

PSE plan reiterated \$8 million of debt found

SARAH RATCHFORD
THE BRUNSWICKAN



Andrew Meade / The Brunswickan

Deputy Minister of Post Secondary Education, Training and Labour Byron James spoke at UNB on Monday, outlining the province's PSE Action Plan.

What's old is new again.

New Brunswick's new Deputy Minister of Post Secondary Education, Training and Labour Byron James gave a public lecture on Monday at UNB outlining the province's PSE action plan – which was initially released on June 26.

The plan consists of some thirty three "actions" which the government is claiming that they will carry out to better the post-secondary situation. The proposed actions cover everything from the tuition freeze of 2008-09, to increasing the number of locations offering university courses, to increasing apprenticeship opportunities.

James' talk was advertised as a discussion during which he would expostulate the plan. The discussion came in a form of a lecture, however, as James reiterated the entire plan, which has been available to the public for nearly five months.

The Deputy Minister asserted that the government means to move forward with its decisions within the current fiscal year.

Jon O'Kane, who sits as VP External of both the UNB Student Union and the New Brunswick Student Alliance, was in attendance.

He says that it brought a lot of stakeholders together, including students, faculty members and members of government.

"It gave stakeholders a chance to ask questions specific to their needs, and have them addressed so that everyone could hear the response. I would say it was the creation of a dialogue," says O'Kane.

It was effective in that way, he believes, but in terms of producing new information from the government, he says it was not effective.

One aspect of the plan will require post secondary institutions to submit five year strategic plans to government for review. This practice, said James, will be in place as of 2010-11.

As VP External of both student

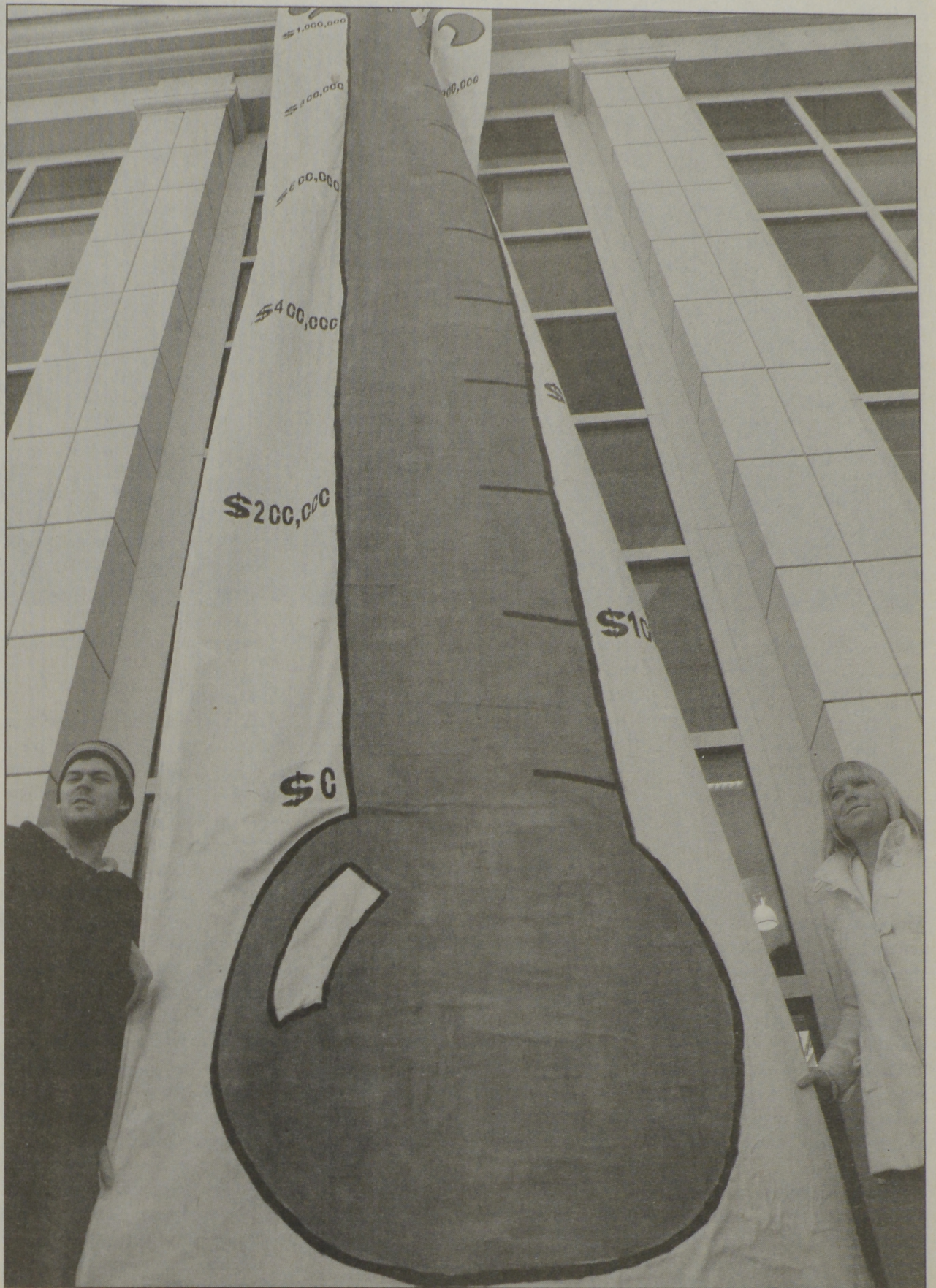
organizations, he says the official stance of both organizations to that recommendation is that "we do not support government control over what is taught in the classroom."

However, O'Kane does say that it is feasible for institutions to create a long-term plan in order to secure funding.

James met with the UNBSU before last week's Day of Action, which O'Kane says that he hopes is the beginning of a mutually beneficial relationship with the provincial government.

How effective that relationship will be in aligning the priorities of student groups and the provincial government, he says, is unsure.

"We have until the budget to find out."



Josh O'Kane / The Brunswickan

The Debt-o-meter reached two stories high, but only \$1 million in debt – one-eighth of the debt found among students last week. Pictured above are SU VP Academic Greg Melanson and VP Student Services Stephanie Lord.

NBSA unveils PSE response

HILARY PAIGE SMITH
THE BRUNSWICKAN

Thursday's Day of Action began with a press conference by the New Brunswick Student Alliance.

NBSA President Duncan Gallant and Vice President Operations of the NBSA André Cormier spoke to the media about the post-secondary policies that the student-driven organization is lobbying for.

The Day of Action was born of the ideas of the NBSA. The NBSA advocates for an affordable, accessible, high-quality education. The policies that the NBSA is lobbying for were born from the release of the New Brunswick government's post-secondary plans earlier this year, which were found by many students to be unsatisfactory.

"While the NBSA is encouraged to see the Government of New Brunswick concerned with post-secondary education and students,

any changes that they make without addressing the financial barriers and growing student debt is just ignoring a key point. There is no post-secondary education without students," said Gallant.

The NBSA and its member organizations, including the UNB Student Union, are fighting for the implementation of a student loan debt cap that ensures that New Brunswick students pay no more than \$6000 dollars per year of study, therefore accumulating no more than \$24,000 in debt for an undergraduate degree. They are also fighting for an Income Contingent Loan Repayment Program, which dictates that a student pays no more than they are able to per pay period and loans that have not been paid within fifteen years will be absolved.

The NBSA is also lobbying for targeted grants that will direct money at students that need it most, such as students from low income families.

"The Government of New Brunswick currently has some student financial aid initiatives that are misguided and inefficient. The NBSA is proposing new programs based on previous research to reallocate money the government

is already spending in a more targeted and efficient way," said Gallant.

As Gallant conveyed the financial woes of New Brunswick students to the press, booklets were passed around containing the information of Day of Action events happening across the province. Students at Mount Allison University were building a shanty town and dressing as 30's-40's hobos, as well as collecting money through the event for local food banks.

At l'Université de Moncton, students dressed in red and marched to City Hall to signify being "in the red." Students at St. Thomas each wrote their total debt on "bricks" and steadily built a wall of debt. Seven campuses in total participated in the day's events across the province.

Each of the demonstrations was meant to send a message to the government of New Brunswick and influence change in the favour of high-needs students.

"Post-secondary education should not be a debt sentence for life," said Gallant.

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total in debt over four years. This number is the national average for accumulated debt upon graduation. The policy also includes an Income Contingent Loan Repayment Program, which states that loans that have not been paid after fifteen years will be absolved.

Neil Cole, VP External for the UNB Graduate Students' Association and New Brunswick representative for the Canadian Federation of Students supports the Student Union's efforts in the Day of Action, but feels that the policies they support may not be the answer.

Cole feels that the money from the \$2000 first year bursary and the tuition tax rebate would be better spent if given directly to universities to lower their tuition costs.

"If you bring tuition fees

down, debt doesn't become unmanageable," said Cole. "It shouldn't be about managing debt. It should be about reducing and eliminating debt."

Cole added that his student debt is over \$40,000 and that post-secondary costs may be crucial in a student's choice to pursue graduate studies.

Vice President Academic, Anthony Secco provided the

crowd with the administration's outlook on the situation.

Secco says "When I see an indication like that one on the debt-thometer behind me and the numbers that Jon has given me; they truly are staggering. It's one thing that the government should recognize and that is an investment in post-secondary education is truly a fantastic investment."

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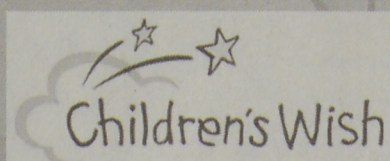
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