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Under-rating a University

ISLE MADAME, NS –

Here is the anomaly. The University College of Cape Breton always comes in at or near the bottom of the annual *Maclean's* magazine university rankings. Yet when *Maclean's* attempts to measure "value-added" -- the benefits which universities actually confer on their students -- UCCB comes out on top.

In 1994, for instance, UCCB ranked 17th of 18 "primarily undergraduate" universities -- but first in value-added. In 1997 it ranks 21st out of 23, but in value-added it stands first among English-language universities and fifth overall. The four Quebec universities which lead the value-added scale also flounder near the bottoms of their respective overall rankings. So do Lakehead, Ottawa and Manitoba, all high in value-added.

If UCCB does more for its students than any other university in English Canada, how can it be one of the worst in the country?

I declare a bias. I joined UCCB in 1994 as Dean of Community Studies because I believe that in a knowledge economy Cape Breton's future depends on the success of UCCB -- and UCCB understands that. I resigned last December because my personal situation had changed, but I retain a part-time connection with the university.

For me, "value-added" is close to being the crucial measurement of a university. The heart of a university's mission is the growth of its students, intellectually and otherwise. Such educational "output" is notoriously difficult to measure -- and *Maclean's*, having valiantly attempted to measure it directly, fails to incorporate the results in its overall rankings. Instead the rankings are based on indicators which at best *imply* educational quality -- finances, library holdings, alumni support, entrance standards, research grants and the like.

All nice things, but none has any necessary connection with a university's current performance. Reputation, which counts for 20% of a *Maclean's* rating, may only reflect past glory. A big budget doesn't necessarily mean the money is well-spent. *Maclean's* penalizes UCCB for having the lowest operating budget in the country -- \$3679 per student, versus \$8994 at Regina and \$7654 at Mount Allison. Yet UCCB has recently expanded its degree offerings, moved into graduate studies, expanded its physical plant by 40% and retired a \$3.5 million debt. None of this gains any points with *Maclean's*.

Again, 15% of *Maclean's* weightings derive from the high-school averages of incoming students. The more exclusive the university, the higher its score. At Queen's, 99.8% of freshmen have average grades above 75%; at UCCB, only 35% do. But UCCB is a community institution with a policy of accessibility. Its students are the children of miners, steelworkers, woods workers and fishermen; many are the first in their families ever to attend university.

If you only accept top students, notes UCCB vice-president Ray Ivany, you can't help looking good, because "you're just making silk purses out of silk purses." The real test is the ill-prepared child of working-class parents, for whom a university campus is as alien as Spitzbergen. In Cape Breton -- as in Newfoundland and among the Acadians -- the students of a single university are the hope of the whole community.

The *Maclean's* rankings evoke the traditional model of an ideal university -- ivy-clad and well-financed, with small classes, vast labs and libraries, and brilliant students and faculty who win innumerable awards. But many lively and valuable institutions pursue other models. In this province alone, the survey completely omits three degree-granting institutions: the Atlantic School of Theology, the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and the internationally-renowned Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

The universities naturally dislike the *Maclean's* survey -- but it remains the only source of unbiased information for parents and students who are piling up debt to finance an education. Now in its seventh incarnation, the survey has steadily improved. Like any good critic, it is feared and respected even by those who dismiss it. As recently as 1994, 15 Canadian universities refused to co-operate with it. This year, none did.

If the universities want a different set of ratings, they should commission independent evaluations themselves. Meanwhile, *Maclean's* will continue to be read with intense interest.

"Is that the universities issue of *Maclean's*?" asked the waitress at a truck stop last week. "Look up Saint FX for me."

Saint Francis Xavier University did well this year, I reported, ranking fourth among "primarily undergraduate" institutions.

"They didn't think too much of us when I was there," she laughed. "But I had a good time, anyway."