



## COMMENTARY\*

"WHY DON'T WE TRUST STUDENTS?"

by  
Robert Burroughs  
Executive Director

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When I tell people what the New Brunswick Student Alliance (NBSA) does for its members, the most common reactions are disbelief and disdain. Disbelief that students could have the foresight to hire staff to actively and professionally advocate on their behalf being an engaged participant in the political process here in New Brunswick. Disdain that students dare to ask things (usually money) of government by proposing policy recommendations based on progressive, evidence-driven research.

This deep-seated fear of putting money in the hands of students or in services uniquely and specifically designed for them is evident in our policy development process. For example, some of the criticism of the policy that guides the Tuition Access Bursary is thinly-veiled classist language — no one would outrightly oppose giving money to the poor to go to school — or personal grievances, but other criticisms have been less disguised in their horror that tuition-specific assistance to meet unmet financial need could be a sound policy proposal. It offends some that the government might want to get into the business of supporting individuals in need, not unlike almost every other non-student-specific welfare program.

But government is not without its own reservations about students. That government still insists on conducting credit checks for non-repayable grants on individuals they have already identified as not having the resources to afford tuition is astounding. Furthermore, the Timely Completion Benefit is grounded in a belief that students' value-added to our economy diminishes after four years. Never mind that there is no quantifiable evidence



to support this; never mind that this government, with no attempt to justify the move other than a cheap cost-savings tactic, increased the debt cap for students; never mind that eligibility for this program, despite the NBSA's calls for modification, remains exclusive to a few hundred graduates.

The most glaring example of government and the public's indifference toward the lived experience of students is with regard to their mental health. Despite pleading with government to the point of begging, students have not seen an increase in public mental health spending in the last five years. Nor have they been given any indication by government that any dedicated resources or funding is to be expected. It bears repeating that our generation's inability to access adequate mental health services has a direct negative impact on our society's ability to pay for senior care.

Failure to grasp the role of students in our political discussions and the very tangible impact they have on our province's economic success is a failure of leadership. A vision for economic recovery without a better educated population and PSE at the centre is no vision at all. It is one thing not to want to invest in a future generation, but perhaps New Brunswick ought to be up front with why it has not engaged its students: it does not trust them. Choosing not to trust students, or insisting that they be held accountable for their own poverty, is a deliberate political act: one that does not serve New Brunswick's best interests and one that reveals a staggering lack of imagination.

In many ways, New Brunswick's mistrust of its students is no different than those who seek to scapegoat millennials for changing trends in consumer spending (see: "millennials don't eat cereal" at the Washington Post, the Independent, and GQ, or "Why do millennials hate groceries?" at the Atlantic). Painting New Brunswick's graduates as itching to escape while simultaneously inhibiting their ability to contribute to their communities is, quite simply, lazy. Making young people the source of our province's woe won't bring any jobs to New Brunswick. But concerted efforts to invest in their academic experiences might.

There are consequences to playing games with the future of our province. Choosing to underfund PSE and student services is purposeless choice to undercut New Brunswick's economic growth. The two are intrinsically tied and necessarily so: an educated society is a healthy society is a prosperous society.