

# WHERE IS OUR FUTURE? WOMEN AND COLLEGE EDUCATION IN B.C.

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*"Où est notre avenir? Les femmes et l'éducation collégiale en Colombie-Britannique" fut le titre d'une conférence qui eut lieu dans cette province, à New Westminster du 3 au 5 mai 1985. Cent soixante-quinze femmes, étudiantes, professeures, employées, représentantes de groupes communautaires venues de toute la province se sont réunies pour échanger des idées et des renseignements sur l'accès des femmes à l'éducation collégiale afin de développer des stratégies régionales pour l'améliorer. Dans cet article, les responsables de la conférence décrivent le contexte social et économique qui a engendré l'idée de la conférence. Elles soulignent les buts et objectifs, le procédé de la planification, la recherche, le contenu et les résultats de la conférence.*

*La recherche sur les résultats de la conférence inscrites à des programmes d'éducation post-secondaires en C.-B., et de celles désirant s'y inscrire, fut entreprise au niveau de la planification de la conférence. Elle a révélé que depuis 1982, les collèges et les instituts ont connu une baisse de subventions, des licenciements de professeurs et des changements fondamentaux au niveau de l'administration, ces derniers s'étant notamment traduits par la centralisation du contrôle aux mains du gouvernement provincial. Par conséquent, l'accès à l'éducation pour les femmes, chose déjà problématique avant ces contraintes, connaît aujourd'hui des difficultés encore plus graves.*

## WHY A CONFERENCE?

"Where Is Our Future? Women and College Education in B.C." was the title of the College-Institute Educators' Association of B.C.'s Status of Women Committee Conference held on 3-5 May 1985 at Douglas College in New Westminster, B.C. One hundred and seventy-five women representing community groups as well as college students, faculty, and staff from across the province came together to exchange information and experiences and to participate in regional

strategy sessions. The main focus of the three-day conference was the economic and social policies implemented by the B.C. Social Credit government and the threats they have posed to women's already limited access to college education.

Since 1982 colleges and institutes in B.C. have been severely attacked by the Social Credit government's "restraint program," which has brought fundamental changes to college-institute funding and governance, and has made the provision of quality education a constant struggle. Between 1982 and 1985 provincial funding to the colleges and institutes decreased by 12%, while student enrolment increased by 11%. As a result, 498 instructors – or 11% of college-institute faculty – have been laid off, and tuition fees have increased as much as 35%. In addition, courses such as office administration and hairdressing have been privatized and removed from some community colleges, and second year courses, which have been centralized to the main college campuses, are no longer taught at some satellite campuses. One college, the Justice Institute of B.C., has been taken over by the Attorney General's office, and another college, David Thompson University Centre, has been closed.

One of the ways in which the government was able to carry out the attack on college-institute education was by restructuring and taking control of the governing bodies responsible for the colleges and institutes. For instance, from 1963 to 1977 College Board members were democratically elected and answerable to their communities. In July 1983 the College and Institute Act was amended to allow the government to disband the Councils responsible for colleges and institutes and to turn their power over to the Ministry of Education. Similarly, the Minister was given the power to initiate or cancel programs, activities, and courses. For the first time in B.C. college-institute history, the Minister had the power to intervene directly in college-institute curricula. Finally, the amendment to the College

and Institute Act allowed for *all* college board members to be appointed by the provincial government.

The funding cuts which have been imposed on the colleges and institutes were not created as solutions to the current economic crisis, as the Social Credit government would have us believe: they were ideologically motivated. Over the past years we have witnessed this provincial government initiating and promoting costly Megaprojects such as Northeast Coal and Expo 86 with our tax dollars, while education and health have been cut back in the name of "restraint." This government's political priorities are clearly profits over people, Megaprojects over social services, and centralized control over democratic local autonomy. The take-over of the democratically elected college boards is one glaring example of the ideological commitment of this Social Credit government.

Obviously, the Socred "restraint program" has had adverse effects on everyone within the college system, students, instructors and staff, and was a constant topic of discussion at College-Institute Educators' Association (C-IEA) Status of Women Committee meetings. Since the committee's inception in 1983 committee members have reported that their colleges were experiencing staff lay-offs; an increase in classroom size; a decline in the number of mature women students; a decrease in the number of women enrolled on a full-time basis; a reduction in Women's Studies courses, etc. As well, the committee clearly felt the effects of the cutbacks at their meetings as they saw their committee members disappearing as a result of lay-offs.

These experiences and frustrations motivated the idea for the conference. Committee members wanted to be able to substantiate their feelings that the isolated and individual situations they experienced at their colleges were occurring throughout the province. Consequently, the Status of Women Committee initiated plans for a conference which would examine the impact of restraint to date on

women's access to education in B.C., and which would provide a forum for community groups and college representatives to come together to plan concrete strategies to fight the serious attacks directed at women in education.

## CONFERENCE RESEARCH

A vital aspect of the conference was the research carried out on women's position in the B.C. college-institute system, 1980-1985. In order to determine the impact of restraint on women and education, it was necessary to know how women fared *prior* to restraint. The research was intended to provide a context for the information presented by the main speakers and a general overview for the workshops, which dealt with more specific issues concerning women and education - such as Math and Science phobia, women and technology, learning mothers, and immigrant women. In addition, the research was carried out with the intention of making it available to all conference participants. Each participant received in her conference kit an information package made up of issue and fact sheets which outlined the pertinent points addressed in each workshop and a research booklet entitled "Women Learning and Working in B.C. in the 1980's" prepared by the conference researcher. Our goal was to have the conference participants take the information back to their colleges and communities and use it in their efforts to fight for better education.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research revealed that the current economic policies are not only making women's struggle for equality more difficult but are forcing us to defend the few gains we have made. Women's access to education, already limited *prior* to restraint, is presently under serious threat. Since 1982, when colleges and institutes suffered their first decrease in funding:

- Women's Studies courses are seen as a "frill" and have been cut. Only 3 colleges taught any academic Women's Studies courses in 1984/85.
- Women's Access Coordinators have been eliminated from almost every college. Between 1979 and 1981 every college, at some point, had a Women's Access Coordinator. In 1984/85 only Douglas College and Capilano College had a

Women's Access Coordinator. In 1985/86 only Douglas College will have a Women's Access Coordinator on staff.

- Courses that are traditionally taken by women, such as Office Administration and Hairdressing have, in some cases, been privatized. Students in the privatized programs are paying tuition fees as high as \$4000.00 for a ten month course as opposed to the \$500.00 - \$600.00 paid at community colleges.
- Women with dependants will find it more difficult to continue their education. For example, the Vernon campus of Okanagan College has cut all its second year courses for 1985/86. This means students must travel to the main campus in Kelowna 53 km. away to complete their education. Consequently, education becomes less affordable and less accessible.
- Increased tuition fees and an elimination of the provincial government student grant have made education in B.C. unaffordable. A single student living alone and enrolled in a 2 year Nursing program would receive approximately \$15,000 in federal and provincial student loans over the 2 year period. If the student were to repay the loan at 12.25% interest, her monthly payments would be \$226.00 for 114 months. Her education would cost her \$25,764.00. Women are, for the most part, concentrated in low-paying jobs; therefore, taking on such a financial burden is almost impossible.
- As of 1983, provincial government student grants have been eliminated and replaced by provincial government loans. Similarly, students must now take 80% of a full course load, an increase from 60%, to qualify for a provincial government student loan. For many women with dependants this is an unmanageable workload. Consequently, they cannot attend colleges or institutes if they require financial assistance.

## CONFERENCE PLANNING

The Status of Women Committee received funding from Canada Works for operating costs and for hiring a staff of three conference planners (the authors of

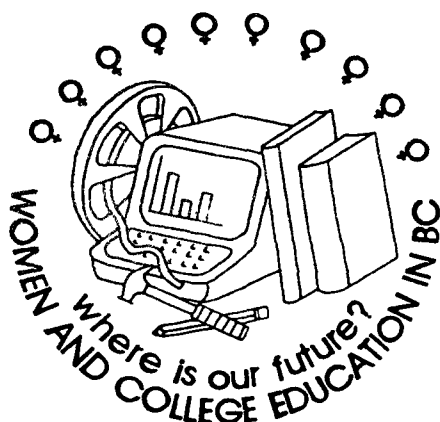
this article). The Status of Women Committee had aimed from the beginning for an action-oriented rather than an academic conference, one that would give participants the opportunity to pool their information and analysis, to begin to build communication networks on local, regional, and provincial levels, and to develop concrete strategies for change. For this to be successful, it was vital that women from all across the province, and from outside as well as within the colleges, should attend.

B.C.'s only three universities are located in Vancouver and Victoria. The community college system in B.C. was originally designed to make post-secondary education available in communities outside these major centres, as well as to reflect and implement community needs for such education. This mandate has been considerably eroded by the replacement of the elected College Boards (the colleges' governing bodies) with government-appointed boards, which has limited the colleges' responsiveness to community input. However, colleges still provide more accessible, more flexible, and cheaper education than the universities, and still represent the only available post-secondary education for most communities in the province. Given current government policies, the colleges may no longer be as responsive to the community, but community needs for college education are still urgent. With this in mind, we realized that any effective movement for change in the college-institute system would have to enlist support from both colleges and communities.

Our first task was to get the word out - to make our conference known to our target audience. We mailed copies of our brochure to 250 women's groups across the province, and made them available on each college campus. With one exception, the colleges no longer have Women's Access Coordinators, but there is an informal network of women - some former Women's Access Coordinators, counselors, student service workers, etc. - who do act as inter-college liaisons on some women's issues, so we distributed our material at the colleges through these contacts and through the Status of Women Committee representatives. The women's groups we contacted included women's resource centres, transition houses, women's bookstores, immigrant women's groups, native women's groups, groups on women and health, women in trades, employment counsel-

# CONFERENCE

## May 3 - 5, 1985



**Douglas College,  
700 Royal Avenue  
New Westminster, B.C.**

*Sponsored by: College-Institute Educators'  
Association of B.C.,  
Status of Women Committee*

ling, daycare, women and the law, women's committees of unions, etc. We also advertised in women's papers, some union newsletters, and with some community education groups.

After getting the information to the women, we had to get the women to the conference. Regional representation costs money, so we applied to the Secretary of State for funds to bring a limited number of participants to the conference, and to subsidize their travel and accommodation expenses. We received funding to subsidize two representatives from each of the eleven regions of the province outside the Greater Vancouver area (regions defined by college jurisdiction) – one college and one community representative from each region. Because most of the college faculty associations provided funding for at least one representative to attend, and sometimes more, we were able to use the Secretary of State funds to bring more representatives from communities. Some college student associations and some staff unions also subsidized their members' attendance. The result of these efforts was attendance of 175, including representation from every region of the province, with college and community participation from each region. In addition, there was good representation by students and college support staff. The conference was open to men, and some did attend (mostly college faculty), but attendance was predominantly female.

### CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

The conference took place over three days – opening on Friday evening, speakers and workshops on Saturday, and community strategy sessions on Sunday. The structure was designed to provide the maximum information possible to conference participants, and to provide them with the opportunity to discuss issues, develop new contacts, and to bring this energy and information to brainstorming sessions on strategy. We knew that one of our challenges would be to offset the effects of absorbing so much negative information and to build in more positive and energizing features. This was naturally part of the motivation for the Sunday strategy sessions, but it was also the focus for the conference opening on Friday evening. The opening speaker, Jane Evans, past Vice-President of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, spoke on "Women's Studies as a Political Tool." Her eloquent defence of the need for a feminist perspective in education, and of the profound changes that such a perspective makes possible, set an inspirational tone for the rest of the weekend. She was followed by a program of entertainment featuring local women poets Sandy Shreve and Leona Gom, and women's singing groups Aya and GleeClub. The entertainment picked up and amplified the inspirational note struck by Jane Evans; sometimes

humorous, always moving, their songs and poems helped create a sense of the collective power of women that formed a very positive base for the rest of the weekend's work.

The main speakers for the rest of the conference were chosen so as to provide all conference participants with vital information on the college-institute system. Thus Mary-Lynn Stewart McDougall, Professor of History and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University, spoke on the impact of restraint on women in the college-institute system; Jack Finnbogason, President of the College-Institute Educators' Association of B.C., spoke on funding and governance of the colleges; and on Sunday, Dr. Pauline Jewett, M.P., addressed the question of federal transfer payments to the provinces for post-secondary education.

Saturday's workshops offered information and analysis on issues relevant to women and college education, as well as workshops on organizing, lobbying and media skills. Workshop presenters were women from the colleges and from community groups, offering a wealth of research, experience in activism, and personal experience of the college-institute system. Many of the workshops were panels; in fact, a number of the women we requested to lead workshops recruited other women to help them address the issues in panel presentations. The results were very active and participatory work-

shops. In order that the information and discussion from the workshops should be available to the Sunday strategy sessions, each workshop had a recorder, whose task was to summarize the content and results of the workshop. We requested that the workshop presenters reserve fifteen to twenty minutes at the end of the workshop to summarize the main issues addressed and to record any strategy proposals. Each workshop recorder was provided with a form to complete, thus helping to ensure that the information collected was in an accessible and uniform format. These forms were then copied and given to the members of the Status of Women Committee, who acted as facilitators at the Sunday regional strategy sessions. Their task was to collate this material and briefly present it to the Sunday session, so that all participants in the strategy sessions would have available the main issues and proposals resulting from the workshops.

In the Sunday sessions, participants divided into small groups according to college jurisdiction region. As well as reporting on the results of the workshops to these groups, facilitators directed the discussion to a number of key questions:

- What are the crucial issues for this region/for this institution?
- What can be done locally (at the community level) to facilitate regional strategies?
- How can we keep in communication?
- What are the barriers to regional action? How can we overcome them?
- Are there any examples of strategies that have been effective in this region?

Facilitators also ensured that concrete proposals made by the group would be directed to specific forums; for example, if resolutions were proposed, that they be taken back to community groups, to college faculty associations, to the C-IEA Annual General Meeting, etc. Any participants making a commitment to take such resolutions to their organization(s) were recorded, so that the Status of Women Committee could maintain contact and get follow-up information on any results. All proposals and recommendations of the strategy sessions were recorded, to be made available to conference participants in the follow-up package.

## RESULTS: MEETING THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The original conference objectives proved to be manageable within the time we had for planning and organizing. The last of our objectives entailed disseminating the information on women and post-secondary education along with the recommendations developed at the conference to the community at large. At the time of this writing we are compiling a follow-up package for distribution to conference participants and interested individuals or groups. The package will consist of a list of those who were present, summaries of the workshops, and a synopsis of the community strategy sessions. Tight budget constraints and dependency on government grants have meant that the scope of the follow-up and its range of distribution will be limited. With this in mind, we feel that post-conference publicity will have to draw heavily on our contacts already available through the colleges and the C-IEA Status of Women Committee, as well as those developed at the conference itself. We have opted to supplement these networks with mailings to select publications.

One of the biggest challenges presented by the conference was how to present vast amounts of information, much of it bleak, in a way that would stimulate people and not render them immobile or feeling hopeless. We set out to provide a stimulating forum for analysis, skill-sharing and network-building. From the early planning stages we focussed on developing a forum that would enable the participants to move beyond consciousness-raising. Our goal was to set the stage for participants to direct their energies, frustrations and skills toward positive action and strategies designed to improve women's access to college education in B.C. This meant that participants would have to consider ways of counteracting new threats to women's education imposed by the current economic and political climate. In addition, they would have to consider ways to eliminate barriers which continue to limit full access for women. Thirdly, they had to consider ways in which education for women can prepare them to meet the challenges of the future. No small task indeed!

The regional strategy sessions on the final day enabled the participants to focus on building networks, pooling

resources and tailoring their strategies to suit the needs of their own communities and colleges. The results have been extremely positive and we are already seeing, in the words of one participant, "sparks which will continue to burn."

## BUILDING NETWORKS

*"Happy that workshops and issues were general enough to engage those of us from community groups outside of the college institutions. I appreciate your including us in your conference."*

*"Must continue to network – this is especially important for women in the out-lying areas who are separated from so much already."*

(Conference Evaluations)

One of the key barriers to improving women's access to post-secondary education in B.C. is the vast distances between educational institutions, between the communities, and between the women themselves. In times of economic hardship, these distances can become even greater as satellite campuses are closed, as staff and faculty are laid off, and as limited finances restrict women's ability to obtain an education. The conference was successful in bringing women together and facilitating the development and strengthening of links between them. Several of the regional groups discussed ways to ensure that their networks thrive. For example, in the short time since the conference, staff and faculty from the college in Prince George have met to discuss the establishment of a joint Status of Women Committee within their college. Groups in the Okanagan and the interior of the province have arranged to meet and to develop lobbying strategies relevant to their respective regions. Other strategies for building networks included:

- Using the college as a meeting place for groups in South Vancouver to establish *community-based* lobbying group for the purpose of mobilizing political support around women and post-secondary education.
- Working to establish cooperative action between existing community groups and the college in Nanaimo to focus on ESL upgrading, job orientation, and volunteer tutor programs.

- Developing an electronic newsletter in the East and West Kootenay regions.
- Forming a coalition of women's groups and institutional women, perhaps through Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) in the Victoria region.

Fortunately, the conference on women and college education was hosted by a standing committee which can maintain some of the momentum generated over the three days. In the coming year, individual members of the committee can provide a link between the networks in their region, the Status of Women Committee, and C-IEA.

## STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATION

*"It was great to hear from all over the province."*

*"We are taking home new information, ideas and contacts. How about a 'once a year' project so we can compare ideas?"*

(Conference Evaluations)

The regional strategy sessions served to highlight a key issue related to building networks – how to develop and maintain effective communication. The action plans of several regions pointed out ways in which the energy and enthusiasm which naturally results from such a gathering can be kept alive. Some examples:

- participants from the Kamloops/Williams Lake region have agreed to enrol as a group in a women's studies program through Knowledge Network (the distance-learning Cable TV channel).
- the group from Nanaimo/Powell River/Duncan region will be working to develop a survival manual including available resources, information on human rights for women, appeal procedures and contact lists for students and prospective students.
- participants from Terrace/Prince Rupert/Fort St. John region are proposing to poll community members on their feelings concerning the college and their awareness of college services.

- articles will be solicited from faculty within the North Vancouver/Squamish region to be included in the C-IEA newsletter.
- those in the Prince George/Quesnel region have proposed to start a letter-writing campaign to federal and provincial elected officials concerning the issue of transfer funds to education.

## DEVELOPING STRATEGY

*"The level of presentation was right on for me. I learned a lot and it was very stimulating. It's always good to be reminded that some folks are out there beating the bushes."*

*"The concerns were there. It will be interesting to see what happens now that a focus has been placed on women in the college."*

*"The ideas will be as good as the people who put them to work in their community."*

(Conference Evaluations)

The strategies which were formulated in the regional sessions represented action plans which could be carried out at three levels – community, college and government. By focussing on the community level as a starting point, participants were better able to assess their own needs and to then determine the role of their group and college in working towards meeting those needs. Interestingly, the concept of regional strategy sessions was not the first idea our committee and conference planning staff attempted to shape into a workable agenda. It was decided upon after an original panel of speakers from various levels of government were found to be unavailable. Several attempts to work within traditional conference formats and to convince bureaucrats and government officials of the importance of our concern for women's access to post-secondary education proved futile. These feelings of frustration and our desire to involve people from the community helped to shift our thinking away from direct government lobbying towards grass-roots strategizing.

Since it has only been a short time since the conference took place, the long-term effects of strategy proposals cannot yet be measured. We are encour-

aged by the realistic approach and enthusiasm which went hand in hand to develop ways of working toward change. Some examples:

- resolutions were developed at the conference and then passed at the College-Institute Educators' Association's Annual General Meeting (23 – 25 May 1985) which called upon: 1) member organisations of C-IEA to endorse the principle of full transfer of the federal government education contributions and demand that the federal government set up procedures that would result in provincial accountability and sanctions against those provinces that did not adequately account for monies received; and 2) C-IEA to urge Canada Employment and Immigration to investigate and encourage: a) funding for part-time programmes, b) structural changes in programmes to enable students to enrol on a part-time basis.
- lobby efforts are being planned to work toward a financial development officer at a Vancouver Island college who would focus on obtaining funding for women's programmes.
- plans are underway to request that college administration keep complete records of women's participation as faculty and students.

The conference revealed that people from all across the province recognize the urgent need to counteract barriers and threats to women's access to education. It was a positive experience for us, as organizers, to see at first-hand the eagerness and skill with which women were willing to take on the challenges despite the obstacles. The conference focussed on the B.C. situation, but it is clear that neither the problems nor the solutions are limited to B.C. We hope that our report will provide insight into potential erosion of accessible education elsewhere and a realistic option for working together for change.

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*Lynn Bueckert, Wendy Frost and Louise Renaud live and work (when jobs permit) in Vancouver. They were hired as conference organisers.*