

# **Struggling to Study**

## **Examining the Opportunity Cost of Low-Income Students Coming to Live and Learn at Wilfrid Laurier University**

Alison C. Schofield



**Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group**

**Struggling to Study: Examining the Opportunity Cost of Low-Income Students Coming to Live and Learn at Wilfrid Laurier University**

Published by: Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group, April 2008

© Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group 2008



**Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group**

Library Room 3-301  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
75 University Avenue West  
Waterloo, Ontario  
Canada, N2L 3C5

ISBN: 978-0-9809006-0-6

## **Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group**

# **Struggling to Study: Examining the Opportunity Cost of Low-Income Students Coming to Live and Learn at Wilfrid Laurier University**

By Alison C. Schofield

### Introduction

Wilfrid Laurier University is one of the highest ranked undergraduate universities in Canada and is the academic home to over 11,000 full time students. Thousands of these Laurier students receive some kind of financial aid: some students require financial aid to supplement their living expenses and others require financial aid to ensure their very presence at this institution. When thinking about financial aid, there are many aspects that must be considered, particularly that dreaded four letter word: 'Debt'. For low-income students considering post secondary education the choice is not always easy. There are several paths that a student might choose from, paths dependent on their long term goals, and those that are chosen to alleviate financial burdens. Each student that is conflicted with this choice has a story to tell about their experiences and what factors contributed coming to their final decision. What is the opportunity cost of a low-income student coming to live and learn at Wilfrid Laurier University? After reflection on the student experience, this is the question I wanted to answer.

In the early months of 2008, I conducted a study based on my question of opportunity cost for Laurier students in financial need. As a researcher and a student at Wilfrid Laurier University, it has been important to me to create awareness and give an academic voice to the student experience of low-income students. It was my goal to discover what other opportunities students passed up (either through necessity or by choice) in order to attain their undergraduate degrees at Laurier. What did they have to sacrifice to come to school here? How are they managing to pay the bills? How do they feel about financial aid and student debt? What are their ambitions? So often one might hear that the whole post-secondary educational system is designed to keep the poor students out, I longed to discover if low-income students felt that way.

There are 990,000 students across Canada that require student loans to be able to afford an education.<sup>1</sup> There are several different types of financial aid that students can attain given they fit the criteria for that aid. The most common type of financial aid for students in Ontario to receive is through loan agreements. One of the most popular of these is government assisted financial aid through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). However students can also attain loans from banking institutions rather

---

<sup>1</sup> Benedict, Julian, New Organization Champions Loan Reform, Educated Solutions, Vol. 3, Pulsar Printing: 2007. pg. 6.

easily, although these institutions usually have a higher interest rate on their loans. Programs like OSAP offer a lower interest rate than banks, but they are often harder to attain. One undergraduate Laurier student with two younger sisters also entering post-secondary education was denied OSAP because her father is part owner of a mill. Even though, times have been tough at the mill, she has to rely on student loans from her bank but fears the amount of money that she will have to repay after she has completed her education. She is but one of thousands of students at Laurier that exercise financial need.

In considering these questions and of hearing experiences from my peers about their struggles with financial aid I decided to design a qualitative study that would be able to tell the stories of some extraordinary students that come from a low income student bracket. My main goal in this study has been to give a voice to the interests of low income students and discover what kind of mentality they have about debt, particularly in regards to the OSAP system. I wanted to consider opportunity cost, which is a concept that takes into consideration what one might have to give up in one path in order to pursue another. What are the factors in making this decision? And will the ends justify the means; will these students be able to pursue their ambitions with any success after becoming indebted students? To do this I surveyed five Laurier students who experienced financial need.

What will follow in this report is a literature review of two important documents to shed some light on the situation of low income students. The first document will be the Eligibility and Financial Need Assessment Manual that OSAP uses to calculate how much financial aid will be given to students who are eligible to receive OSAP. The second document is one that was created by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance that discusses ways to innovate the financial aid system in Ontario to better benefit the students who demonstrate financial need across the province. The report will then discuss the research design and procedure that was used to survey students and the results from three specific experiences from real Laurier students. The report will conclude with a look at the government and the future of financial aid in Canada and discuss the overall findings from the survey conducted. What has been produced is a chronicle of some of the unsung experiences of the low-income student population at Wilfrid Laurier University.

## Literature Review

### *2007-2008 Student Eligibility and Financial Need Assessment Manual – Ontario Student Assistance Program*

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Student Support Branch is where one would find one of the most common programs for financial aid, the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). The document available for review was the *2007-2008 Student Eligibility and Financial Need Assessment Manual*, written in June of 2007. This document is one that is given to the financial aid office of each post-secondary institution across the province and comes to the hands of very few students; most students apply to the OSAP program and know only that they are denied or accepted and if that, how much they are entitled to get. This document outlines a process of five steps, taking into account different life circumstances; for instance if a student does not have parental

support, or is married or if a student has dependent children. These five steps determine how much money, if any, the student will receive through this government program.<sup>2</sup> Step A is to identify the student's category that fits with their living situation. There are four categories that a student may be considered for: single dependent students, independent single students, married or common law relationship students, and sole-support students that single handedly support a child of their own that lives with them throughout the study period.<sup>3</sup> Step B is to assess the student's costs during the study period. This step takes into account tuition and compulsory fees; books, supplies, equipment and computer allowance; province specific living allowance; return transportation once a semester; and child care if applicable.<sup>4</sup> Step C is to assess the contribution from all available resources. This step takes into account pre-study income, income the student is planning to receive during the study period, student and spousal assets, parental income and federal resources if applicable.<sup>5</sup> These contributions lead to Step D which is to calculate the student's need.<sup>6</sup> Step E, complimentarily is to calculate the student's assistance. From these steps the formula for how much assistance a student will receive is created.<sup>7</sup> Assistance is calculated when you take the allowable educational costs (Step B) and subtract the expected financial contributions (Step C) and are given the result of the calculation of assessed need (Step D).

The majority of Laurier Students who are receiving OSAP at Laurier fall within the Single Dependent Student category. This means that the majority of the students at Laurier are dependent on parental support, however there are also students that fall in the other three categories of a student independent of parental support, married and common law students and students the provide sole support to a child.

One of the tools used to calculate if a student is eligible for OSAP is the calculation of Annual Discretionary Income (ADI) of the parents. Interesting points have been raised in regards to what by OSAP standards is the Moderate Standard of Living in Canada and in Ontario.<sup>8</sup> When one looks at the figures for the two areas side by side, the difference between the two of them seems pretty stark. The calculations for living standards are determined by how many children are within the household. There is no figure for families that only have one child, but as the average family in Canada has 2.5 children,<sup>9</sup> one can use this chart to see that if the number is rounded up to 3 children in the family that the Moderate Standard of Living in Canada is \$50,968 and in Ontario the Moderate Standard of Living is \$41,049. Therefore the Annual Discretionary Income of the parent(s) in the family is determined by subtracting the appropriate Moderate Standard of Living depending on the family size from the net family income.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, *Ontario Student Assistance Program 2007 – 2008 Student Eligibility and Financial Need Assessment Manual*, June 2007, pg. 18

<sup>3</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, pg 18

<sup>4</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, pg. 19

<sup>5</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, pg. 27

<sup>6</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, pg. 63

<sup>7</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, pg. 65

<sup>8</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, pg. 59

<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada, *Consensus families, number and average size*. March 2008

[http://www40.statcan.ca/cgi-](http://www40.statcan.ca/cgi-bin/getcans/sorth.cgi?lan=eng&dtype=fina&filename=famil40.htm&sortact=2&sortf=3)

[bin/getcans/sorth.cgi?lan=eng&dtype=fina&filename=famil40.htm&sortact=2&sortf=3](http://www40.statcan.ca/cgi-bin/getcans/sorth.cgi?lan=eng&dtype=fina&filename=famil40.htm&sortact=2&sortf=3)

<sup>10</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, pg. 59

What OSAP fails to take into account with this and other fees, is that the cost of living across the province is quite varied and the general sum that they provide may not be enough for all families across Ontario.<sup>11</sup> This is one of the many general calculations that the OSAP system has created that forces students to be at the financial mercy of the government's unrealistic expectations for student living as several more examples, such as those for books and supplies, can be found throughout their eligibility manual. Because of these policies the average family across Ontario may have to look for additional loan support from other financial institutions on top of their OSAP entitlements. This creates more debt for students to get out of after their university careers are over, and certainly more stress over how the following school year will be afforded. However, if OSAP is aware that a student is also receiving financial aid from another institution, then the student's OSAP entitlement might be lowered. Just the same, if OSAP does not give enough money to realistically cover the expenses of a student during their school year and the student decides to get a job to supplement their OSAP entitlement, if the student makes too much the entitlement may again be reduced. For instance, the one-size fits all aspect to these OSAP policies may fit a family of moderate income in Southern Ontario if the cost of living is relatively low and the family can save more for the student's education, but may not fit a family living in Toronto where the cost of living is higher and educational savings are not the main priority compared with the cost of food and shelter. Therefore the needs of all Ontario students are not being considered in a fair and effective way.

*Solutions: A Vision for Higher Education in Ontario – Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance*

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) gives hope to low-income undergraduate students by being advocates to the accessibility, affordability, accountability and quality of undergraduate education.<sup>12</sup> OUSA has membership at 7 universities across the province, including WLU. In November of 2007 OUSA produced what they had hoped to be a “living, breathing document”<sup>13</sup> called *Solutions: A Vision for Higher Education in Ontario*. OUSA has taken on the task of assessing and putting together policy to reform Ontario's student financial aid system.

The main concept outlined in the report issued by OUSA is the “Three Pillar Approach”. This approach describes three areas that show support to undergraduate students: supporting the post-secondary system (particularly government operating grants), tuition paid by students and government financial aid programs for students in need of financial assistance in order to attain a post secondary education. It is described that tuition and government grants given to the universities keep them running, and the third “pillar” as being the financial aid system that ensures that all students regardless of their income bracket, have the same opportunities to attend a school to pursue their professional goals.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, *Solutions: A Vision for Higher Education in Ontario*, November 2007, pg. 68

<sup>12</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, pg. 2

<sup>13</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, pg. 5

<sup>14</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, pg. 46

When discussing financial aid in Ontario, OUSA focuses on the OSAP system in particular. OUSA calls for part-time students, Ontario Works students, students with difficulty in their studies and those with bad credit records to be able to receive the funding they obviously need, for these students can be among the most in need of them all. OUSA also attests that students should be allowed to choose a repayment program for their student debts that is unique to their individual incomes following graduation.<sup>15</sup> Also, concerning the time during the student's study period, OUSA wrote about the fact that students who choose to work to supplement their student loans will see a decrease in their loan entitlement if they are deemed to "work too much". The very reason why students already receiving OSAP choose to have a part time job is because they feel that OSAP does not provide them with enough funding. Because OSAP has a general formula for every aspect of a student's fees, it is general to cities and institutions across the province, when it is evident that the cost of living in Toronto for instance, will be higher than living standards in a place like Waterloo.<sup>16</sup>

OUSA also outlines sixteen principles that they believe to be inherent in the student financial aid system. The first principle is arguably the most important principle of them all. It states, "All willing and qualified students must be able to access and have the tools to excel in Ontario's post-secondary system."<sup>17</sup> This principle is inclusive of every level of wealth and anyone desiring to pursue an education. Other principles include such concepts as a student friendly financial aid program; accessibility and availability to all students in need; the fact that the financial aid system is a public and therefore government responsibility; coverage of all reasonable costs. Along with their principles for reassessing the financial aid system in Canada, OUSA also has over 30 concerns about the current program, all of which outlining where the OSAP guidelines are too strict or their accessibility to students falls short. OUSA makes over 40 recommendations in their proposed action plan for financial aid in Ontario, but in summary they are:

- To fix the formula that assesses a student's need by using real costs of living from around the province
- To re-instate OSAP eligibility for certain groups that have otherwise been excluded from the program
- Make OSAP more user-friendly by providing more information and making it easier for students to apply to the program.
- Make repayment policies more manageable by making payment options more adaptable to students that are in debt who have various needs; and
- Increase access to under-represented groups through giving financial assistance specific to that group.<sup>18</sup>

OUSA realizes that there may never be a perfect system, but if changes to the system could start gradually the system would only become stronger and less students across the province would feel that the fees for their education and the debt that followed them is a burden.

---

<sup>15</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, pg. 53

<sup>16</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, pg. 67

<sup>17</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, pg. 49

<sup>18</sup> Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, pg. 112

## Students and the Government:

The Millennium Scholarship Foundation is a program that has offered over 2.2 billion dollars to students in the form of bursaries based on financial need and awards of excellence based on academic performance to many Canadian students since 2000.<sup>19</sup> However, this fund has almost been exhausted and the program will soon expire. In the new 2008 budget the Conservative government has indicated a plan to be enacted that would create a grant system for 2009-2010. The details of this grant program are still being discussed and there are even plans for the current Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, Monte Solberg, to sit down with current students and complete the details of the grant program with their ideas and opinions. This plan for post-secondary students was mentioned in one small paragraph in the budget.<sup>20</sup> Blink and you might miss it.

There may be a connection between the government's feelings on responsibility to Canadian students and the students' responsibility to their civil duty. Voter turn-out among Canadian youth is the one demographic with the most potential voting power but the least voter response. Perhaps part of the reason why the government feels that they do not necessarily have to cater to and look after the students of their country is because this demographic makes the least amount of effort to go to the polls and vote for a particular party. Because these parties do not feel that students are an asset in terms of votes they do not feel compelled to go out of their way to include extensive plans and accommodations for students in their platforms or extensively in the budget.

One participant in the low-income student study said, "I can't understand why the government does not think that an investment in university students – or any post secondary student for that matter – education is also investing in the future of our country."

## The Low-Income Student Study

### Research Design

I designed a research study to explore what the opportunity cost would be for low income students to live and learn at Wilfrid Laurier University. The goal of this study was to find out if students had to make any sacrifices in order to come to school at Laurier and what they would have to have done if they did not have the financial opportunity to afford university. To conduct my study I asked the participation of 3 students currently receiving financial aid in their undergraduate years at Wilfrid Laurier University and one student who is at another institution in the province. These four students completed a qualitative survey about their experiences with financial aid, what affect these financial struggles have had on them and what they would have done if they

---

<sup>19</sup> Millennium Scholarship Foundation, *About the Millennium Scholarships*, April 2008.  
<http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/en/aboutus/index.asp>

<sup>20</sup> House of Commons. 2008. "The Budget," *Debates*. 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> session. Vol. 142. (February 26-27), pp 3337-44, 3364-71. Ottawa. Queen's Printer.

were not able to attend Laurier. The students studied in my survey all fell within the Single Dependent Student category of the OSAP system.

### Risks Associated with the Study

During the survey process because of the sensitive nature of some of the questions some participants could have felt some discomfort or vulnerability. If at any time a participant did not feel comfortable enough to answer a question, he or she was able to abstain from providing that information.

### Benefits of Participation

Participants will benefit from this study as they will be a part of a study that has not been done before at Wilfrid Laurier University. They will also be helping to bring awareness about the portion of the student population that is receiving financial aid and the struggles and experiences that they have endured. It is the hope of this researcher that this study will help to remind students and other academics of the privilege and value of a post-secondary education.

### Procedure

I advertised my study on posters around campus and also through word of mouth with students on campus. The survey was able to be taken online by participants enabling them to participate in the study from the comfort of their own home. I asked the participants to create a six digit number for themselves instead of using their name to keep this survey completely confidential. I had asked the student participants to read a consent form that outlined the risks and benefits to participating in the study, information on where to receive counseling if the student felt uncomfortable following completion of the survey and made it apparent that if they continued on to the following page of the survey they would be consenting to their involvement in the study. There were 29 questions for students to answer and all descriptive questions were able to be skipped if the student felt that the question did not apply to their student experience or if they felt uncomfortable answering questions.

### Jenna's Story

“Jenna,”\* a third year Arts student has had plenty of experience with financial aid, specifically with the Ontario Student Assistance Program. Jenna was born in Ontario where she has lived her entire life in a lower middle class family. When she was accepted to university, she had many options to seriously consider, the most important being if she should attend the university closest to her home town to save money. Her mother had recently been switching jobs and her father's work at a local factory was constantly unstable, so the idea of moving away to go to school was something she could not get her hopes up about. Her father, not having much post-secondary education of his own, wanted Jenna to have the best experience and education the province could offer and so

---

\* All names used in this study have been changed to protect the identity of the student.

he made it clear to Jenna that she could go to school away from home and her parents would do whatever possible to make it work in terms of financing. Jenna was accepted early to all the schools she applied to and settled easily on Wilfrid Laurier University as she felt comfortable with the community atmosphere and small campus. As she prepared in the late summer of 2005 to go to Laurier, the union her father belonged to went on strike. Her entire first year at Laurier from September to May, her father was on strike so her family relied completely on her mother's income and their personal savings. "If it were not for the OSAP program," she said, "I would not have been able to attend the university of my choice that year."

The first was a difficult year for Jenna, having only the OSAP funds provided to her that just covered her tuition and living expenses, she could not bring herself to ask her parents for money knowing that they were already giving what they had. Relief came in the summer when the strike at her father's plant ended and he was able to go back to work. However, the financial recovery of her family would be something that would still affect her student life into her second year of university. Jenna was forced to obtain a job in retail before the holiday season began in 2006 in order to pay for utilities and groceries each month. OSAP had helped her again by paying for her tuition and her parents managed to pay for her rent, she describes this time of her life as stressful, but she was grateful the team effort she felt with her family.

Into her third year now, Jenna still relies on OSAP for financial aid to be able to afford to continue her education at Laurier. She also works two jobs and has an involved position in her students' union. She did however, happen into an interesting situation with OSAP in her winter term. After several weeks of her OSAP funding being unavailable, she checked in with the OSAP website to see if there was any indication as to the hold up. Between the information provided there and from staff at the student awards office she was informed there was an overdraft on her account and she had to repay a sum of hundreds of dollars back to the National Student Loan Center (NSLC) before her funding could be released. She was confused as to why they could not just deduct the overdraft money from her current OSAP entitlement, however since her family was starting to get back on their feet financially her parents were able to provide the money to the NSLC. The process took much longer than she had expected, and was prolonged due to further miscommunication and wait times with the administration of the NSLC. While she was waiting for the receipt from her payment of the overdraft to be sent to the financial aid office at Laurier, she was withdrawn from all her classes by the Registrar's Office because her fees were still unpaid as her OSAP had still yet to be released.

She was told it would take anywhere from 4 to 6 business days for the transaction to happen. She was instructed that once the money had been taken from the account she was to call back so that a fax could be sent to the financial aid office at Laurier. When the transaction went through, she did that and a week passed and she had not heard anything from Student Awards about her OSAP availability. One very early morning she tried to access course material online and her access was restricted. Being told it would only be a matter of days, she never thought it would come to her being deregistered from all her classes, she was, after all, an OSAP student. Wouldn't they know that at the registrar's office? When she called the next day to a cold reception from the registrar's office, she was completely distraught. She was told that even if she did pay her fees that she would have to petition the faculty in order to get back into her classes. "How degrading," Jenna

said, “to have to go to my professors and explain that I am a poor student who can’t afford to come to school and then have to ask to be allowed back into their classes.” She was then transferred the Business Office extension where she became very emotional on the phone. The woman on the other end of the phone put her on hold to check in with the Student Awards office. When she came back she told Jenna that the Student Awards office had no record of her ever making the payment on the overdraft. This sent Jenna into a tailspin. The woman from the Business Office told Jenna that she would have to call the National Student Loan Centre again and asked them to have the fax sent to the Student Awards office once more. She hung up, tried to collect herself and called the NSLC again. When she called they asked her to call the Student Awards office again to make sure that the fax number was right as they said that the fax of the receipt of payment had been sent over a week before and the payment made weeks before that. Jenna called the Student Awards office again to get no answer, she was at her wits end.

Later that day Jenna decided to go down to the Student Awards office, that old familiar place, try to get everything all figured out. She had an assignment due the next day that she needed to have finished and the access to the material she needed was online. When she went down to the Student Awards office she was told to call the NLSC again and have them fax over the receipt again. Jenna explained to the Student Awards Officer that she would need to get into her course material that day and that the fax was sent over a week before. The staff said they had never gotten it and even looked into it for her. She then called the NSLC again. When they said that they could have the fax there within three days, Jenna explained that that would not be acceptable because either the previous fax was never sent or it was misplaced on the other end and she had been deregistered from her classes and needed re-entry immediately. The representative on the phone then said that they could have it at Laurier’s Student Awards office within 4 hours. Jenna, emotionally drained, went home. Not a half an hour after she came home did the Student Awards office call to say they had received the fax and were going to work on getting Jenna re-enrolled in her classes. Later that afternoon she was guaranteed that she would have access to her online material the following day and would be reinstated in all her classes without penalty or need for petition. Although Jenna was very grateful to have everything restored to normal, she couldn’t help but wonder if the whole situation could have been avoided. She was able to hand in her assignment; however she did have to explain her need of financial aid and the rest of the situation to two of her professors and a teaching assistant. She couldn’t help but feel embarrassed. Later she talked to her parents about all that had happened and they both promised that during the summer months they would work very hard and hope that Jenna would not need to use OSAP the following school year. “I never want to go through that again,” Jenna said.

“I would define the student experience as taking in all aspects of a student’s life such as academics, extracurricular activities and social experiences. I have felt somewhat withdrawn from this complete experience because of my economic hardships, though when I chose to go to university away from home I knew that this wouldn’t be easy.” Jenna also stated that she felt pressure to be involved on her campus in order to hopefully attain scholarships and admission into graduate school, but has found it very hard to balance the course load of her academics, the extracurricular and her two jobs, and has not just taken a toll on her ability to participate in the average student experience. She also expressed feelings of great stress, particularly in the winter semester of her third year

when she had to deal with being removed from her courses on top of course work, working to pay her bills, and fulfilling her obligations as a volunteer. Through her experiences, Jenna stays positive. “I love Laurier, despite the stress I feel about money a lot of the time I have had some very positive experiences here so far which makes the debt worth it in a way.”

### Nile’s Story

Nile is a second year student in the School of Business and Economics originally from the Middle East. Both of his parents and his grandparents were able to achieve post secondary education there. He currently lives away from his home in the Greater Toronto Area with some friends off campus. Before coming to Laurier, Nile went to York University for one term but he decided to leave York to come to Laurier because he was not able to engage in a social atmosphere that would give him the student experience he had imagined.

“The most important thing for me was to make friends,” Nile said, “I did not make a single friend in those four months,” he recalled of his time at York. At Laurier Nile fell in love with the school spirit and help and support of the Laurier community. He describes this help as something that is contagious, that once you have that experience, you want to be able to do the same for others in the community. After attaining his undergraduate degree from the School of Business and Economics Nile says that he would like to travel back to his home in the Middle East, to China and Europe and then come back to Canada to work. This passionate Laurier student estimates that he will be approximately \$55,000 in debt after he completes his undergraduate degree at Laurier.

Nile has been receiving OSAP and also has a student line of credit at his banking institution. He also is a student of the Ontario Work to Study Program. “I have a part-time job while at school. I work in order to pay my telephone bills, etc. It definitely interferes with my school life. It is an added thing that one has to worry about... It is hard to balance school work, co curriculars, friends and a part-time job... One would rather have that friendship and socializing experience while it lasts rather than [be] thinking of work and bill payments; that is something one will do all their life.”

Nile said that if he was not able to come to Laurier because of financial reasons he would likely have had to go to a local college to learn a trade and start making money faster. He said that if he could not afford to go to college either he would have just started working right away, estimating it would have taken him ten years of working in the labour force to be able to save the money (on top of other living expenses) to be able to afford to get a university or college education, though he said that his education would have been something he would have strived to attain regardless of his situation. He described the life he would be living as “living hand to mouth” and that if he did have to go to the local college he would be living with his parents to help support the family. This would have also saved on rent money and other living expenses he has to pay while living away from home.

“Coming to university was always written in stone. It was never a choice,” he said, “For me it was a rite of passage. And I believe what I am today is because of the reason that I chose to attend university.” Nile knew that in order to succeed in Canada he would need to impress potential employers by attaining a degree at a prominent university. Nile

kept a positive attitude throughout the process of choosing a course of action after high school. What kept him motivated was to think of all the hardships his family went through in the course of their immigration. The result has been a very positive experience at WLU and he feels that he feels at home in the Laurier community. Although Nile aspires to work for a corporation when he returns from his proposed travels, he speculates that he will also have to find a weekend job doing manual labour or start his own business in order to pay off the student debt that he has accumulated before interest rates make this debt an even larger load to carry. He looks forward to starting off with a “clean slate” before pursuing his master’s degree in business. Nile is hoping that the business that he will work for will pay for the graduate education he hopes to achieve so that they will be able to benefit from his higher learning, in turn letting him climb the corporate ladder.

Overall Nile feels that his student debts are a burden on him because he may have to work for a few years just to pay off his debts instead of working to buy his first home, travel and maybe build a family. “I would rather start afresh the moment I graduate. But I guess that is what a price one has to pay to get [an] education - if one's parents aren't rich enough.”

Luckily Nile did have the resources through numerous means of financial aid to be able to achieve his ambition of coming to Laurier and attaining a post-secondary education, to think that this might not have been possible for Nile is a thought that is hard to swallow. Although his ambition and the ability to receive financial aid may have brought him this education, if he had had to wait to come to school there is no telling what other financial burdens may have prevented him from achieving his goal.

### Brittany’s Story

Brittany is a third year student of the faculty of science at Wilfrid Laurier University. She comes from southern Ontario where she lives in the summer time in a single parent household with her mother and sister. She made the decision to come to Laurier above any other option because she felt that it was the best path to follow so that she might later get the career she desired. “My Mom and I decided that a university degree would hopefully be worth the loan debt, and I would be able to get a good enough job afterwards to pay it off within a reasonable amount of time,” Brittany said of her decision. “I felt good about the decision, and a little stressed about the financial debt I was getting myself into.” She currently lives in an apartment off campus with four other friends. Aside from worrying about money a lot of the time, Brittany says, her student experience has been generally positive. She says she does volunteer in the Waterloo community through volunteer placements that will give her some experience in her field, but that since she is paying for her education and will continue to for years to come, her academics are her first priority.

The other alternative Brittany described when considering her post secondary education and alternative costs was going to college closer to home so that she could save on living expenses by living with her mother and enjoy the cheaper tuition that the local college offered. She was glad that she decided instead to move away and bear the brunt of financial burden. Brittany said, “I knew that I needed the experience of moving away, I also think that a college program would not have challenged me enough intellectually.”

OSAP student loans and government grants have made her post-secondary education possible. As she comes to the end of her third year, she currently owes the National Student Loan Centre over \$22,000 and suspects that by the time she has completed her degree she will be approximately \$30,000 in debt. After she has completed her undergraduate degree, Brittany suspects that she will have to move back home with her mother, get a job, and start making payments. As Brittany graduates from Laurier, her sister will be entering into post-secondary education herself and her mother will have to help her as well. Brittany said that she feels increased pressure and burden to manage and repay her debts all on her own. When asked about whether or not Brittany needed a student job to support her over her years of study, she said that her mother was afraid that if she had a part time job it would interfere with her studies. This made sense, thinking that if they were going to be thousands of dollars in debt that she should do the best she could regardless of what other income she could be making. "But this year I have found myself applying for jobs for next year because I can't afford to go through the school year relying on OSAP to cover all my expenses," Brittany said. "[My] rent is going up next year."

Brittany also relies heavily on bursaries to support her throughout the year. She says that she counts on the Millennium bursary to pay for her tuition first semester and for the Laurier Undergraduate Bursary to continue her financial assistance and pay for her rent in the spring time. "I feel the cost of tuition is very high. I also feel that the cost of textbooks is outrageous. There have been times I don't buy textbooks because I can't find them used and I can't afford to buy them new... A lot of students cannot afford books and it is rarely given any attention!"

Although Brittany says that her student experience has been generally pleasant, she says that she does worry a lot. Sometimes her lack of funds keeps her from participating in events in the school community, and when she does get to go it is often on the charity of a good friend or her partner. She feels bad at the end of the year she is unable to celebrate friends birthdays because of her lack of funds, which is a stress and embarrassment she has to deal with on her own. When asked if there was anything she wanted to add in regards to the questions asked in the survey, Brittany replied with a poignant comment: "I remember coming to Laurier on a tour when I was still in high school, and the guide was telling us about the student assistance that Laurier offers, and one thing she said was that 'money won't stand in the way of you coming to Laurier'. I would probably be a more content student if that were true."

### The Other Path: Jeff's Story

In the spring of 2006 Jeff was thrilled to be accepted to the four universities in Ontario he applied to. At home in Southern Ontario he planned for his coming years at university. He applied to Wilfrid Laurier University as his first choice, and three other schools including the university closest to his hometown. He was a bright young man who wanted to be a high school teacher. When he came to visit a friend at Laurier in the fall of 2005 he knew that the small campus was right for him.

When the time came to make a decision about where he would be attending that fall, he sat down with his parents and discussed his options. His mother had had her fourth child the year before and the house was becoming more crowded. Although Jeff

was itching to leave and have his own place at a school somewhere else in the province, he and his family decided that going to school anywhere else but the university closest to home would be too much money. Jeff accepted that he would have to live at home and attend the university there. Although it was still a very good school, Jeff felt he would miss that student experience as his parents felt it would be more affordable to buy him a decent used vehicle and for him to commute back and forth for classes. “I accepted where I was going to school and why,” Jeff said. “It may not have been my personal first choice, but I’m still getting to be a part of the program I wanted and I still have a lot of friends here. Some of us are in a similar situation.”

Jeff described the positive side of his choice to be that he would save a lot of money by living at home and commuting to school and that he would still have many of his friends at the school with him which was a familiar comfort. Jeff was still eligible to receive OSAP but is glad that when he repays his loans it will take him half the amount of time as his friends with student loans that were now across the province. “I don’t need a job through the school year,” he said, “I work in the summer and focus on my school work and help out with my family the rest of the year. It could be worse, I could have not been able to afford to go to school at all. I’m still getting an education, and that’s what’s most important to my family and I.”

Now that Jeff has had some time at his new school he feels he enjoys the experience and that he is still as challenged academically there then he would have been at Laurier. He tries not to think about what he may be missing from a student experience away from home, but did reflect on how different his life and indeed he as a person would be if he had had the financial ability to go to the university he had chosen years ago.

### Findings

At the completion of this study there have been many interesting and somewhat predictable findings about the low-income student experience and what they felt the opportunity cost of choosing an education at Laurier was. The majority of the participants were happy Laurier students who felt they were still able to have a positive student experience for the most part. None of the students that went to Laurier that were surveyed felt that they were necessarily giving up anything to pursue this path of education, save for maybe having to spend time working instead of time with friends. It was made clear by all students that the issue of debt was a personal one, but that they all realized that an education is an investment and they are optimistic their decisions will pay off in the long run.

Surrounding the issue of fees and spending, most of the students said that they felt that living standards in Waterloo were high. One student even speculated that grocery stores closest to the university raise their prices because they know that most university students will come to their stores because of their proximity to the school and because food is an obvious commodity. One of the major complaints from low-income students surrounded the cost of books. According to the OSAP Eligibility Manual students of the general arts and sciences are allotted \$300 per term for their text books.<sup>22</sup> Brittany noted in her survey that her books in her arts and science program average out to about \$600

---

<sup>22</sup> Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, pg. 21

per semester. This raises another generalization by the OSAP program that is inaccurate to real student fees. This participant said that for some classes she does not buy the textbooks if she cannot find them used because the editions of textbooks change too frequently and are too much money.

All of the students that answered the survey stated that they have experienced some degree of stress in regards to their monetary situation. This stress ranged anywhere from just being worried about how much money they had to being embarrassed about not having much to use. When the students felt that their student experience might be suffering is where they felt the most stress. "I feel like I've had to grow up a lot faster than some of my friends," one participant said.

When asked the questions surrounding opportunity cost and what participants would have done if they hadn't come to Laurier, all the students said that they would have explored options of going to school closer to home to cut back on costs and one participant replied that he would have worked in the labour force until he was able to afford his education. This was also seen in Jeff's testimony. The students were very aware of the responsibilities of student debt, although they may not be completely aware of how much debt they will be in once interest is charged to their loan accounts.

### Bursaries at Laurier

In the study, participants were asked how they felt about the availability of scholarships, bursaries and grants at Laurier. Jenna received an entrance scholarship and bursary coming into her first year at Laurier but since that year she only received the annual student bursary. Jenna said that she came to rely on the bursary that was made available to students at the beginning of second term. "You have to look for it. I think this was the first year I received an e-mail to my Laurier account saying when the deadline was and how to apply." When the bursary is released in the end of March, Jenna says that she uses that money to pay off the credit card debt that she had acquired over the year. "I count on the bursary." Similarly Brittany made it clear that she relies on the undergraduate bursary to be able to pay for rent in the spring and without it she would be at a loss for how to account for that money.

Nile did not receive any scholarships from the school at any point in time, "I have received a few bursaries and grants over the years. But these sources are so uncertain and limited that I cannot rely solely on them." However Nile says that any bursary or grant he did receive was an amount substantial enough to impact his need to other financial assistance. Although he said that he is grateful for all the money that is given to him, he does not feel that this type of assistance cannot be relied upon. Nile commented that unless a student is proactive enough to dig out the information, which takes time and effort in itself, there is little awareness on our campus about the bursaries and awards available. Not to mention that chances are that students who are forced to work on top of their academic study and extra curricular activities often cannot find the time to constantly be on the hunt for awards they might not receive. Because this source of funding is uncertain and sometimes inaccessible students are forced to find a guaranteed source of income.

Every student in the study agreed that when it comes to bursaries at Laurier these competitions are not advertised enough. Each student felt that the bursaries and

scholarships that Laurier offers are kept somewhat hidden and the application process may not even be known until the deadline has or is about to pass. While half the students surveyed felt that Laurier provided enough bursaries, the other half felt that the school was not generous enough to real low-income students.

Participants were also asked to comment on the price of tuition at Laurier. In Ontario students are fortunate to have at least some of their tuition subsidized by the government. This is comparable with some of the eastern provinces where the tuition is approximately \$5000 a term. Students are not ignorant of the mechanics it takes to run a university: not only the professors and teaching assistants, but all the full and part time staff at the Registrar's Office, Business Office, Financial Aid Office, department faculty, everyone who works in admissions and student recruitment – as one participant, Nile, put it, “The management has to be run and the faculty has to be paid. And then as a student, the cost of education is high I feel. I empathize for both the parties.”

## Conclusion

The value and burden of the student experience lies with the real low income students of Wilfrid Laurier University. Some of these students are forced to juggle it all: academics, part time employment, volunteer work and a social life with their peers. The findings have been all around similar, that those students that come from a low income situation often have an already troubled past of hardships and burdens. It has become evident through the entirety of this study that the problem lies with the financial aid system, not necessarily the bursaries that Laurier provides. That being said, the bursaries that Laurier does provide need to be better advertised to the low-income student population so that those truly in need are able to take advantage of the funds available.

Low-income students are forced to look at their education as an investment that will hopefully pay off later in life. One of the benefits that is often brought up to console low-income students is that because low-income students often have increased responsibilities they may be more prepared for what life will be like when they leave the university and enter the working world or further their quest for higher education. However, this is little consolation when students consider some of the hardships they had to go through and the stress they had to endure considering their need to work and their amount of student debt.

When students come into university thinking about student debt it is not common that the perception of what the ramifications will be like. Nile believes that it will take him up to 5 years to completely repay his student loans. If he does land a job in a corporation this may be a possibility, however not everyone graduating university in various fields will have the opportunity to repay their debts so quickly due to fluctuations in the job market upon graduation. More education should be provided to students about the responsibilities of financial debt and the opportunities for scholarships and bursaries while in the high school system, but also when these students come to Laurier and participate in orientation week. A seminar to first year students about the accessibility of further student aid may decrease the amount of stress and feeling of burden on the students.

In the end, the consensus with the student participants was that it is worth putting themselves thousands of dollars in debt and spending years paying it and the accumulated

interest back in order to receive an education away from their hometowns at Wilfrid Laurier University. This university offers a dynamic student experience and community atmosphere to all its students and that is something that is cherished by the low-income population at Laurier. Despite their struggle to study, students with financial aid that have had the opportunity to come this far are grateful for the experience and the education they are receiving. For those who have had to hold themselves back however, their experiences are different. As Canadian citizens, the government should recognize that education for low-income students is just as important as for a student in any other financial bracket. In fact, these opportunities may be even more important if they wish to break out of the low-income bracket themselves; such a feat would certainly require a good education. So this lies with a call to the government to be accountable to the young people of their country, for investing in bright, young, Canadian minds is an investment in the future of our country.

## Bibliography

Benedict, Julian, *New Organization Champions Loan Reform*, Educated Solutions, Vol. 3, Pulsar Printing: 2007. pg. 6.

House of Commons. 2008. "The Budget," *Debates*. 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament, 2<sup>nd</sup> session. Vol. 142. (February 26-27), pp 3337-44, 3364-71. Ottawa. Queen's Printer.

Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities Student Support Branch, *Ontario Student Assistance Program 2007 – 2008 Student Eligibility and Financial Need Assessment Manual*, June 2007

Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, *Solutions: A Vision for Higher Education in Ontario*, November 2007, pg.

Millennium Scholarship Foundation, *About the Millennium Scholarships*, April 2008.  
<http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/en/aboutus/index.asp>

Statistics Canada, *Consensus families, number and average size*. March 2008  
<http://www40.statcan.ca/cgi-bin/getcans/sorth.cgi?lan=eng&dtype=fina&filename=famil40.htm&sortact=2&sortf=3>