

# EDITORIAL

## Demanding Excellence in Teaching

by Lynne Wanyeki

In the past few weeks, the mainstream press has paid significant attention to the issue of post-secondary education. The recently released Smith Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education raised some eyebrows at the federal level of government. Accordingly, some criticism was directed towards academia, members of whom were seen as being comfortably ensconced in various university bureaucracies. Maclean's magazine jumped up onto the topical bandwagon, and this week's issue featured a Special Report which was largely centered around a survey ranking 46 different universities. Petty bickering over the relative benefits of being in either the civil service or academia aside, the Smith Report and the Maclean's Special Report both raise some interesting and relevant issues for us as students to consider.

In the Maclean's article entitled "What Makes a University Great", Bruce Wallace discussed two criteria of academic excellence: teaching and reputation. He defined teaching excellence solely in terms of academic qualifications of the faculty involved, and student-teacher ratios. He did not define what constitutes an outstanding reputation. For the purposes of this discussion, let us consider indicators of an outstanding reputation to be the quantity and the quality of research emanating from any given university.

What are the benefits to be drawn from both excellence in teaching and an outstanding reputation? Unfortunately (from a student's perspective), more obvious benefits are seen to arise from an outstanding reputation than from excellence in teaching. The argument is as follows: an outstanding reputation draws into any given university highly-qualified faculty members as well as more talented and thus more competitive students. This reputation also attracts larger amounts of funding for further research, which implies the availability of better facilities for the students. Evidently, then, the potential for excellence in teaching is implied by reputation. Yet, in reality, the universities whose reputations were ranked among the highest were also, for the most part, the universities with the highest student-teacher ratios - one of the very indicators of excellence in teaching.

It seems obvious that the benefits of good research are being more heralded than the benefits of good teaching. For good research sustains and perpetuates the very existence of any given university, while good teaching does not. This observation is upheld by the Smith Report which states: "The official policy at almost every Canadian university is that teaching and research are two sides of the same coin, and are given equal weight ... In practice, things are different ... In general, it seems fair to say that while a truly terrible teacher, with average research ability, will not be promoted, the same terrible teacher, with excellent research publications to his or her credit, will be."

The implications of this statement to us, as students, are rather grim. This statement indicates where priorities lie at any given university. If we are at universities to learn, we must expect and, if necessary, demand excellence in teaching. This means that we should not take casually the course assessment forms that are handed out to us towards the end of every term. This means that we should genuinely be curious as to what happens with the results drawn from these forms. This, in fact, means that we should question the efficacy of these forms in serving our needs, and the purposes to which they are put, if they are put to any purpose at all.

Earlier this year, our past Vice-President Academic, Robert Burrige stated that "Teaching is the real business of the institution." It is somewhat encouraging to see that, in keeping with the sentiments of that statement, a new Teaching Centre has been established on campus, headed by a professor of English, Reavley Gair. It remains to be seen how many faculty members will choose to participate in workshops planned by the Centre, as well as how many proposed initiatives to improve teaching the Centre will follow through with.

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This week's issue of the Brunswickan includes a supplement focusing on the issues to be raised at next week's symposium Options East. The symposium is to take place at the UNB Law School and deals with the economic and political choices open to the Maritime provinces and the role these provinces can play in the make-up of Canada. The Brunswickan published the supplement to raise awareness of the issues at hand, and to stimulate debate on campus about these issues. All material used in the supplement came from those involved with Options East, and the organizers are to be commended for their efforts. Enjoy, think, and give us some feedback next week!

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