

## ◆ POINT OF VIEW ◆

# U of C undergrad students among best in the world

by Tom Flanagan

During the previous academic year, I had a unique opportunity to carry out an almost experimental comparison of the performance of undergraduate students at two Canadian universities.

After being the Seagram Visiting Professor of Canadian Studies at McGill in fall 1999, I came back to my usual teaching position in the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary in winter 2000. The opportunity for experiment came from the fact that I taught exactly the same course at our university as at McGill.

When I say "exactly the same," I mean just that. I used the same readings, lecture notes, homework assignments, and final exam questions. As luck would have it, the class size was also the same—18. The only difference was a slight change in the order of presentation for a few topics.

The subject I was teaching—game theory for political scientists—lends itself well to a comparative evaluation of student abilities because it demands considerable analytical facility. A student cannot get high marks simply by being well informed, speaking fluently, or writing smoothly. Those who can master the art of setting up and solving game models have a high level of whatever is measured by standard intelligence tests.

same sorts of questions as the

Calgary students. A couple of students in each class were the scary type who understood everything right away and were obviously smarter than the instructor! Others had to struggle hard to comprehend even the most basic points. I also had the same general impression in another course I taught at McGill, i.e., that both the mean and the variance of intellectual ability among undergraduate students were about the same as at the U of C.

McGill was ranked fourth among medical-doctoral universities in Canada in 1999. It recruits aggressively across the country, and indeed internationally, to enrol top-quality undergraduate students; and it seems to succeed to the extent that ability can be measured by high-school grades.

How then can it be (if my data and impressions can be trusted) that the average intellectual ability of McGill undergraduates is

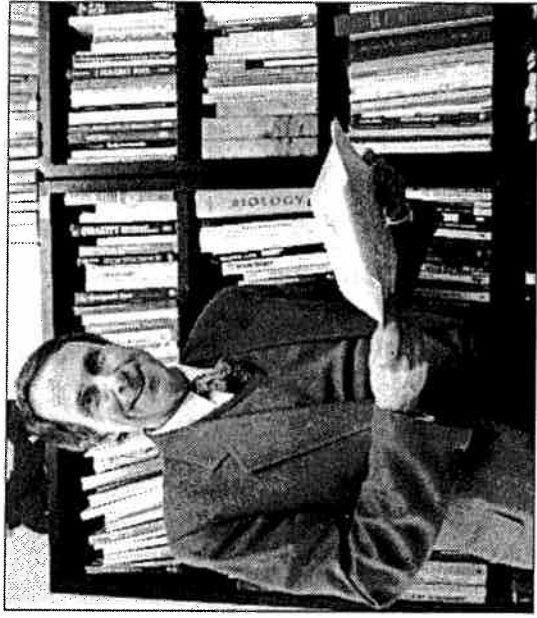
similar to that of students at the University of Calgary?

Of course, many ad hoc explanations are possible. My samples were fortuitous rather than random, and the sample sizes were small, so maybe my results were just a statistical fluke. I certainly wouldn't want to claim too much on the basis of one semester's experience working with small numbers of students. It would be interesting to hear from colleagues at the University of Calgary to see if their experiences teaching elsewhere parallel mine.

My guess, however, is that more than a statistical fluke is involved. There is known to be great variability in high-school grading practices in Canada, both within and among provinces. This variability, coupled with the absence of nationally standardized tests of ability and achievement, makes it difficult for universities aspiring to elite status to recruit a truly elite student body. One can de-

bate whether that is good or bad, but I believe it to be a fact.

One consequence of this situation is that Canadian universities that don't rank high in the Maclean's survey may nevertheless enrol substantial numbers of brilliant undergraduates. This has been my consistent experience teaching at the University of Calgary since 1968. When I met my first classes, I quickly realized they contained some students who would have been outstanding at



Flanagan

DENNIS UROUHART

the American and German universities at which I had been educated. The increase in the participation rate in advanced education over the last three decades means there is now a higher proportion of ordinary students, but the brilliant ones are still there, too.

When I go back to the classroom in September, I will again look forward to meeting undergraduates who would be outstanding at any university in the world.