

EDITORIAL

Maclean's report: A top-ten mentality?

by Allan Carter

A top-ten mentality is how Dr. Tom Traves, UNB's VP Academic, describes *Maclean's* ranking of Canadian universities which appears in the November 9, 1992 issue. Dr. Traves is not alone in his assessment of the magazine's attempt in trying to measure excellence. Many other university administrators, faculty, students and alumni have not been pleased with UNB's ranking, nor are they satisfied with the amount of coverage which UNB was given in the magazine's special issue. UNB ranked 7th out of 12 universities in the comprehensive category. STU ranked 10 out of 18 universities in the primarily undergraduate category. STU president Dr. Daniel O'Brien made very clear his feelings about the magazine's ranking system when he said that the criteria which *Maclean's* used "gives an incomplete picture of what is happening at our institutions of higher learning."

The question which needs to be asked, however, is just how incomplete is this picture? With regard to ranking, *Maclean's* ranked each university on a fairly impressive scale. Each university was judged on: student body, classes, faculty, finances, library and reputation. In addition, there are about 22 categories which fall under one of the above. Obviously, one can argue that much thought, time and effort went into the magazine's survey. The problem which the university community may have with such a survey is that while each university is ranked on the same scale, *Maclean's* really does not make any effort in trying to make clear what the differences in numbers really mean. In other words, as Dr. Traves points out in a news article in this week's issue, what exactly does it mean that UNB is 10th in the average entering grade category and Simon Fraser is first? Given the reaction which people usually have to surveys, many would automatically conclude that there is something wrong with UNB's average entering

grade. However, if the numbers are put into perspective, UNB would naturally rank low in this category simply because it has decided to be more accessible to prospective students than some of the other Canadian universities. In other words, while Simon Fraser's average entering grade is about 83%, UNB's is 74.7%. When people are given the actual facts behind the figures they may not be as upset about the ranking as they first were. *Maclean's* does make an attempt to reveal the facts and procedures which were used to produce the figures, but in many instances they fall short in that attempt.

Thus, ranking universities on the basis of their average entering grade or class size may be acceptable and somewhat useful. But for those who are interested in what facts lie behind the figures, it appears that *Maclean's* has left it up to the reader to find out exactly what they mean. In other words, while *Maclean's* may make a few attempts through their articles to highlight some of these figures and explain the criteria which they used to get these figures, it would be impossible for any print media to encompass all of the reasons and facts behind each figure in such an ambitious study. Further, it would be impossible for any print media to take such a study and analyze fully what exactly it means to be sixth in a certain category instead of first. Nevertheless, it is clear that the results of *Maclean's* survey and the figures which line the 54 page special report, must be viewed in a very cautious and critical manner.

One aspect of the university community which the *Maclean's* report has completely neglected in their survey is what universities have to offer in terms of extra curricular activities. While there is a quick figure given on university funded students services, there are no figures to compare how active Student Unions are at each university. Additionally, *Maclean's* does not rank universities on the basis of what they have to offer students in

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terms of student organizations, clubs and societies. Of course, such groups are not mandatory to an individual's education at university, but it is obvious that such groups provide many extra curricular activities which help stimulate and enhance a student's years at university.

The *Maclean's* report on universities is an honest attempt to try to provide useful information to the public. Ranking universities may be the only method which the magazine finds practical and feasible, however it is a method which justifiably irritates many administrators, faculty, students and alumni. Perhaps *Maclean's* could fulfill their intended mandate better by investigating a variety of issues on a long term basis rather than trying to jam everything into one special issue. Such a technique, however, may not sit well with many readers who would soon grow tired of reading about universities in almost every issue of the magazine.

Ranking universities may not be the fairest method which *Maclean's* could use, however it appears that it may be the only one. Indeed, much of the information is helpful and interesting and should spark some much needed debate at both UNB and STU. But at the same time, one is forced to question whether or not the ranking of universities makes them about as important as the songs on a top-ten chart list.



the
brunswickan

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The Brunswickan, in its 126th year of publication, is Canada's oldest official student publication. The Brunswickan is generally published every Friday during the school year by Brunswickan Publishing Inc with a circulation of 10,000. Membership is open to all University of New Brunswick Fredericton students, but all members of the university community are encouraged to contribute.

The opinions contained in this newspaper are those of the individual writers, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Brunswickan.

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The Brunswickan is printed with flair by Maritime Web in Moncton, and impeccably delivered by Tiny.

Subscription rates are \$25 per year. Second class mail is in effect -#8120

National advertising rates are available from Campus Plus at (416) 362-6468.

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