

# Are Adventist Nursing Schools Really Different?

**B**y its very nature, the profession of nursing emphasizes honesty, caring, and nurturing. A recently released Gallup poll rating the most honest and ethical occupations again placed nurses in the number one spot. Nurses have held this place of honor since they were added to the survey in 1999, with the exception of 2001, when the rating of firefighters surpassed them after the September 11 tragedy.\*

From this, one might assume that all nursing programs produce practitioners who can be relied on and who are worthy of trust. So, what is the advantage in attending a Seventh-day Adventist nursing school? Are they really different than other private or public nursing programs? Certainly, good nurses can be educated at public institutions. But Adventist nursing schools *are* different. There is an added value to learning to be a member of the most trusted profession within a Seventh-day Advent-



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ence of attending a local public nursing school before transferring to Walla Walla College's nursing program (Portland, Oregon).

ist Christian environment. The difference is not easy to define, but it can clearly be felt by those who experience it.

I recently talked to a non-Adventist student who had the unique experience of attending a local public nursing school before transferring to Walla Walla College's nursing program (Portland, Oregon). She very enthusiastically and succinctly described the difference between the programs by saying: "Every-

**By Lucille Benson Krull**

one treats me nicely here. You all live such clean lives, and absolutely everyone cares that I become a great nurse.” She didn’t say that the Adventist nursing program had developed better ways to care for and cure patients or offered vastly different courses than other nursing schools. She didn’t say that she loved the religion classes or the worships and wanted to become an Adventist. But what I think she was unconsciously saying was, “I see a human reflection of Jesus here.”

The principles: treating students nicely, living clean lives, and caring that students succeed are, of course,

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and chapels, there is no unique set of nursing courses or healing techniques taught only at Adventist colleges and universities. Many non-religious nursing schools emphasize ethics, spiritual care, and health concepts similar to those emphasized by Ellen G. White.

The difference is not the teaching techniques or the high standards. And it’s not just the required religious courses and extensive opportunities to worship with others. It is something much more subtle. Though it’s hard to describe, people know it when they experience it—and once they have it, they know when it is missing. This elusive quality includes the essence of the Christian environment and the special ambiance that results when a group of people bound together by common spiritual practices and a common belief system strive toward shared goals: “treating students nicely, living cleanly, and caring that students succeed.”

#### **Treating Students Nicely**

Don’t all schools treat their students “nicely”? We in the Adventist educational system may take this for granted. Of course, a few students may not agree, especially when they must be held to high standards. This is not unlike the actions of loving parents making rules that are in the best interest of their children. However, Adventist nursing schools are well-known for respecting the life challenges and



**Walla Walla College nursing instructors pray for their students.**

not unique to the church’s nursing education. Adventist faculty members from every discipline live out these principles as they working with students in every field of study.

So, what makes Adventist nursing unique? It’s not the curriculum, which is largely set by the state. While students are expected to take religion courses and participate in worships



beliefs of each student. They make every effort to accommodate legitimate student needs. Like other Adventist nursing instructors, I can recall many times when I found it worthwhile to make an adjustment in a class or schedule to help a student through a difficult time.

With the popularity of the nursing profession, many Adventist nursing schools are attracting applicants who are just trying to get into a nursing school . . . any nursing school will do. The Walla Walla College School of Nursing has had a large percentage of non-Adventist students for many years. Many are actively seeking Christian education, but the beliefs of others sometimes clash with the culture embedded in the curriculum. Students of all religions and those with no religious background have successfully completed our program. The teachers have worked hard to meet their unique needs.

For example, a few years ago, we admitted a Mennonite student. She was unable to wear our usual student uniform because her beliefs required her to wear only one-piece dresses without adornment and a small white head covering at all times. Guided by the professional principles of safety and infection control, we were able to select an acceptable uniform that met our requirements and her needs as well.

Today's students come to school facing many challenges. Gone are the days when most college students were single, lived in the dorm, and didn't have to work much. Today we have single parents, students who must work full time, and even military personnel hoping merely to complete the term before being de-

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ployed. Because most Adventist schools are small, this allows for extensive personal contact, so nursing faculty can usually be in tune with students' personal issues.

The instructors pride themselves in providing gentle guidance instead of destructive criticism as students learn the role of the professional nurse. Some nursing schools demoralize students who make mistakes or don't

grasp concepts quickly. Many nurses can recall being told they would never be a nurse or being fearful that a teacher would chastise them for not knowing all 50 side-effects for the 10 different drugs they were expected to administer that morning.

Nursing faculty often find themselves in a position to help guide students in making the right choices. While family life can sometimes conflict with the rigors of nursing education, many times a creative faculty member and a dedicated student can work out a plan to balance work, family, and academic demands to maximize academic performance.

Here is one example where a positive outcome was achieved. A student of mine was pregnant and due to deliver her child three weeks before graduation. She came to us, fearful that her graduation would have to be postponed. Unfortunately, during the last three months of her pregnancy, she was scheduled for a rotation in critical care that required 12-hour shifts. Knowing that this would be difficult for her, we were able to change her schedule so that the critical-care rotation came earlier in her pregnancy, and she could do the less physically demanding rotation in community health closer to the end of the pregnancy. In addition, her community health instructor encouraged her to start her clinical hours during spring break so that by the time the baby came, she would have completed her clinical work.

In comparison, I have a friend who had a baby while taking nursing at a public community college. She was told that if she missed even one class or lab, she would be dropped immediately from the pro-



gram, so she had her labor induced over a weekend and went back to school on Monday morning. She felt she had no other choice. For a profession that is supposed to teach people how to care, this seemed unnecessarily harsh.

### Living Cleanly

Seventh-day Adventist schools have always emphasized a healthy lifestyle for their faculty and students. All nursing schools expect their students and graduates to be skilled in teaching patients how to improve their health. For Adventist nursing schools, these principles, already a part of the church teachings, agree strongly with what research tells us about

ways to be healthy. Society expects that nurses caring for sick patients to be healthy and live healthfully themselves. A nurse counseling a patient on how to stop smoking or change his or her diet will have much more success if the nurse practices what he or she teaches.

Of course, there are some lifestyle issues that Adventist schools *require* students to comply with, such as modest dress and avoidance of alcohol and other drugs. Due to the shortage of nurses and the wide-open job market, nursing schools are having to adjust to the wide variety of lifestyle choices found in applicants by implementing precautions such as drug testing, fingerprinting, and criminal background checks. There are, however, many other healthy lifestyle choices that Adventist nursing schools emphasize by example rather than by policy. These include things such as having a healthy mental attitude, self-care during times of stress, healthy relationships, and professional language. Most Adventist faculty members serve as wonderful role models to their students on how to actively seek all types of health. This does not necessarily occur in secular schools.

## Adventist nursing schools are well-known for respecting the life challenges and beliefs of each student.



My personal experience in nursing education includes time spent in both Adventist and public nursing programs. After receiving associate and baccalaureate degrees in nursing from Pacific Union College, I transitioned to a state university for my Master's degree. The difference was eye-opening. The content of the curriculum was sound and professional in nature, but the behavior of the faculty was very surprising. I was accustomed to patients with different lifestyles and behaviors, but I was unprepared for the variety of behaviors I saw in my teachers. I watched a nursing instructor berating a student in front of the whole class for poor performance. I was unprepared for the smoking and other substance abuse I saw demonstrated by the faculty. I was shocked by the unprofessional language used during class period—not by my classmates, but by my teachers! I feel that the sound principles of clean living that I learned as an Adventist and in my training at an Adventist college makes me a better role model for my patients and my students.

### Caring That Students Succeed

Caring that students succeed re-

quires faculty commitment. For most Adventist faculty, teaching is a calling. Working in an Adventist college or university does not make the teacher wealthy. However, in the academic world of “publish or perish,” most Adventist colleges and universities remain focused on excellence in teaching. Faculty members have personal contact with their students and provide individual attention rarely seen in public higher education. While the same can be said for Adventist teachers in any discipline, what is different in nursing education is the sheer number of hours that faculty members spend with their students. Nursing clinical labs require students to

work with patients for many hours a week under the supervision of an instructor. It is not uncommon for a nursing instructor to have direct personal contact with a group of students for 12-20 hours per week. Nursing faculty see their students at their best and at their worst, early in the morning and late at night. Faculty and students share the joy of birth and the sadness of death, and work together to better understand the complexity of the human body and mind.

Because of the vast number of hours they spend with students, nursing faculty get to know them very well. This enables the teachers to provide personal attention and Christian compassion that enriches the students' academic experience. When faculty see students with self-destructive behaviors or in bad situations, they can act as mentors and advisors in areas other than academic learning. I frequently have students tell me that they truly feel valued by the faculty.

I hope that all students see obvious examples of how the faculty care that they succeed, but sometimes we practice our Christian compassion in ways unknown to the students. While students are encouraged to pray with

their patients, I have found that praying privately for students makes a difference. The nursing faculty at Walla Walla College began a new practice recently. During our worship at the start of each faculty meeting, everyone attending is asked to briefly mention

## *Nursing faculty often find themselves in a position to help guide students in making the right choices.*

times, these instructors fit in well with the Adventist culture, other times they do not. I believe that what makes Adventist education so great is the common culture that faculty share. Many times, it is this that makes us consistent in the way we treat people and handle difficult situations.

Of course, no nursing program is perfect. Teachers have bad days, students perceive faculty actions negatively, and the best-laid plans fall apart. There is a grave danger that with all of the pressures and stresses to provide the best academic environment for students, we will lose sight of the culture that makes our Adventist schools so unique. It is very important that we keep focused on the greater mission of our Adventist educational system so that the details of daily teaching do not overpower it. At the present time, I sincerely believe that our nursing schools are really different when compared to non-Adventist nursing schools. (This difference can also be seen



specific students who are known to have some personal challenge or difficult situation. We then allow time for other faculty to offer solutions or options. Then we pray for these students by name. It is amazing how many times we have seen obvious answers to prayer.

Besides allowing time for student and instructor to work together, Adventist nursing schools encourage students to support one another. Nursing is a profession where working together is necessary every day and absolutely essential during a crisis. Adventist nursing schools encourage students to care for one another in a spirit of cooperation, rather than competition. While students are motivated by good grades, I often see “A” students helping struggling students to succeed. Nursing student groups often function as support systems to help one another.

One example occurred recently in our computer lab. A senior student was putting the finishing touches on a much-agonized-over paper. Suddenly, it was gone! Her computer disc was corrupted, and all she had was one printed copy of a rough draft. After a panic-filled 10 minutes, four of her classmates at the computers around her divided up the rough draft, and each re-typed a section of the paper.

As the dean of a Seventh-day Adventist school of nursing, I know that nursing students need role models and mentors to succeed in the fast-paced, complex, ever-changing arena of health care. One of the great challenges that faces church-operated nursing schools is finding a sufficient number of qualified Adventist nursing faculty. Many times, schools must hire part-time non-Adventist faculty to teach students in the clinical setting. While many

when comparing any Adventist educational program with its secular counterpart.) The difference is not the content of the courses, the national reputation of the professors, or the type of students who chose to attend. It is a spiritual quality where a group of faculty work together within a common culture to teach and nurture the way Jesus would if He was here. ☞



**Lucille Benson Krull, R.N., Ph.D., F.N.P.,** is Dean of the School of Nursing for Walla Walla College in Portland, Oregon.

#### REFERENCES

\* “Public Ranks Nurses #1 for Honesty and Ethics.” *California Nurse* 101:1 (January/February 2005), p. 4.