Canadian students lacking engagement

By: Shaun Sinclair

Are undergraduate students in Canada learning and developing as well as students in the United States?

The 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement conducted by Indiana University’s Centre for Postsecondary Research revealed that Canadian universities are falling well behind their American counterparts in crucial areas such as academic challenge, student-faculty relations and collaborative learning.

The NSSE analysis is based on over 160,000 randomly selected student surveys from 472 colleges and universities across the U.S. and Canada.

The students were asked to rate the performance of their respective universities in five areas, such as enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment. In each area, the scores of the University of Western Ontario and the rest of Canada’s G10 schools fell significantly below those of the U.S. schools.

“The NSSE is a highly, highly recognized survey with a high credibility rate,” said Arnice Cadieux, executive director of public affairs for the Council of Ontario Universities. She noted that Canadian schools fail to meet many of the standards set by American schools due to their levels of federal funding.

“The fact that our funding levels are significantly lower certainly plays the biggest role,” Cadieux said, adding greater financial resources give schools more opportunities to “deliver quality and maintain strong student support systems.”

One of the biggest challenges Canadian universities face lies in addressing the issue of interaction between students and professors. “We need to look at the very high student-faculty ratio,” said David Robinson of the Canadian Association of University Teachers. “There are fewer full-time faculty members today than there were 10 years ago.”

While lower funding levels have undoubtedly put the G10 schools at a disadvantage when compared to American universities, the problem of funding is prominent amongst the smaller Canadian universities as well.

“I would argue that those issues are heightened in the smaller schools,” said Rob van Adrichem, director of media and public relations for the University of Northern British Columbia. “Smaller schools are struggling to establish themselves on an operational level because all funding is limited.”

However, van Adrichem said issues of funding should not take all of the blame for Western’s poor performance in student engagement. Universities with considerably less resources than Western tend to do much in terms of making students feel involved.

“[Student engagement] is a measure that tends to favour the smaller schools,” van
Adrichem said. “Students who choose to go to a smaller school often value the type of learning experience that exists.”