

Critics call for federal-run evaluations

Samarasekera says that *Maclean's* university rankings are statistically unreliable, as others call for the creation of nation-wide evaluation methods

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Back in August, criticism coming from representatives at Alberta's three main universities concerned the way the magazine calculated university entrance grades, weighted at about eleven per cent out of the assessed categories, and which they felt made Alberta entrance grades seem lower because of different percentage points used for As.

"I don't actually think there's a lot of significance to [the results]. I think *Maclean's* went ahead and just did what it normally would have done otherwise," Students' Union President Sam Power said.

Keller explained that in order to evaluate those universities who had decided not to participate, *Maclean's* used publicly available data.

"A lot of stuff you can get from third party sources," Keller said.

However, Power said the rankings do little to tell universities where they really stand, as some of the data was a year old, and added that the federal government needs to look at how universities can be evaluated on a national scale.

Samarasekera agreed with Power in advocating for the establishment of a national evaluation system, stating that the existence of an organization responsible for looking at the performance of universities would better serve students and faculty.

"We would be very interested in participating in that kind of standardized set of metrics that could be captured," Samarasekera said.

"One of the problems with the *Maclean's* ranking is they don't audit the data, so different universities may be sending data that is not gathered in the same way and therefore not comparable," Samarasekera said, adding that she worried some universities may be even undertaking "gaming," in other words adjusting their data so they look better.

And in a paper released yesterday by the Educational Policy Institute, a Toronto-based think tank, they advocated for the creation of a national unified method of evaluating schools.

"Our purpose for looking at this is not particularly based on university accountability, our purpose for looking at this is just to be able to create a reasonably useful set of data," Alex Usher from the Educational Policy Institute said.

Usher also noted that universities put out enormous amounts of data, but not every institution collects it in the same way.

"In my mind, if people had enough data people could create whatever rankings they wanted," Usher said.

But Keller stressed that if universities are unhappy with the *Maclean's* rankings methodology they're always welcome to help the magazine develop

a stronger model, rather than boycott participation.

And while Samarasekera noted she isn't a great promoter of *Maclean's* rankings, she also said she was pleased to see the U of A come first in the national reputation category.

"I think there's huge improvements needed for those ranking to be more meaningful, [but] having said that we were very pleased with the national reputation survey," Samarasekera said. "That was good news, it means that people are increasingly becoming aware of the high quality of a University of Alberta education. And that will help us attract some of the best students from Alberta, Canada and the world to come to the U of A."

Usher further pointed out the controversy surrounding the reliability of the *Maclean's* rankings has sparked constructive debate.

"I think there's a willingness to talk about the issue that was not there even six months ago," Usher said. "If there's one thing that the *Maclean's* [rankings controversy] did is it made institutions aware of the difficulties in inter-institution comparisons that exists."

With the launch of this year's university issue, *Maclean's* has also redesigned its website to allow users to now create their own ranking using a customized evaluation of the data collected in the survey.

High marks for *Globe and Mail* survey

SCOTT LILWALL
Deputy News Editor

The *Globe and Mail's* University Report Card, released in late October, has already received the passing grade from the Administration at the University of Alberta.

"The *Globe and Mail* [report] is becoming a very useful piece of information because they're very clear, they deal with only undergrad students on issues related to undergrad education," said Carl Amrhein, U of A Provost. "So it's crisp—it's pure in that sense."

The fifth edition of the annual University Report Card, which was compiled using survey results from nearly 33 000 undergraduate students across Canada, gave a letter grade to various instructions for a number of categories, including overall satisfaction, food service, and availability of faculty members outside of class. The grading system was designed to help prospective students make an informed decision when applying to postsecondary institutions.

"I hope it has some impact," said Simon Beck, editor of the University Report Card, in an e-mail sent to the *Gateway*. "It's not meant to be the only resource university

applicants should use, but a complement to other more traditional sources of information."

The study assigned a letter grade for over 60 different categories, with the scores based off of the average response of students from those institutions. Beck explained that the grading system was used in place of traditional ranking systems because it provided a better understanding of what the institutions offered to students.

"The old method did not take into account differences in size between schools, and was misleading in that there was not often a big statistical difference between schools that were placed high or lower in each ranking. We switched to a letter grading system in 2004, which is much more reflective of the actual survey results and a better guide for the reader," Beck said.

In this year's issue, the U of A scored top marks for its academic reputation and the personal safety of its students, with an A for both. Lower marks were given for other areas, with Cs in both student residences and on-campus employment opportunities. Amrhein says that the information contained in the rankings has an impact on how the U of A

views itself and what plans it makes for its future.

"We take very seriously the information contained in the Report Card, especially relative to other universities. For example, class size and advising [are things] we clearly need to worry about," Amrhein said. "We look at these things as we work with the students and work through the budgets."

Beck also believes that the *Globe and Mail's* university reports, and others like it, have had an effect on the way that universities do business and what areas they focus on.

"I think there is now a huge drive by universities to improve the student experience and make campus life much more enjoyable for their customers. I think this is partly because our Report Card brought the issue to light in the first place. Our survey made it clear that issues such as huge class sizes and lack of interaction between faculty and students was marring the student experience, especially in the larger institutions. Now, these are issues every university is addressing," Beck concluded.

A full report of all of the grades for the U of A and other universities across the country can be found at www.globeandmail.com

THE RATE STUFF

While both the *Globe and Mail* and *Macleans.ca* rated Canada's universities, the methods used by the two were quite different. The *Globe and Mail* surveyed students and assigned a letter grade for each category. *Maclean's* spoke to current students, university officials, guidance counsellors and corporate CEOs, assigning each university a place compared to other institutions. Here's how Alberta stacks up to the rest.

Globe and Mail University Report Card

Category	Grade
Faculty's knowledge of subjects	A
Tolerance for diverse opinions	A-
Attractiveness of campus	B+
Health Services	B
Quality of teaching	B
School spirit	B-
Class sizes	C+
Needs-based scholarships	C
Food Services	C-

Macleans.ca University Ranking Tool

Category	Ranking
Reputational survey	1st
Faculty with PhDs	2nd
Student awards	5th
Library holdings per student	6th
Medical research grants	9th
Operating Budget	9th
Alumni support	21st
Proportion of graduates	24th
Student retention	28th

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