Analysis

The obsession with ranking needs to end

by Derek Carlisle

One unwritten rule in the world of journalism is when you come across a good "beat", you become reluctant to part with it. Last year, *Maclean's* magazine discovered they were on to a good thing by examining the university beat in Canada.

At a meeting of the UPEI Student Council this week I learned from the Board of Governors Representatives that university administrations across the country spent two million dollars in staff-time for necessary research to compile the required information for *Maclean's*.

Now granted, this sum looks quite large on a Canada-wide basis, but at the local level just think of some of the things university administrations and their staff people could have been doing instead of catering to *Maclean's* whims.

How about researching university curriculum or making improvements in student services? What about beefing up scholarship and bursary programs? I know filling out forms and responding to surveys is one of my least-favorite tasks.

When FORTUNE magazine compiles its annual list of the world's richest billionaires do you think some of the world's wealthiest people, like the Irving's, are willing to fork out two million dollars to help the magazine come up with its findings? Think again!

After just two years, university administrations have taken a "Damned if you do, damned if you don't" approach to participating in the *Maclean's* survey. Other than the reputational part of the survey, most of the information used by *Maclean's* is available to the public and compiled by organizations like the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission.

The problem arises when overworked university staff do not always have the time to keep the information ready and updated when *Maclean's* starts pestering them.

Last week I attended a student forum at Saint Thomas University and two members of the administration explained the cautious approach they took with this year's survey.

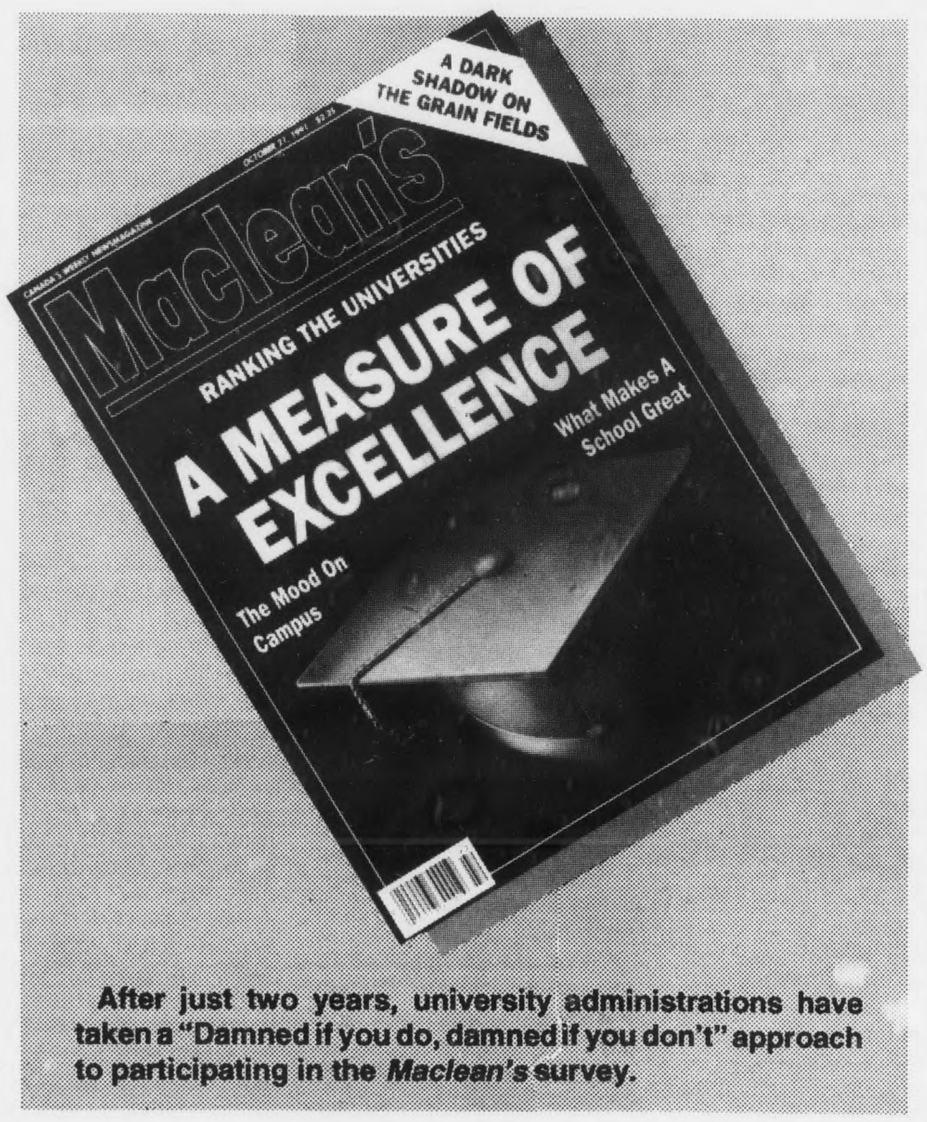
Although they were somewhat encouraged by some of the changes made by the magazine, Saint Thomas refused to take part in the reputational aspect and one administrator admitted to actually throwing that part of the survey in the trash can.

The reasons offered were that Saint Thomas does not actively solicit alumni for funding. Nor do they believe that high-profiled alumni should have any bearing on what their university has to offer its students.

For an example of this, one has to simply think of the plight of Saint Francis Xavier University. With his popularity rating hovering at a lower percentage of people who think Elvis is still alive, would you be proud to boast Brian Mulroney as one of your alumni?

When it came time for Mulroney's eldest child to decide on which university to attend, where did she turn? To charming, sleepy Antigonish, Nova Scotia? Uh-uh. No, instead we learn from *Maclean's* that Caroline Mulroney is now one of 122 Canadians attending Harvard University with its $30,000 a year price tag. (I wonder if this falls within the jurisdiction of the Canada Student Loan Program?)

It is hard to dismiss the whole *Maclean's* survey as all-out gobbledygook. Edi tor Kevin Doyle seems to come out in favour of a National Ministry of Advanced Education in the opening article of the issue. This is something that has long been advocated by groups like the Canadian Federation of Student s. (I should be entitled to at least one free plug for CFS, shouldn't I?)



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With so many discrepancies in federal transfer payments, some government officials almost casually refer to monies intended for education ending up in the form of asphalt for our highways.

This past weekend I visited two friends and the *Maclean's* rankings were a hot topic of discussion. It turns out that the three of us completed BA degrees at different universities: the top ranked school in the "Medical/ Doctoral" category, and the seventh and eighth ranked schools on the "Comprehensive" list.. (Okay, so a little bit of homework is involved here. Everyone should at least read through the issue and decide for themselves.)

Who is to say that any of us have a higher quality degree than any of the others? My friend who attended the "number one" school in the Medical category admitted that he was never in a lecture class of less than 100 students. My other friend and I were fortunate to have small class environments, particularly in our last two years.

My job takes me to university and college campuses in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. It does not take long to recognize that all of the universities in this region have unique characteristics and offer different options for their students.

It is ridiculous to make comparisons. *Maclean's* should be focusing more on the type of information they present in the "Class Options" section of the issue. There we discover that UPEI is renowned for its veterinary program and that UNB has a strong forestry engineering program. No surprise to most of us. But why no mention of the Shippagan campus of the University of Moncton which has one of the few fisheries management programs in Canada? The list could go on.

No offense to Mount Allison, but reading the article on their number one placement in the "Primary Undergraduate Universities" does not provide a true indication of the entire picture there.

There is only one small mention of the faculty strike this spring which had students in a state of limbo for two weeks wondering whether they would be able to complete their academic year.

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The university has serious budget problems with more cost-cutting measures in the years to come. Don't forget the highest tuition fees in Canada and that lingering question of who is answering the security calls once the lone security officer goes off duty at 3 A.M.?

A recent survey from an organization studying physical accessibility at campuses around the country finds Mount Allison is one of the worst culprits when it comes to accessibility for disabled students.

Is anyone really impressed with the overhaul of *Maclean's* ranking procedures? The obsession with ranking needs to come to an end. Should UNB continue to take part in an unfair ranking system simply to be charted on *Maclean's* "top 10"? Students at UNB can play an important role in relaying their disapproval to the university administration.

Why not have a movement to pressure *Maclean's* to present a fairer picture of what all universities have to offer? Why does *Maclean's* see fit to exclude all of our colleges which also have a vital role to play in post-secondary education?

Last year at the General Meeting of the Canadian Federation of Stu dents there was a motion moved by the Mount Allison Student's Administrative Council condemning the first *Maclean's* survey. The motion passed unanimously. Stay tuned to this space or to news from council for an update on the student reaction to Maclean's Part II from VP External Tammy Yates once she arrives back from the next CFS meeting.

(As an aside, didn't Frank McKenna graduate from UNB's Law School instead of Dalhousie's — see page 74 of the special Maclean's report..)

Derek Carlisle is the NB and PEI fieldworker for the Canadian Federation of Students

Interested in writing for news?

Anyone who is interested in writing for news is invited to attend the next general staff meeting this Friday at 12:30pm in room 35 in the Student Union Building