

Help choosing a university in Ontario

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Below is information that has been gathered from professors, alumni and the universities themselves to describe some of the strengths and weaknesses of 20 universities in Ontario. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) informed coverage of the type of undergraduate education. But, most importantly, we spoke to real-life students about the good and bad of their university experience.

ONTARIO

Algoma University

Accessible and small

Sault Ste. Marie

Students: 1,300

Cost: \$6,600

Awards: \$380,000

Pro: Tight-knit community

Con: Limited course options

Although Algoma is Ontario's newest university, it has fine-tuned its brand of hands-on learning for the past 50 years as a college of Laurentian University. One would assume the absence of graduate programs would allow the school to focus on creating an exceptional educational environment for its small student body, yet Algoma hovers around average on most indicators on NSSE. With a minimum entering grade of only 65 per cent, the university is very accessible, and stands to remain so as it aims to grow to 3,000 students by 2020.

Hotshot prof: Biologist Istvan Imre researches how to naturally repel lampreys, an invasive species of fish plaguing the Great Lakes.

Notable alumnus: Brad Jacobs and E.J. Harnden won the 2013 Canadian men's championship in curling.

Brock University

On the rise

St. Catharines

Students: 19,000

Cost: \$6,300

Awards: \$5.6-million

Pro: Unique bachelor of sport management degree

Con: Lack of study spots on crowded campus

Brock will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year but that doesn't mean it has settled into complacency. Infrastructure is continually expanding, such as the almost-finished \$110-million Cairns Family Health and Bioscience Research Complex. Brock has the fifth biggest co-op program in the country, and even offers placements in history, liberal arts and dramatic arts. Campus is perched on top of the Niagara Escarpment, with views of downtown St. Catharines and Lake Ontario, but box-like concrete buildings and prominent parking lots take away from campus' natural beauty.

Hotshot prof: Marilyn Cottrell, economics professor, was recognized by the Council of Ontario Universities for developing interactive online lectures on macroeconomics.

Notable alumnus: Tonya Verbeek won an Olympic silver medal for freestyle women's wrestling in 2012.

Carleton University

Access to the capital

Ottawa

Students: 26,000

Cost: \$6,700

Awards: \$17 million

Pro: Generous undergrad scholarships

Con: Duller campus life than the University of Ottawa

Carleton shines in programs specifically designed to serve the nation's capital. The university is home to the oldest four-year journalism program in Canada and students in the public affairs and policy management program often score placements as government pages. The university has traditionally been considered stronger in the sciences, but Carleton's interdisciplinary cognitive science degree is gaining renown and research in fields as diverse as microbial genomics and computer security have attracted prestigious research grants. Located to the south of downtown and surrounded by parks, campus can feel somewhat isolated.

Hotshot prof: History prof Shawn Graham has won multiple teaching awards for his classroom innovations, such as creating an interactive online archeology dig.

Notable alumnus: Angus Reid is the founder and former chief executive officer of the market research and polling company that now operates as Ipsos-Reid.

Students say: "Carleton's campus is the perfect size for me. It's a gorgeous campus with lots of greenery."

– Francesca Jackman, second-year journalism

University of Guelph

Leading in the life sciences

Guelph

Students: 27,000

Cost: \$7,300

Awards: \$15-million

Pro: Strong international development program

Con: Large first-year classes

The University of Guelph was established when the Ontario Veterinary College and the Ontario Agricultural College were amalgamated in 1964, and it continues to offer some of the country's top programs in those fields. For instance, the biomedical science program allows students to simultaneously study foundations of animal and human health. Students are reputed to be politically active and left-leaning.

Hotshot prof: Playwright Judith Thompson, theatre professor, won the Governor-General's award for drama twice and the Order of Canada.

Notable alumnus: John Kenneth Galbraith served as an adviser to U.S. democratic presidents for over 50 years.

Students say: “Many students are interested in experiential learning and global opportunities, but these programs and activities tend to have high costs associated with participation, making them financially inaccessible to the average student.”

– *Dominica McPherson, fourth-year international development*

Lakehead University

Resource rich

Thunder Bay and Orillia

Students: 8,700

Cost: \$6,700

Awards: \$9.6-million

Pro: Accessible 70-per-cent minimum entering grade

Con: Scored poorly on NSSE for enriching academic experience

Located near gargantuan Lake Superior and surrounded by boreal forest, Lakehead is a fitting setting for its well-regarded resource management program, in which students learn about tourism, conservation and sustainability. Environmentalism is central to the university’s ethos, especially at the Orillia campus which is the first LEED certified campus in Canada. Lakehead attracts a higher percentage of aboriginal students than other universities.

Hotshot prof: Tony Gillies led a team of students to victory in the American Society of Civil Engineers and American Institute of Steel Construction National Student Steel Bridge Competition in 2011, beating 47 other universities.

Notable alumnus: Michael Rapino is the CEO and president of Live Nation Entertainment Inc., the company that owns Ticketmaster.

Laurentian University

Serving the north

Sudbury

Students: 9,700

Cost: \$6,400

Awards: \$6.4-million

Pro: Many classes offered in both English and French

Con: Performed poorly on NSSE

Laurentian exists to serve the Northern Ontario region, and its best programs reflect that mission. The Bharti School of Engineering excels in mining-related fields. Its medical school, which it shares with Lakehead University, provides training and hands-on experience to prepare students to work in rural and remote communities. Sudbury (population: 160,000) is in dire need of revitalization, but it is home to Zig’s, the only gay bar in Northern Ontario.

Hotshot prof: John Gunn is the Canada Research Chair in Stressed Aquatic Systems and leads a team studying Boreal Shield ecosystems.

Notable alumnus: Minnijean Brown-Trickey was one of the “Little Rock Nine,” a group of African-American students who were credited with desegregating their Arkansas high school in 1957 after attracting the support of then-president Dwight Eisenhower.

McMaster University

Inquiry-based learning

Hamilton

Students: 28,000

Cost: \$6,600

Awards: \$16-million

Pro: Waterfalls 10 minutes by bus from campus

Con: Study space and transit shortages due to crowded campus

McMaster is best known for its medical school, but it deserves equal recognition for developing innovative inquiry-based approaches to teaching typified by its Arts and Sciences program. In the unique Integrated Sciences program, a maximum of 60 students study science and mathematics in an interdisciplinary and project-based environment. McMaster's cyclist and pedestrian-only campus with ivy-covered Gothic buildings is pleasant, but it often becomes a ghost town on weekends as students vacate for their 905-belt homes.

Hotshot prof: Marshall Beier, professor of global politics, won the Canadian Political Science Association Teaching Excellence Prize in 2010 for his engaging classes, which often involve student research.

Notable alumnus: Roberta Bondar was Canada's first female astronaut and the first neurologist in space.

Students say: "Our cohort of students was about 60, allowing us to form quick relationships, many of which have lasted my entire time at university."

– *David Campbell, fourth-year arts and sciences*

Nipissing University

Small classes

North Bay

Students: 5,700

Cost: \$6,700

Awards: \$2.2-million

Pro: High quality teachers' education

Con: Lousy transit

Nipissing is heaven for the outdoorsy, with cross country skiing trails right outside residence (Snowshoe rentals are free!) Aboriginal students are attracted for its ties to the First Nations community. While North Bay (population: 54,000) lacks big city excitement, Nipissing's campus pub the Wall is one of the best campus drinking holes in the country.

Hotshot prof: A rising mathematics star, Logan Hoehn, assistant professor of mathematics, won a \$100,000 Discovery Grant from NSERC to apply math to research on tree products.

Notable alumnus: Jamie Lim, a former mayor of Timmins Ont., is the head of the Ontario Forest Industries Association.

Ontario College of Art and Design University

University of the imagination

Toronto

Students: 4,000

Cost: \$6,600

Awards: \$1.4-million

Pro: Downtown location next to Art Gallery of Ontario

Con: No residences and expensive rent

Aspiring artists of all types come to Canada's largest arts and design school to study with professors at the top of their professions. Students can choose from a large variety of majors and minors ranging from illustration to the innovative interdisciplinary Digital Futures program. The bizarre campus building, a black-and-white box balancing on six-storeytall pencils, is a Toronto icon, even if it lacks functionality. The hyper-competitive atmosphere and well-dressed student body can be intimidating.

Hotshot prof: Professor David Pellettier, former chairman of the sculpture/installation program, created a bronze statue of the late NDP leader Jack Layton that was unveiled in Toronto in August.

Notable alumnus: Michael Snow was the first Canadian artist to have a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Students say: "We have fantastic instructors. We could really use more financial investment in studio space so students can have proper access to studio equipment."

– Lisa Frost, *third-year publications specialization*

University of Ontario Institute of Technology

Wired campus

Oshawa

Students: 8,400

Cost: \$7,100

Awards: \$5-million

Pro: 95 per cent of graduates are employed within two years

Con: Suburban Oshawa is uninteresting

As its name suggests, UOIT is set on being Canada's high-tech university. Students pay a \$900 technology-enriched learning fee, which gets them access to a quality laptop preloaded with field-specific programs. Students working toward a bachelor of information technology have access to the Hacker Research Lab, where they explore security from a hacker's perspective. The 10-year-old campus boasts modern, environmentally-friendly buildings.

Hotshot prof: Rupinder Brar, physics professor, won TVO's Big Ideas Best Lecturer Competition in 2010.

Notable alumnus: Kate Beirness is a host on SportsCentre on TSN.

University of Ottawa

Canada's bilingual university

Ottawa

Students: 41,000

Cost: \$6,500

Awards: \$39-million

Pro: 75 per cent of classes are available in both French and English

Con: Lousy on-campus food options

University of Ottawa is the biggest bilingual university in North America with a French immersion option offered in 58 programs. But, according to students, francophone and anglophone students tend not to mingle outside of class. Ottawa's international development and globalization degree places students at governmental organizations such as the Department of Foreign Affairs. Ottawa performed poorly on NSSE, ranking dead last in the country on the supportive campus environment indicator.

Hotshot prof: Karin Hinzer, engineering professor, runs SUNLab, one of Canada's leading solar cell research facilities.

Notable alumnus: Vincent Lam's first book, *Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures*, was adapted for television and broadcast on HBO Canada.

Students say: "Although no one is really embarrassed to have gone to uOttawa, it is rare to see a uOttawa grad scream it at the top of their lungs."

– *Matthew Conley, recent graduate in marketing*

Queen's University

Undergrad education leader

Kingston

Students: 24,000

Cost: \$6,700

Awards: \$21-million

Pro: School spirit

Con: Homogeneous student body

Kingston is often cited as the prison capital of Canada, but the Queen's experience cannot be compared to imprisonment, even metaphorically. Campus culture is friendly and fun, and students report strong school spirit. Nearly 85 per cent of students live within a 15-minute walk, lending the campus a vibrant feel. Some students complain there is some truth in Queen's reputation for primarily attracting white, middle-class students. Still, the positive atmosphere extends into its high-quality undergraduate programs, and the university scored well for fostering an enriching educational experience in NSSE.

Hotshot prof: James Fraser, associate professor of physics, recently spent his sabbatical at Harvard University working with renowned physicist Eric Mazur.

Notable alumnus: Stephen Poloz recently replaced Mark Carney as Governor of the Bank of Canada.

Students say: "The student government at Queen's gives you many options to get involved. It's not very often you hear that a 21-year-old is the head manager of a pub that brings in over \$1.5-million a year."– *Sarah Kucharczuk, fourth-year religious studies*

Ryerson University

Urban innovator

Toronto

Students: 38,000

Cost: \$6,600

Awards: \$26-million

Pro: Better performance on NSSE than York University and the University of Toronto

Con: Polytechnic roots lessen academic prestige

If you prefer the idea of scoring a corporate internship to reading Camus under a tree, Ryerson might be for you. Its history as a polytechnic institution lives on in its career-focused programs and close collaboration with industry. The university is home to the largest undergraduate business school in English Canada, and the Digital Media Zone, an incubator for entrepreneurial students, has created 800 jobs since opening in 2010. Ryerson's journalism school is also top notch. Campus benefits from the energy of its location in the heart of downtown, but students complain it lacks its own distinct community feel.

Hotshot prof: Lynn Lavallée, social work professor, developed an arts-based research method, built on teachings of the Anishinaabek peoples, to study diabetes among urban aboriginal people living in the Greater Toronto Area.

Notable alumnus: Photographer Edward Burtynsky's work is housed in more than 50 museums worldwide, including the Guggenheim in New York and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.

University of Toronto

The heart of Toronto

Toronto

Students: 81,000

Cost: \$6,900

Awards: \$55-million

Pro: Incredibly diverse student body

Con: Unsupportive learning environment

U of T's alumni list is a "Who's Who" of influential Canadians. Add in its famous research – on topics from stem cell to dinosaurs, solar power to national security – and it's easy to see why U of T is regularly ranked among top universities in the world. The diversity of its 700 undergrad programs is rivalled only by the diversity of its student body. U of T is an obvious choice for ambitious students wanting to study among heavy-hitters, but the university scored dead last in the country in NSSE for "active and collaborative learning" and similarly low for "creating a supportive campus environment."

Hotshot prof: Yu-Ling Cheng, director of the Centre for Global Engineering, led faculty and students to win a \$2.2-million grant from the Gates Foundation to design a waterless toilet for use in developing countries.

Notable alumnus: Lester B. Pearson, the 14th prime minister of Canada, won the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize.

Students say: "I would recommend the school if you are very independent. Campus spirit is definitely not our forte."

– *Jonathan Zvi Hadad, third-year political science*

Trent University

Pledging sustainability

Peterborough

Students: 7,800

Cost: \$7,300

Awards: \$5.9-million

Pro: Small but not too small

Con: Inconvenient location

Trent was modelled after the college system at Oxford. With an average first-year class size of 30, students enjoy lively discussions in place of the 300-student lectures at larger universities. The average entering grade is lower at Trent than at the more prestigious Ontario universities, making it more accessible, and all students with an entering average of more than 90 per cent are automatically awarded a full scholarship. Students report a distinct leftist political atmosphere; at convocation new graduates are invited to take the “Green Pledge,” a promise to be environmentally and socially conscious in their future career.

Hotshot prof: Suresh Narine, director of the Centre for Biomaterials Research, was named one of Canada’s “top 40 under 40” by The Globe and Mail.

Notable alumnus: Yann Martel, 2002 Man Booker Prize winner, has sold more than seven million copies of his opus *Life of Pi*.

Students say: “Because Trent is small, it can’t accommodate all activities, like varsity swimming. If you want a good education, Trent can give you that.”

– *Anita Vieu-Robson, third-year nursing*

University of Waterloo

Canada’s silicon valley

Waterloo

Students: 35,000

Cost: \$6,700

Awards: \$31-million

Pro: Massive co-op program

Con: Lack of support and access to profs

If you’ve got a big technology idea to turn into a billion-dollar company, University of Waterloo is the place to be. With more than 17,000 undergrads enrolled, its co-op program is the largest in the world. Students benefit from ties to prestigious research institutes such as the Balsillie School for International Affairs and the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, and it offers Canada’s only undergraduate degree in nanotechnology engineering. Students study hard, but Waterloo life isn’t only about work; the city stages the largest Oktoberfest outside of Germany.

Hotshot prof: Larry Smith, an associate economics professor, attracted almost one million views on YouTube for his TED talk, “Why you will fail to have a great career.”

Notable alumnus: Mike Lazaridis cracked the Forbes billionaire list after co-founding BlackBerry.

Western University

Big school with big energy

London

Students: 31,000

Cost: \$7,000

Awards: \$31-million

Pro: Great “school spirit”

Con: Spirit-induced hangovers

Western’s reputation earned it a nod from Playboy’s 2011 list of top party schools. But the fun atmosphere runs deeper than just keggers, lending Western an energetic feel rare for such a large school. The university offers exchange opportunities at 85 universities in 25 countries. The Richard Ivey School of Business consistently appears on national and global rankings of top schools and its alumni’s salaries are higher than that earned by grads from other schools. One benefit of such a large school is having 300 academic programs to choose from, but drawbacks include unusually large first-year classes.

Hotshot prof: 3M Teaching Fellowship winner Mike Atkinson uses music, film and technology to engage large-scale undergraduate classes.

Notable alumnus: Margaret Chan, World Health Organization director-general, is 33rd on Forbes’s 2013 list of the world’s most powerful women.

Students say: “There are a lot of students who attend only for its reputation as being a party school. However, the engaging profs do a wonderful job with a well-structured curriculum.”

– *Lizzy Sutherland, second-year geography*

Wilfrid Laurier University

Strong school spirit

Waterloo

Students: 18,000

Cost: \$6,700

Awards: \$2.8-million

Pro: Strong school spirit

Con: Ugly, claustrophobic campus

With a growth spurt that doubled the student body in the last five years, Laurier can no longer be described as Waterloo’s little brother. Still, the university maintains its small-school feel, especially on the compact main campus that is jammed into a single city block. (Good luck avoiding that person you regrettably hooked up with on Friday night.) Laurier’s business school features a strong accounting department and a huge co-op program. Students who want in on the exciting technology research scene in the city of Waterloo are able to pursue bachelor degrees in both business admin and computer science simultaneously.

Hotshot prof: Stephen MacNeil, an organic chemistry prof, was named one of Ontario’s best university teachers by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations.

Notable alumnus: Shadrach Kabango, better known as Shad, won the 2011 Juno Award for rap recording of the year.

Students say: “More work can still be done to ensure capstone projects and thesis funding is available to all undergraduate students.”

– *Stephen Franchetto, fourth-year business administration*

University of Windsor

Border university
Windsor

Students: 16,000

Cost: \$7,000

Awards: Not available

Pro: Mechanical engineering program offers a variety of options such as aerospace

Con: High unemployment in Windsor

The University of Windsor is experiencing a period of revitalization and growth, even as the city struggles to find its feet after the painful closing of automotive factories. For example, the new LEED Gold-certified Centre for Engineering Innovation brings engineering students, business students and local entrepreneurs together. (Costing \$112-million, it was the largest capital investment in the university's history.) The Lancers varsity athletics program is one of the finest in the country; the women's basketball team has been the reigning national champions for the past three years.

Hotshot prof: Siyaram Pandey, biochemistry professor, is currently working on a formula made out of dandelion root that could help to kill cancer cells.

Notable alumnus: Mary Jo Haddad, president and CEO of The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, was named as one of Canada's most influential women by Women of Influence magazine in 2011.

York University

Intellectual oasis in the suburbs
Toronto

Students: 55,000

Cost: \$6,700

Awards: \$29-million

Pro: Students' dedication to social justice

Con: Uninspiring setting

Getting to York from downtown Toronto involves a long commute through bleak suburbs, but once there students enjoy a vibrant, politically-engaged culture thriving among otherwise spiritless architecture. Gargantuan York is noted for highly-rated programs in business, social work, fine arts, psychology and criminology, and the school recently broke ground on a new \$85-million engineering building. While a number of high-profile assaults in recent years sparked concerns about student safety, York responded aggressively with security and surveillance upgrades including a mobile app that connects students directly to the security department.

Hotshot prof: Dawn Bazely, winner of York's 2013 teaching award, spearheads research at the Institute for Research and Innovation in Sustainability.

Notable alumnus: Janice Fukakusa, chief financial officer at Royal Bank of Canada, was inducted into Canada's Most Powerful Women Hall of Fame in 2007.

Students say: "It's because of my criminology classes that I am pursuing a master's degree. That isn't necessarily everyone's experience – some people I know struggled with the huge class sizes."

– Jessica Thyriar, fourth-year criminology