

# AT ODDS OVER ACADEMICS

## Schools split over success strategies

### Degree-completion rates lead to differing academic approaches

BY SARAH SCHMIDT

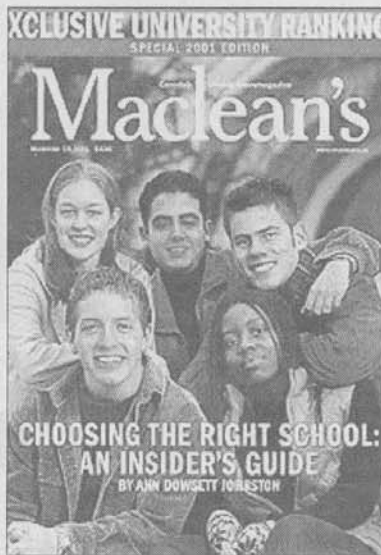
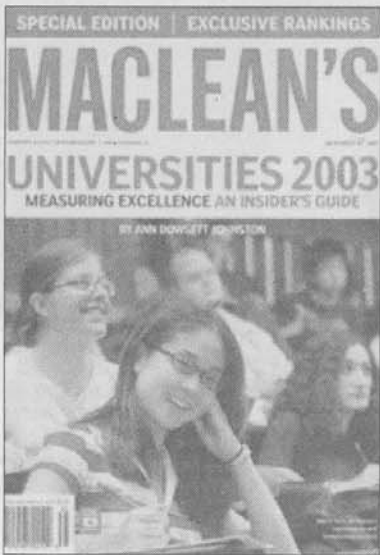
When the University of Waterloo identified a problem with its graduation rate, it made a simple but controversial decision to raise entrance requirements, even if it meant unoccupied seats in some programs.

Concordia University in Montreal takes a decidedly different approach to its stubbornly low degree-completion rates, among the worst in the country. Six years after beginning full-time studies, just over half — 54 per cent — of students have a degree in hand. "We have a tradition of trying to find ways to help students who might need help, rather than turn them away," said Brad Tucker, director of institutional planning.

These two divergent strategies speak to a split among Canadian universities dealing with a persistent problem. In Alberta, the degree completion rate is just 66 per cent; in Ontario, it's about 75 per cent. And underlying the debate currently gripping institutions is a fundamental clash of ideas about the role of a university.

The open-door approach invites interested students to take on the challenge of a university education. Many may falter, but some will thrive. The alternate path is a system of tighter controls built around an emphasis on excellence and high admission standards to attract top-tier students. It's a strategy sure to produce exceptional success rates, but perhaps fewer graduates.

"Having an open-door policy, you give people a second chance. The question is economics — if you have an open-door policy you can identify some nuggets, but at the same time it will cost huge amounts of money," said Raymond Per-



Maclean's annual university rankings issue is traditionally its most well-read and profitable edition. This year's edition hits newsstands Thursday.

## The catfight between universities and 'The Scottish Journal'

Maclean's has found itself stonewalled by some institutions that are unhappy with its school-rankings issue, writes **PAULINE TAM**.

think-tank, says a few universities are determined to fight the magazine's information requests. If that happens, Maclean's is entitled to complain to provincial information commissioners.

In preparing its latest ranking of Canadian uni- The fight took a nasty turn earlier this year when a

"In one or two cases, I

ry, a research fellow at the University of British Columbia's Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth.

The flipside raises an equally difficult question, he said. "The luxury of having restricted access should also be accompanied by a social responsibility. What do you do with all the people that don't get in? You can't turn them out on the street," said Mr. Perry, a psychology professor currently on leave from the University of Manitoba who specializes in the factors that make some university students successful and others not.

Waterloo determined a few years ago that about half the students admitted with an average below 75 per cent failed to graduate within seven years.

It has since systematically raised admission standards to increase its completion rate, which now stands at about 80 per cent.

"This data seem to suggest there was a relationship between entering grades and success and completion," said Bruce Mitchell, associate provost of academic and student affairs. "That was Part 1. The other part was the University of Waterloo has always felt it attracted high-quality students, so we wanted to reinforce that tradition. How can we enhance the quality and excellence of this place? One way would be to enhance the quality and excellence of its students."

Carleton University takes a different approach.

It, too, traces the graduation rates of its students by high-school admission averages. And its findings are similar to Waterloo. Among undergraduate students who were admitted in 1999 with a high-school average of between 70 and 74.9 per cent, just over half of them — 54 per cent — had graduated by last spring, seven years after beginning their studies.

Among those with entrance averages between 75 and 79.9 per cent, the graduation rate is 65 per cent. There is an 85.3-per-cent degree-completion rate among those admitted with high-school averages between 90 and 94.9 per cent.

While Carleton strives to attract the strongest students, it doesn't turn away applicants with high school marks below a certain threshold, says Ann Tierney, Carleton's associate vice-president of student and academic support services.

Universities, *Maclean's* magazine used freedom-of-information laws to demand data it once got for free from unco-operative schools.

The University of Toronto reportedly put the cost of processing the request at \$45,000.

Another request, received by Carleton University, sought any records — including e-mails — that referred to the magazine by name. The university reacted by instructing staff to drop the word *Maclean's* from all correspondence.

For a time, the magazine was code-named "The Scottish Journal."

Some universities are prepared to stand their ground and force *Maclean's* to appeal to provincial information commissioners for the release of detailed data on their student body.

Such is the state of relations between *Maclean's* and the 22 universities that no longer supply the magazine with information for what is traditionally its most well-read and profitable issue. When this year's edition hits the newsstand Thursday, it will contain information on many top universities that's at least a year old.

*Maclean's* was forced to re-use old data because of a dispute with some of the country's largest universities, which for years have been unhappy with the magazine's rankings.

Granted, nearly half of lower-performing high-school students don't graduate after earning admission at Carleton, but if all were excluded, none would earn their credentials. And late bloomers also deserve a fair shake, she said.

"We don't bar them," said Ms. Tierney.

This fall, for example, 421 students out of a freshman class of 3,239 were admitted with high-school averages below 75 per cent. Another 751 students were admitted with high-school averages between 75 and 79.9 per cent.

"We want to encourage strong academic students, and they have been coming here — and that's great. But there are many students who still come in with 75 per cent who are go-

ing to succeed at university, and we believe they can succeed," said Ms. Tierney.

Part of the Carleton strategy is the opening last year of the First-Year Experience Office to help freshmen deal with the academic transition from high school to university.

Carleton's new Learning Commons, set up in the main library, is a one-stop shop for academic support services, including advising, writing tutorials and workshops; drop-in hours allow students to come in for help while studying for an exam or working on an essay.

The University of Victoria, meanwhile, is monitoring the situation. Among those who began their studies in September 1999, the average entering grade of successful graduates

was 83.6 per cent. Those no longer enrolled at UVic and who left without a degree had an average entering grade of 81.8 per cent. UVic considers the difference small, but worth keeping an eye on. In the meantime, its focus is on programs to improve student success.

But others, like Concordia University, the University of Winnipeg, the University of Calgary and York University, don't analyse graduation rates by average entering grades.

"As a general rule, it's fair to say the higher the student's academic performance, the greater likelihood of persisting and graduating," conceded Robert Tiffen, vice-president of students at York, where the degree-completion rate stands at 67.8 per cent.

think the institutions are daring *Maclean's* to go to the information commissioner," said Mr. Usher.

Some schools, sensitive to the suggestion that they are thwarting the public's right to know by boycotting the *Maclean's* survey, have devised strategies for appearing open and accountable.

The U of T, University of Western Ontario and Queen's University have pre-empted *Maclean's* by posting updated student information on their websites, ahead of the publication of the special issue.

Others, such as Carleton, Dalhousie University and the University of Lethbridge, have invoked extensions allowed under provincial laws to release the requested data at a later date.

About half the country's universities — including top-ranked McGill — voluntarily submitted information to *Maclean's*. For the remainder, the magazine relied on year-old data to produce the 2006 rankings, says Tony Keller, *Maclean's* managing editor of special projects.

Mr. Keller says the rankings are based on solid methodology because the information fluctuates little from year to year.

"They are the best publicly available data, so I have every confidence anybody using our ranking will find it to be a very useful package."

WITH FILES FROM SARAH SCHMIDT