

Help choosing a university in the Prairies

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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 10 universities in the Prairies. 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.

ALBERTA

University of Alberta

Alberta's flagship university

Edmonton

Students: 39,000

Cost: \$6,800

Awards: \$22-million

Pro: World-class research opportunities

Con: Unsupportive campus environment

Located next to a river valley and within walking distance of Whyte Avenue's vibrant nightlife, U of A boasts more 3M teaching award-winning profs than anywhere else in Canada. Its undergrad engineering and commerce programs are regularly ranked among the best in the world and its undergrad research initiative offers funding to students to get hands-on research experience. The opening of the Medical Isotope and Cyclotron Facility last July further establishes U of A as a global player in medical research. However, according to NSSE, U of A flounders in fostering student engagement and recent budget cuts could further damage undergrad education.

Hotshot prof: Philip Currie, an internationally renowned paleontologist, will soon launch U of A's first MOOC (massive open online course).

Notable alumnus: Beverley McLachlin is the longest-serving chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada.

Students say: "What I am disappointed with in undergraduate arts programming is a very clear division between humanities and sciences. There isn't any encouragement or academic incentive to pursue both courses in the humanities and sciences."

– *Blue Knox, fourth-year political science*

University of Calgary

Up-and-coming research giant

Calgary

Students: 32,000

Cost: \$6,500

Awards: \$13-million

Pro: Huge entrance scholarships for engineers

Con: Commuting

Calgary is the commercial hub of Alberta's oil and gas industry, and U of C is the place to be for future energy engineers, business leaders and lawyers. Like any large university, it

struggles to create an engaging learning environment for undergraduate students with a large average first-year class size of 109. U of C is aiming to become one of the country's top five research universities by 2016, and evidence of this ambitious goal can be seen in recent capital expansion including the new Energy, Environment and Experiential Learning Building. The cycling and transit infrastructure is mediocre in car-obsessed Calgary.

Hotshot prof: Walter Herzog is one of the leading biomechanists in the world and won an NSERC CREATE grant worth \$300,000 a year to train biomedical engineers.

Notable alumnus: Stephen Harper is the first prime minister since Joe Clark in 1979 not to hold a law degree.

Grant MacEwan University

All about undergrad

Edmonton

Students: 11,000

Cost: \$5,600

Awards: \$2.4-million

Pro: Flexible part-time degree, diploma and certificate programs

Con: Business students have to commute to south campus

With no graduate programs, Grant MacEwan is 100 per cent about undergraduate teaching. Some opportunities exist to conduct research alongside professors, but choices are more limited than at larger universities. Originally founded as a college dedicated to health care and social work, MacEwan offers strong related programs such as its bachelor of child and youth care. The bustling urban main campus will only become more interesting as the university nears its goal of moving its other three locations downtown by 2017.

Hotshot prof: Torah Kachur, professor of biological sciences, is a frequent science columnist for Airplay on CBC Radio One.

Notable alumnus: Jerrold Dubyk's 2009 album *The Maverick* won a Western Canadian Music Award for best jazz recording.

Students say: "Profs take that extra mile to help you do well in class."

– *James Skrlík, second-year accounting*

University of Lethbridge

Undergrad research leader

Lethbridge

Students: 8,300

Cost: \$5,900

Awards: \$2.6-million

Pro: Internationally renowned neuroscience research

Con: Dungeon-like dorms

U of L was once known for its strong liberal arts education, but lately it's scored consistently below average on the NSSE, suggesting its reputation as "Acadia of the West" is out of date. That aside, U of L has earned accolades for its undergraduate research and it boasts one of the top neuroscience programs in the country. Love it or hate it, the modernist University Hall designed by Arthur Erickson is a Canadian architectural icon.

Hotshot prof: Robert Sutherland and his research team became the first in the world to regenerate cerebral cortex brain cells in adult rats suffering from a neurodegenerative disorder.
Notable alumnus: Cheryl Misak, vice-president and provost at University of Toronto, was Lethbridge's first Rhodes Scholar.

Mount Royal University

Leader in applied learning

Calgary

Students: 14,000

Cost: \$6,400

Awards: \$3-million

Pro: Good preparation for job market

Con: Lack of affordable rental apartments

Despite its relatively large student body, you won't get lost in the crowd at Mount Royal. Hints of its recent past as a college remain, such as an average first-year class size of 30 and strong rankings for collaborative and active learning. Since granting its first bachelor's degrees in 2009, Mount Royal has become known for strong undergraduate programs developed from its century-old tradition of vocational and professional education, like the bachelor of applied interior design. Some students complain that this vocational focus makes them feel somewhat pigeonholed and limits opportunities for broad intellectual exploration.

Hotshot prof: Norman Vaughan won the University Professional and Continuing Education Association's 2008 Philip E. Frandson Award for Literature in the field of continuing higher education.

Notable alumnus: Alison Redford is a lawyer and the 14th premier of Alberta.

SASKATCHEWAN

University of Regina

Career support

Regina

Students: 13,000

Cost: \$6,000

Awards: \$5.5-million

Pro: Cheerleading squad is the best in Canada

U of R ranks in the bottom third on every NSSE metric, which might have something to do with it receiving \$1,000 less in government funding per full-time student than more prominent University of Saskatchewan. Nonetheless, U of R has strengths; its petroleum engineering program "attracts students from countries such as China, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia due to its strong reputation," according to president Vianne Timmons. U of R guarantees that students who complete a series of career development activities will be employed within six months of graduation, or they receive an additional year of study at no cost.

Hotshot prof: Mark Brigham won the 2008 Joseph Grinnell Award from the American Society of Mammalogists for his contributions to education in mammalogy.

Notable alumnus: Vancouver Sun columnist Daphne Bramham is a National Newspaper Award winner.

University of Saskatchewan

Agriculture experts

Saskatoon

Students: 20,000

Cost: \$6,200

Awards: \$10-million

Pro: New \$140-million vaccine research facility

Con: Recent tuition hikes

With neo-gothic buildings ringed by farmland and the South Saskatchewan River, the university is downright beautiful. The Bowl, a grassy area in front of College Building, is a popular hangout until harsh winter weather chases students down to the extensive underground tunnel system. Its world-class agriculture department offers 13 majors ranging from soil science to agronomy. Students worry that Saskatchewan's efforts to decrease its deficit (almost 250 employee positions were eliminated since November of 2012) will be felt in the classroom.

Hotshot prof: Priscilla Settee was named a Female Food Hero by Oxfam Canada for her work on indigenous food sovereignty and women's rights.

Notable alumnus: Brad Wall is the Premier of Saskatchewan.

MANITOBA

Brandon University

Small-town prairie school

Brandon

Students: 3,100

Cost: \$4,000

Awards: \$1.2-million

Pro: Small class sizes

Con: Lacking co-op and internship opportunities

Brandon University features the small classes and access to faculty you'd expect from such a small school. But its performance on the NSSE is oddly mixed, scoring high on some indicators and poorly on others. Program highlights include engineering (students have the option of taking classes at the University of Minnesota) and music education, which boasts a 100-per-cent job placement rate.

Hotshot prof: Bernadette Ardelli netted grants from NSERC and the Canada Foundation for Innovation for her research into drug-resistant infections.

Notable alumnus: Tommy Douglas, first leader of the New Democratic Party, is credited with introducing universal health care to Canada.

Students say: "In my program the quality of professors is fantastic. The reason I switched my degree to political science was partly because of the quality. "

– *Stephanie Bachewich, recent graduate political science*

University of Manitoba

Growing community

Winnipeg

Students: 28,000

Cost: \$4,200

Awards: \$11-million

Pro: Cheaper than similar options in Ontario

Con: Poor performance on NSSE

The massive U of M offers a huge variety of programs and research opportunities. Its pharmacy program is one of the best in the country. Located in the deep suburbs 10 kilometres from downtown, U of M can feel impersonal. But students say the school is transitioning from a dull commuter campus to a bustling, lively community. The opening last June of a 35,000-seat, \$200-million stadium, the largest on any Canadian campus, should help.

Hotshot prof: Annemieke Farenhorst is the NSERC Chair for Women in Science and Engineering (Prairie region).

Notable alumnus: Murray Sinclair was Manitoba's first aboriginal judge and is the chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Students say: "The U of M is on the rise; be it the new stadium, the Southwood land development, or the enhancement of the faculties to create a professional, collegial environment."

– *Al Turnbull, fourth-year political studies*

University of Winnipeg

Artsy and progressive

Winnipeg

Students: 10,000

Cost: \$4,300

Awards: \$3.9-million

Pro: Beautiful architecture in heart of Winnipeg

Con: Fewer course offerings than U of M

Students say that the smart, artsy kids go to U of W while everyone else commutes to the suburbs. The comment speaks both to U of W's urban, small campus feel and to its longtime rivalry with the University of Manitoba, which comes to a head during the annual Duckworth Challenge basketball and volleyball tournament. U of W has a reputation for being progressive, and this doesn't only apply to its student body; a number of innovative financial aid programs help aboriginal and refugee students afford higher education.

Hotshot prof: Craig Willis has received more than \$400,000 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for his research into white nose syndrome, a fungal disease that has killed millions of bats in North America since 2007.

Notable alumnus: Lloyd Axworthy, former minister for foreign affairs, is now the president of University of Winnipeg.

Students say: "There was a consistent emphasis on volunteerism, community engagement, international practicum placements, leadership, experiential learning and taking our learning and applying it beyond the classroom."

– *Megan Fultz, recent graduate international development*