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## **OttawaWatch 97: University politics – and faith**

**By Lloyd Mackey**

*In the fifteen years since this piece was written, Christian Protestant (and generally evangelical) universities have gained substantive recognition in the world of educational politics. And many of the schools that were near-universities at the time have now gained full status – my own DMin alma mater, Tyndale University, included. And my other (MBA) alma mater, Simon Fraser University, generally rates high in these surveys, in the “comprehensive” category. And, I am enjoying a good rapport with one segment of SFU life, as a volunteer “chaplaincy support” person in the school’s Multifaith Centre.*

Carleton University was a local news story in Ottawa this week, for a number of reasons that might well relate to national educational politics in Canada.

David Atkinson, who was Carleton president for just 15 months, resigned suddenly, in a so-far-unrevealed dispute with the school’s board of governors.

Atkinson came to Carleton from a 10-year presidency at Brock University, a smaller school in St. Catharines, located on the Niagara Peninsula, between Hamilton and Niagara Falls.

As I indicated, the reason for his resignation has not yet been officially revealed. But various Ottawa press reports indicated that Atkinson had shown a rather robust – some even referred to it as intemperate – response to the ratings that Carleton received in the annual *Maclean’s* magazine university ratings.

The ratings and the special magazine edition connected with them has become controversial in the last year or two, in part because several university presidents maintain that the reports are skewed to present the more unflattering aspects of student and academic life.

Whether that is at the root of the dispute between Atkinson and the Carleton board is still a bit of a moot point.

But the fact is that the rivalry between unilingual-English Carleton and its bilingual and somewhat more historic University of Ottawa (Ottawa U) is a continuing subject for debate in academic Ottawa. Indeed, there was a time, about a dozen years ago, when Carleton was tottering on the edge of insolvency, while the Ottawa U, with its downtown campus, handy to The Hill, was growing and prospering.

The signs marking the entrances to Ottawa U, identify it as “Canada’s University.”

That may well be, although, as a journalist coming from western Canada, I personally knew much more about suburban Carleton than its downtown counterpart, before moving here eight years ago. That may well be because Carleton is home to a well-regarded journalism program. Anyone who has been in the newspaper world will know at least one or two highly capable Carleton grads.

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Because rivalries between universities can, at times, become rancorous – especially when controversial but highly-documented findings appear in “Canada’s newsmagazine” – the view from Ottawa regarding Canada’s post-secondary institutions becomes relevant. And, of course, there is a faith-based aspect to the issues involved, which we will explore in a moment.

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One of the unfair – perhaps even elitist – aspects, in the minds of many Christian people who have watched the *Maclean’s* surveys develop over the years, was the fact that Protestant universities were left out of the surveys, while at least one Catholic institution, to wit, St. Francis Xavier in New Brunswick was always included.

For some years, the oversight seemed aimed at one particular school, Trinity Western University, in BC’s Fraser Valley. As more Protestant Christian universities developed, replacing such venerable institutions as McMaster and Waterloo Lutheran, which had “gone public”, the omission seemed more philosophical than purposeful.

The newer schools, Canadian Mennonite, St. Stephens and Atlantic Baptist universities, were added to the singular seeming discrimination against Trinity Western.

Now some of my good Catholic friends would be quick to point out that one visit of a Trinity Western fan to the 150-year-old St. Francis Xavier, would show that the latter school is much more generously endowed and highly developed, and is thus deserving of the *Maclean’s* rating. I would not want to quibble, but rather am interested in trying to see if a consistent principle is developed.

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That is why I was intrigued, a few weeks ago, to see a newly developed *University Report Card* drop out of my *Globe and Mail* one morning.

The report, just as glossy and impressive as that produced by *Maclean’s* falls somewhat short of the latter in terms of comprehensiveness. By its own admission, it is a student rating of the schools, and does not include a lot of other measuring sticks that are part of the *Maclean’s* reporting system.

Nevertheless, it does a credible job of rating the reports from 37,500 students of 49 Canadian universities. And, in addition to St. FX, three faith-based institutions are included – all in the “very small” school category (less than 4,000 students). They are Trinity Western, St. Thomas (a Catholic New Brunswick school) and Concordia University College of Alberta, a Lutheran institution.

The inclusion of a university college, apart from its faith connection, is consistent with the *Report Card* decision to include near-universities which are soon expected to have full institutional status. One such is the University College of the Fraser Valley.

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I will wrap up these observations today with an indication of how Trinity Western did vis-à-vis other “very small” universities. The 45-year-old acknowledged Canadian leader in the development of evangelically-based liberal arts and science education can be justifiably proud of some results, as well as just a tad embarrassed at others. In doing so, I will make some comparisons with St. FX, precisely because it was included in *Maclean’s*, while TWU was omitted.

I should note that St. FX falls into the “small” university category – enrolment between 4,000 and 12,000. It has an enrolment slightly over 4,000: TWU is slightly under.

Under the heading of “quality of education” – the first-listed category Trinity comes out on top in the very small classification, with an A+. St. FX rated second, behind Nipissing U in the small classification.

Under the “academic reputation” heading, St. FX rates an A+ for first place in its classification, while Trinity takes third spot in its class, with an A-. (As it happens, a former Baptist school, Nova Scotia’s Acadia University, beat out TWU for second spot, in the “very small” category.)

In quality of student services, TWU was third in its class and St FX, ninth, it its.

Under the “Most Satisfied Students” heading, both St. FX and TWU ranked second in their respective classifications.

The points on which TWU might be most embarrassed are the library (last out of eight), student residence (second-to-last out of eight) and food service (second-to-last out of eight) categories. Under those same headings, St. FX is, respectively, 4<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> out of 14 and 11<sup>th</sup> out of 14.

And, just to end on a positive note, Trinity topped its category under the “quality of career preparation” heading.

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The *Report Card* included a “cool” vignette from Trinity Western. I repeat it here:

Just because a school is tiny doesn't mean it's not plugged into the corporate world. In 2004, Sarah Weigum left the farm town of Three Hills, Alberta, for Trinity Western University. She picked the 3,500-student Christian school in Langley, BC, for its communications program, turning down offers from better-known journalism schools at Ryerson and Carleton. She was willing to overlook Trinity Western's strict code of conduct rules.

“The direct feedback from professors, the way we talk back and forth, made for an incredible learning experience,” says the 21-year-old. And the skills she learned won her a four-month internship this fall at the *Ottawa Citizen* newspaper.

Having given Trinity Western this generally favorable plug, permit me to state my potential conflict of interest. It is that I have a warm spot for the communications program, given the opportunity permitted me periodically to teach in it. If enough students are enrolled, my next such opportunity will take place for six weeks in January and February, 2008. The course will be “Journalism in Political Context”, an offering last presented in 2005.

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