

THE REPUTATION-QUALITY PARADOX IN CANADIAN POST SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Not long ago, a colleague and I were talking about Mount Royal's plan to become a new, undergraduate, instructionally-focused university. While supportive, he wondered if students would be better served by, and get more value, from a university with an established reputation, rather than from the new Mount Royal University. He suggested without malice that university reputation was important to students, and thus a degree from a larger research-intensive university would hold more value.

Last week's release of the annual *Maclean's* magazine university rankings (June 19, 2006) suggests that he may have missed the mark. While Canada's research focused universities are indeed outstanding institutions from which anyone would be proud to have a degree, Canadian universities are experiencing what could be called a reputation-quality paradox: the widening gap between a university's reputation — based primarily on research-related measures — and the quality of students' undergraduate experience.

Maclean's concludes that, "Broadly speaking ...students at smaller, primarily undergraduate universities are generally more satisfied than their peers at larger institutions." It goes on to say that "...undergraduate teaching is not sufficiently valued at Canada's big research universities...." In the survey, where undergraduate-centred universities are grouped with research-focused institutions, undergraduate universities are ranked higher on almost every student satisfaction measure. The top five universities in all five satisfaction categories are primarily undergraduate universities (Nipissing, St. Francis Xavier, Mount Allison, Cape Breton, St. Thomas), none of which can match the international research reputations of a Western, Laval, Memorial or Waterloo. As judged by student satisfaction, institutional reputation (based upon size and research), and undergraduate quality are apparently different things.

To those involved in post-secondary education, this is not a new observation.

- When the *Globe and Mail* conducted a student satisfaction survey in 2003, the top-ranked university was undergraduate-focused Trent and the lowest ranked was the research-intensive University of Toronto.
- Studies continue to show that undergraduate-focused universities in the United States send a significantly larger proportion of graduates to graduate professional schools than do research-intensive universities. Last May, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted "...some of the nation's small liberal arts (schools) send more women, proportionately, for PhDs in the sciences than do elite universities."
- Performance indicators for Ontario's 17 universities indicate that undergraduate focused universities lead the province in measures such as employment rates six

months and two years after graduation, participation in graduate and professional school, and student success in obtaining Ontario Graduate Scholarships.

- Peter Smith in his 2006 book, *The Quiet Crisis: How Higher Education is Failing America*, suggested that “America has an historic confusion between academic access, academic quality, prestige and status...this confusion about quality [versus reputation] is widely shared but rarely discussed, making the problem more difficult to confront and resolve....”

In a 2005 article in the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, Dan Lang from the University of Toronto stated that “... there is no credible or convincing evidence that establishes [institutional] research performance as an acceptable surrogate for educational performance.... While ideally reputation and quality ought to be the same, they are not.”

To be clear, I am not criticizing research-focused universities or questioning the important link between scholarship and instruction. I am and will always be one of the biggest supporters of the research imperative of Canadian universities and the critical role these institutions play in the future of our nation. As the former president of one of the undergraduate universities ranked highest by the *Maclean's* satisfaction survey, I emphatically believe that the kind of success reported in the survey rests, to a large degree, on an institution's ability to blend good scholarship with the undergraduate classroom experience.

Rather, this is a plea for more recognition of the need for diversity and choice in Alberta's post-secondary system. The *Maclean's*, and other rankings show that it is becoming more and more difficult for all institutions to be all things to all people. We need outstanding and well-supported research-intensive institutions that provide society with new knowledge for its own sake. And, we need equally well-supported undergraduate-focused institutions. Each should have its own measures of success, should celebrate its unique strengths and contributions, and should work in partnership to ensure that no student is left behind.

But returning to where this discussion started, it's wrong to tell an undergraduate institution, like that which Mount Royal aspires to be, that it needs the “reputation” of a research-focused university. As the *Maclean's* survey and other data shows, when it comes to student satisfaction, it may just be the other way around.

The *Conference Board of Canada* recently reported that Alberta faces a “labour shortage of 332,000 workers by 2025 if current trends continue.” Calgary certainly needs a strong and highly ranked research university. But, one university for a city of Calgary's size and pace of growth is unsatisfactory and unprecedented. Calgarians, especially students, deserve their own “number one ranked” undergraduate university. Mount Royal, with nearly a century of success behind it, is ready to don that mantle.