, is the sense of the part of the prospective student (usually a member of an identifiable group with low participation rates) that the public institution, the school, has been established by and for somebody else and does not, in any real sense, 'belong' to him, his family, or community," the report says.

"This sense of being in an 'alien' institution also makes it difficult for such students to stay in school even when they do take the courageous step of entering.

### Low-Income Students Left Out

"The privilege that the children of the well-to-do have, and the "haves nots" do not, is the ability to use their talents and powers within social institutions which 'they' (their relatives, neighbours, friends and communities) have created and maintain. Such places, schools and places of work actually belong to them. They feel 'at home' and comfortable using them.

"Time and time again as we listened to people in communities around the province, we discovered that major barriers to access were grounded on the fact and perception that the institutions to which people wanted access were established and run by somebody else, somewhere else, in the interests of others."

Recommendations range from accepting the principle that accessibility to post-secondary education is a right, to proposed changes in the student aid plan and a plan to extend financial aid to secondary school students.

And the report condemns schools for failing to remedy inequalities between classes and perpetuating existing social conditions.

In an appendix to the report, UBC history professor Stephen Straker says if there really was equality of access to post-secondary institutions, there would be "the same

distribution of sexes, races, ethnic groups, students from urban and rural backgrounds and socio-economic classes as we find in the general population."

And, he says, if admission to post-secondary institutions was based on merit -- that is, academic standing -- there would be a high proportion of students who have done well on IQ and aptitude tests.

Instead, Straker says, "The proportion of white, middle and upper class, urban makes" is much higher in post-secondary schools than in the general population.

And according to a 1971 Ontario study, 71 per cent of students with low aptitude test scores from high income families graduated from grade 13 but only 68 per cent of "high ability" students from low income families graduate from grade 13.

### Dumb Rich Enroll Smart Poor Don't

Ontario Liberal MP Timothy Reid described the situation bluntly:

"Whereas one-third of the brightest children of the poor in Canada do not survive to the final years of high school, one-third of the stupidest children of the rich clutter up our universities."

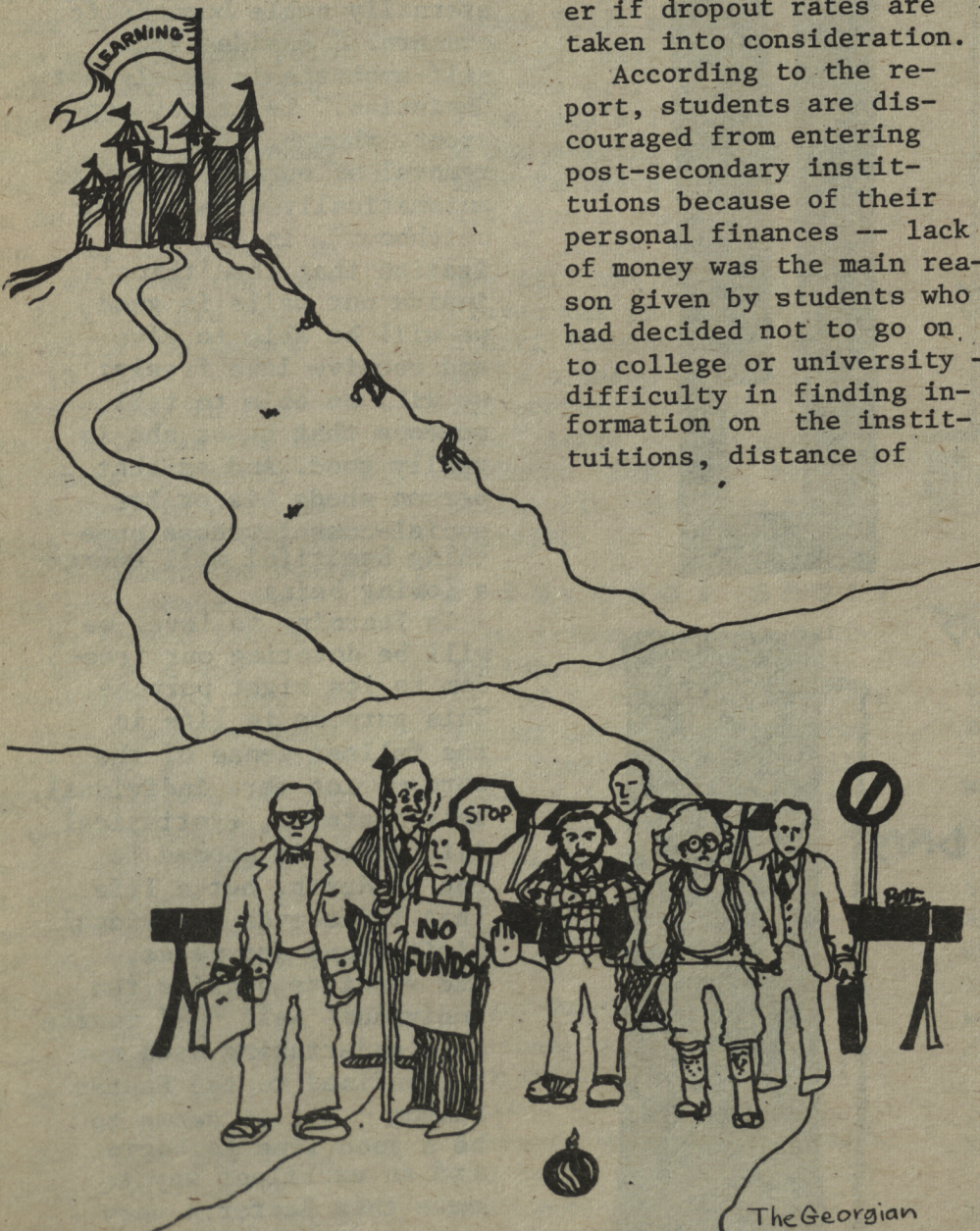
Straker says it is generally believed that schools are "agents of equal opportunity in society... and provide grounds for people to compete fairly for jobs."

"In this sense schools are expected to be the agents of upward social mobility and a social leveler, shrinking the distinctions between rich and poor. But the prestigious and highly paid positions in our society are occupied by a disproportionate number of white, affluent, urban males.

"Their sons have a better chance at these places than their daughters or the children of working class families," Straker says.

And, he says, the continuation of this "disproportion" shows that schools are not changing society, but merely perpetuating the present social structure.

The council's final



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