

The Maclean's university "Ratings" issue: My opinion

If the advance advertising on campus this September had been any indication of its quality, the *Maclean's* "A Measure of Excellence" issue on universities would have been a tool no self-respecting student or educator could be without. Flyers around campus stated "You will want this indispensable issue!" and promised to reveal "How Canada's education system affects your future!" I think it's very safe to say that *Maclean's* recognizes that this issue sells a lot of copies.

The third annual *Maclean's* ranking of Canadian universities claims to be more than it actually is. The survey is in fact a tabulation of universities' scores in a number of categories. Universities are also divided into three types, U.P.E.I. being placed, of course, with other primarily undergraduate institutions.

The survey itself presupposes that a combination of attributes can be "rated." *Maclean's*, in its wisdom, has decreed that the combined scores for these attributes determines the value of an education obtained at that institution. This is a leap of logic and faith that I'm not prepared to make.

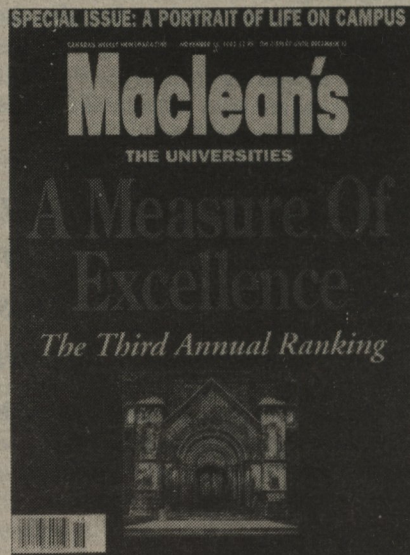
The categories are best explained by looking at how U.P.E.I. fared on each. Scores are out of the 23 universities rated. On the first series of questions, "Student Body," U.P.E.I. rated 14th on average entering grade, 13th on students entering with 75% or higher averages, 4th on the percentage of students who graduate, 6th on the number of first-year students from out of province, and seventh in terms of student awards.

In the category "Classes" we were tied for 15th on median first year class size, 17th on class sizes first and second years, and 14th for third and fourth years. U.P.E.I. also placed 11th in terms of faculty who are tenured.

Under "Faculty," we placed 16th in number of faculty with PhDs, tied for 11th in terms of full-time faculty receiving awards, and were 20th for both humanities and science grants.

U.P.E.I. came in far better in terms of university finances, ranking second for operating budget, eleventh in terms of scholarships and bursaries as a percentage of total budget, and 16th in terms of the percentage of budget allocated to student services.

The Robertson library rated sixth in terms of holdings per student, fourth in terms of library acquisitions, and 16th on "expenses." Finally,



UPEI seventeenth yet again

U.P.E.I. alumni support warranted a 10th place rating and our reputation with other universities warranted a 21st place rating.

The single most important question to be asked in response to these ratings is simply "but what does all this really mean?" *Maclean's* would have us believe that these ratings mean that U.P.E.I. deserves to be rated 17th among primarily undergraduate Canadian universities. I believe that it all actually means less than that. The flaws in the evaluation criteria remove most of the value of the survey.

"I'm willing to accept that it might be possible that U.P.E.I. might place 17th on a more comprehensive rating of educational quality..."

Many of the categories U.P.E.I. was evaluated in simply ignore the fact that this is primarily a teaching institution. Teaching is the focus here, not research. Instead of that aim being rewarded, U.P.E.I. is penalized for not winning as many research grants as other institutions. The idea of being evaluated for the numbers of faculty who are tenured and being penalized for those who do not have PhDs ignores the value of fresh perspectives that newer faculty can bring to a discipline and the value of faculty (particularly in the humanities) who do not have PhDs but have considerable academic and community standing and renown for their work.

The fact that the sum of the survey's parts do not equal its supposed whole is also demonstrated by looking at the "top" undergraduate university, Mount Allison. Mount Allison University is a fine institution and I have no desire to say anything against it. It is important, however, to remember that a university that has \$2,890 tuition (the second highest in Canada) and no security department (in a university with a large residence population -- it was eliminated recently as a cost cutting measure) was rated as the best of its kind in Canada. Mount Allison has also suffered through a debilitating faculty strike a year and a half ago and has had problems with the university's debt load. None of these facts affected its *Maclean's* scores, yet they do affect the overall quality of education that students receive, I maintain.

The *Maclean's* survey is a useful tool when used to examine the quantitative factors it reports, but it does not adequately access the qualitative factors that contribute to the value of an education from a particular institution. I'm willing to accept that it might be possible that U.P.E.I. might place 17th on a more comprehensive rating of educational quality, but I really don't think that it's possible to measure that sort of quality in the way that *Maclean's* does. That sort of value is far more complicated than a series of rankings assigned by editors for whom selling magazines must always be a high priority. "A Measure of Excellence" measures the factors it sets out to, but I remain convinced that the overall results should not be taken as seriously as *Maclean's* would want us to take them.

BRUCE DAVISON