

Students buried under mountain of debt

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Makeshift gravestones marking student debt are the grim reminder for what many of those at Okanagan College have to look forward to.

The launch of a campaign by students across B.C. called "Education shouldn't be a debt sentence" was highlighted in Penicton by the gravestones on the front yard of the college. Some students etching down a debt expectation of \$350,000.

"Today with the rest of the students union and the students at Penicton campus we have created a graveyard of debt to represent the debt of different students that attend Okanagan College and the debt they are already in or anticipating by the end of their programs," said Cory Nelmes, Penicton campus chair of the Okanagan College Students Union.

"Six years ago we had the best grant program in the country, we now have the worst. Our government gives the least amount of funding to students per capita out of any other province."

The campaign is hoping to mobilize students to pressure the B.C. government to reduce tuition fees, re-



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PENICTON CAMPUS chair Cory Nelmes of the Okanagan College Students' Union lies among the headstones with the names of other students and their anticipated debt at graduation during the start of a province-wide campaign Tuesday.

establish a provincial student grants program, restore per-student funding for universities and colleges and eliminate interest on B.C. student loans. Nelmes said the interest rate on student loans means that an average student debt in B.C. of \$28,000

becomes \$42,000 owed to the government. The Canadian Federation of Students-British Columbia is calling for tuition levels to be put back to

2001 before it started increasing two per cent every year. The Penicton campus students union chair said debt aversion is the largest factor keeping people away from going to post-secondary.

"I'm currently working three jobs, I'm taking five full-time classes and I just work my hardest. There are days where you work so hard and you go what is this all for? How much money am I going to owe at the end of the day?" said Nelmes. "I personally don't know how I will pay all my debt back."

She believes that if students come together in solidarity across the province they can reach their goals and accomplish what has happened in Newfoundland where the interest rate on student loans has been abolished as of Aug. 1.

According to the Canadian Federation of Students those getting a post-secondary education today are deeper in debt than they have ever been before. The average student debt has more than doubled in the last 10 years as tuition fees doubled in most provinces in the same period.

"No other generation of British Columbia students has ever had to go this far in debt to get a basic degree or diploma," said Nelmes.