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What Should an Educated Person Know?



Beverly Robinson-Rumble

“The easiest way to start an academic brawl is to ask what an educated person should know,”¹ quipped a *Time* magazine article discussing recent changes in the core curriculum at Harvard University and other American institutions of higher learning. The new guidelines at Harvard are oriented toward active learning and real-life applications. In defending the changes, Interim President Derek Bok says, “Students will be more motivated to learn if they see a connection with the kinds of problems, issues and questions they will encounter in later life.”

“Harvard’s new curriculum establishes eight primary subject areas that all students will have to take. The categories include Societies of the World, encompassing subjects like anthropology and international relations; Ethical Reasoning, a practical approach to philosophy; . . . the United States in the World, which will likely span multiple departments, including sociology and economics”; and Empirical Reasoning, which will cover math, logic, and statistics.

Harvard’s curriculum committee dismisses charges that it is embracing purely practical knowledge: “We do not propose that we teach the headlines, only that the headlines, along with much else in our students’ lives, are among the things that a liberal education can help students make better sense of.’ . . . What’s crucial, they say, is that the new approach emphasizes the kind of active learning that gets students thinking and applying knowledge.”

Of particular interest to me was the sharp criticism that ensued when the curriculum committee proposed mandating the study of “reason and faith.” Psychology professor Steven Pinker protested: “The juxtaposition of the two words makes it sound like “faith” and “reason” are parallel and equivalent ways of knowing. But universities are about reason, pure and simple.” (The committee ultimately substituted a “culture and belief” requirement.)

If we were to ask the same question of Adventist educators: “What makes for an educated person?” what would be the answer? Would we talk only about practical applications, “skills for the workplace,” and fulfilling the academic criteria demanded by accrediting associations and professional boards? Would we regard the study of history as optional, as Harvard’s new Core Curriculum does? George Knight’s two recent articles in this journal, the second of which appears in this issue, point out that without an apocalyptic vision and an understanding of God’s guidance in our history, Adventism has no reason to continue to exist, and its school system would offer nothing that students could not obtain from the schools of other Christian denominations.

Some of Harvard’s new guidelines should provide fruitful areas for discussion. Surely, doing a better job of helping our students understand the headlines would be worthwhile. And active learning in the context of encouraging thought and applying knowledge would enhance their preparation for the workplace and for life.

But there are other dimensions vital to a uniquely Adventist education. I hope that our professors and administrators would never assert that Adventist higher education is “about reason, pure and simple.” For, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10, NIV).²

As we grapple with these issues, a quote from the opening page of *Education*, though written more than a hundred years ago, still sums up succinctly what Adventist education should be about:

“True education means more than the pursual of certain course of study. It means more

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4. Agreed-upon expenses for traveling to the school or to home should be reimbursed in a timely manner.

5. The academy must provide liability and medical insurance for each task force worker. If these young people are transporting students as part of their job description, even if they have complete auto insurance coverage, they are advised to use school vehicles.

6. Each task force dean should have a clearly defined job description, along with the needed authority to complete the designated tasks. The delegated responsibilities should be both meaningful and significant.

7. The task force deans should be respected and supported by administrators, teachers, staff, and students. In turn, they should respect the school program, academy employees, and students.

8. The academy should ensure that each task force dean has a mentoring relationship with the supervising dean and the principal. Task force deans are far more likely to have a positive experience if they are intentionally mentored.

9. Each task force dean should have scheduled off-duty time. Efforts must be made to respect the schedule, while allowing flexibility for emergencies or unusual circumstances.

10. Task force deans should be invited to all faculty/staff social events and given an appropriate farewell gift at the end of their term of service.

These 10 “obligations” may seem like basic common sense. When they have been implemented, task force deans generally report having had a successful experience. For too many, however, the experience has not been so positive.

I remember a social work major, new on the job as task force dean, who was asked to contact the parents of a child who had just attempted suicide. She then had to drive the student hundreds of miles to reunite with the parents. The young dean reacted amazingly well. However, she should not have been asked to assume this serious responsibility by herself.

Other students have told me that they were not invited to faculty social occasions and never received official words of appreciation or a gift at the end of the year.

Still other task force deans have reported that their workload compromised their health. I think of one former Andrews University student who each morning taught three classes (with three different preparations), each afternoon supervised the library, and after supper was on-duty in the residence hall because the principal had given the girls’ dean evenings off due to family issues. The task force dean worked until midnight or later in the residence hall and then returned to the room she shared with another task force worker to prepare for her classes. At Christmas break, she resigned, exhausted, and returned to Andrews University feeling like a failure. In my opinion, that was abuse.

As of this writing, many academies are advertising task force positions for the 2007-2008 school year, with at least one school offering eight positions. Why do schools rely so heavily on short-term college students who are essentially volunteers? Shouldn’t a standard be set for how task force workers are used and how many positions are appropriate for any school?

At its best, the task force program provides college/university students with opportunities for significant service and a safe place to field test the skills they have acquired during their educational journey. Ideally, during their term, they will learn additional skills and become more invested in the ministry of the church. To make a lasting impact on the life of an adolescent is a rare privilege. Many task force workers have discovered this truth. However, we must face the reality that others look back on their service with mixed or even negative feelings. I urge the formation of a committee to do a careful analysis of the task force program, and then make specific recommendations that will benefit everyone involved in the program. ✍

Often referred to as the “dean of deans,” Donald W. Murray retired in June 2006 after serving as a residence hall dean for 42 years. He writes from St. Joseph, Michigan.

**Donald W. Murray, Called to a Ministry of Caring (Lincoln, Neb.: Advent Source, 2005). Available by calling 1-800-328-0525 or at <http://www.adventsource.org>. Catalog No. 625005. \$14.95, plus shipping and handling.*

Editorial

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than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”³

As Adventist educators discuss what educated people in the 21st century need to know, we must also grapple with how best to prepare them for a life of service here and in the hereafter.—B.J.R.

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1. Quotes in the first four paragraphs are taken from Jeremy Caplan, “As Harvard Goes. . .” *Time* 169:10 (March 5, 2007), pp. 62, 63.
2. Scripture texts credited to NIV are from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*, copyright © 1973, 1978, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.
3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 17.