

**Transcript for Lightning Session: BCFS, Fund It, Fix It (November 1, 2023)**  
**104d Studio23, Day 1**  
**Presenter: Melissa Chirino**

MELISSA CHIRINO:

Hi, my name is Melissa Chirino. I'm the chairperson of the BC Federation of Students. I want to thank BCcampus for having the student voice here. As always, you folks are great to work with. Yeah, I'm happy to be here. But a little bit about me. I moved to Canada six years ago from Curaçao, and I really thought my educational journey was going to be me going to college, wrapping it up, and going back home. But obviously that was not the case. I got involved with the advocacy work. And I'll just tell you a bit about the BC Federation of Students. We're a provincial scale student union in the province. We have 14 members in different ridings. And really is to make sure that we have all the student voices at the table when we are advocating, talking to government, and making sure that we have all the different needs of students in our asks when we are bringing this forward. And yeah, we provide folks with advocacy services and representation.

One of the things that I really want to emphasize is that the Federation's primary focus is to work for an affordable, accessible, and high quality public post-secondary education system in British Columbia and in Canada entirely. We want to make sure that folks are able to get their education and are getting a good quality one. One thing that I often thought about when I was trying to get into the student union and getting involved in advocacy work, is that the reason why I'm here is, not for me as an individual. I'm here for folks that were not able to access education. Not everyone has the resources. People choose not to go and get higher education because of the resources that they're lacking. So that's always on top of my mind all the years that I've been advocating that I want to make sure. And I'm not going to fix it, but I want to really strive for making education accessible for people that don't have that access.

The reality of students has changed over the years. There's some similar concepts here, but students are having to work more than two or three jobs to support themselves, whether that's for them paying for tuition, fees, for housing, it has become increasingly unaffordable. Students are living in precarious housing situations. Specifically, I've heard many stories of international students that are four students living in a one-bedroom apartment because they simply cannot afford housing here. I know you folks probably know that's also a big struggle for you. But it is something that students are feeling more and more now. Students are also avoiding to purchase mandatory school materials due to the high costs because it's so expensive. And BCcampus has done amazing work when it came to the open education resources, but it is still something that folks really struggle with. Student Unions are also seeing an increase of the food banks on campus. We're also hearing stories of how when students are reaching out to local food banks, they're being rejected because they're international students or because they just simply don't have enough resources. I just want to emphasize how students have diversified. There's students that are mature students, there's parents, international students, trade students. Students are not the typical 18-year-olds graduating from high school and going into

the post-secondary education system anymore. We have diversified and students are very diverse now.

The issue that I want to bring forward to you is that tuition fees have skyrocketed. I'm more than happy to nerd out about this. I now have less than 10 minutes left now. But definitely come to the table and I can tell you all about what happened in the past. But tuition fees have doubled since 2001, and students are graduating with high amounts of debt. Tuition fees make up 50% of budgets of institutions, and we're seeing that the government funding has decreased. Government funding was previously, in 1980s, around 80% of operating grants. That has gone down, on average, to 40% now, so a lot of that cost has been put on to students. And we're also seeing how there's been so many cuts at different institutions. If you're from a rural institution, you probably have felt that with services being cut and things not running as they used to before because of the lack of funding. Additionally, we've been seeing over reliance on international student fees, which can be very dangerous if anything were to happen like the pandemic. And we're not getting those tuition fees, like we're really going to see gaps in funding that institutions have. That's why we have the funded fixing campaign.

Essentially, this campaign is aimed to increase funding to post-secondary education and really bring them back to the levels that they used to be in the past. Also, this is a future goal, but honestly, maybe freezing tuition fees at a point. Students are really struggling and we are seeing big issues when it comes to affordability. So how do we support folks that are going to be the future workers of B.C. to actually get education and be amazing folks within our communities?

I don't have this on the slide, but I think it's also worth mentioning one of the great things that we were advocating for that we got the first step to was the funding review, which would have looked at how institutions are being funded. Maybe changing up the pie division, we have been asking for that. There's been some delays there. But do reach out to me if you're interested in collaborating, working together on that.

I just wanted to show you folks, the work that we have gotten done over the last bunch of years. I'm doing the advocacy work. Student advocacy does work. All the students as leaders were once students and were once in these positions. The student advocacy does work. We're a really strong voice in the province and in the world. If your school has a student union, I really want you to go out and meet with them and ask them what they're working on because there might be some great collaborations that you can do with them. What we do as students can affect everyone on campus and essentially we're stronger together. Definitely do reach out to folks on your campus to see how you can collaborate.

I want to wrap this up by just really like having this reflection piece, "Investing in students is the best way to invest in the present and future economy to ensure economic growth in British Columbia." Really thinking about that when you have learners in your classroom. Those are the

future folks that will bring great things to British Columbia, to Canada. Yeah, I just want to finish with that.

Definitely give us a follow, reach out. I think I just want to wrap it up by saying I'm happy to be here but also I'm looking forward to chatting with you folks about how we can fund it, fix it. Thank you.