

THE GATEWAY

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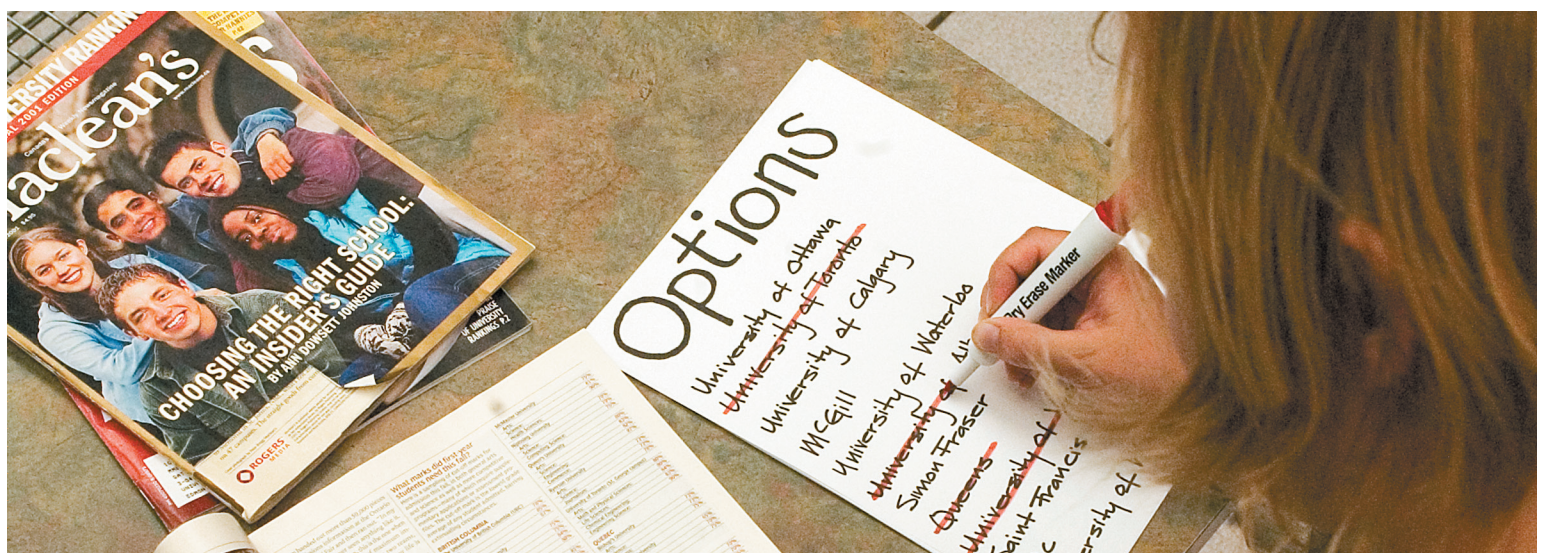


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: ASHLEY SCARLETT

CHOICES, CHOICES So far, twelve universities across Canada, including the U of A, have told *Maclean's* they want out of the magazine's annual education review.

Universities drop out of *Maclean's* survey

Presidents at Alberta's three universities say rankings leave province at a disadvantage

CHLOÉ FEDIO
Managing Editor

While the "Alberta advantage" is a suitable label for the province in most respects, when it comes to university rankings, Canada's richest province says it's being slighted against the rest of the nation.

On 14 August, presidents from eleven of Canada's universities sent a letter to *Maclean's* magazine indicating that they would no longer fill out the questionnaire required to create the magazine's annual university rankings issue, due to what they called an "oversimplified and arbitrary" methodology. And, though the signatories represented institutions from coast to coast, all three of Alberta's universities made a firm stand together on specific issues.

Dr Alan Harrison, Provost and Vice-President (Academic) at the University of Calgary, explained that one main source of contention, shared by all Alberta institutions (not including Athabasca University, which has never been included in the rankings), was the manner in which *Maclean's* calculated university entrance grades, which is weighted about eleven per cent among all of the elements assessed.

"The issue is quite straightforward: it has to do with whether the reported grades for students in one province are directly comparable with the recorded grades in another province," Harrison said. "If you just stack them up side by side, Alberta is disadvantaged."

University of Lethbridge President William Cade said that even though Alberta high-school students have the highest national average in mathematics and language efficiency tests, because provinces have different percentage points for As, entry grades for Alberta universities seem lower than they are in reality.

"Because of grade inflation, some other provinces' universities have higher rankings than the Alberta students, even though the Alberta students are top-notch by all other measures. Grades are a big deal with us—how the magazine gages them—and they've never really addressed that issue at all," Cade said.

Tony Keller, managing editor of special projects at *Maclean's*, agreed that Alberta's complaint is valid, however, he argued that there was no practical solution so far.

"They actually make a good point on this: it is an area that has to be studied," Keller said. "I asked the University of Alberta to provide me with a proposal: I'm still waiting. This is a problem that requires a 200-page solution and all I've gotten from them is one sentence."

Furthermore, the challenges for reforming the way *Maclean's* measures entrance grades extends beyond Alberta, Keller said, pointing to Dalhousie, a university that gets more than a third of its students from outside of Nova Scotia.

"I just don't know how to deal with this. I'm a journalist—I don't run Statistics Canada," Keller said.

PLEASE SEE MACLEAN'S • PAGE 4

Letter signed by eleven universities blames flawed methodology for decision to end participation

WILLIAM WOLFE-WYLIE
CUP Atlantic Bureau Chief

SACKVILLE, NB (CUP)—Tony Keller is the managing editor of special projects at *Maclean's*, working in the same department charged with putting together the annual university rankings. He first heard that eleven universities were pulling out of the annual feature when an *Edmonton Journal* reporter called his office asking for a comment. But that was only the beginning.

"It was very convoluted," said Keller about how he received the letter, which was signed by eleven university presidents. After several other media outlets called him asking for comment, he became concerned that he hadn't yet received a document that seemed everyone else had. "I asked several universities to please send it to me," he said.

Maclean's annual university rankings has withstood criticism for 15 years, but now eleven universities from across the country have declared that they're not going to take part in the 16th survey, stating that the methodology used to compile the statistics is flawed and delivers an oversimplified view of their institutions.

The following universities officially withdrew their support from the magazine's rankings in a letter dated 14 August, 2006: Dalhousie University, McMaster University, Simon Fraser University, the University of Alberta, the University of British Columbia, the University of Calgary, the University of Lethbridge, the University of

Manitoba, the University of Montréal, the University of Ottawa and the University of Toronto.

The letter stated that the methodology used to compile a large number of statistics into a single ranking and that the magazine was comparing "apples and oranges."

The University of Northern British Columbia, for example, was rated eighth overall in 2002 when it had achieved top marks in library acquisitions while falling to the bottom of the pile in scholarships and bursaries.

"When it lumps all these categories together into a single ranking, arbitrarily assigning more points to one category than another based on its own idiosyncratic judgment, it fundamentally misrepresents the character of every institution," said Dalhousie University President Tom Traves.

But Keller disagrees. He points out that overall averages are exactly how universities grade their students and that this, as well, can sometimes fail to properly represent the student. What *Maclean's* is doing is little different, he argues, but it does turn the tables.

"The universities are saying that you can't combine a bunch of grades together into a grade point average. Right," said Keller in a phone interview. "It's the equivalent of a student submitting their transcript," he added.

The 2006 issue of the *Maclean's* university rankings will feature 47 universities, including the universities who have decided not to participate, and will hit newsstands on 2 November.