

THE QUALITY OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION

How can we know how well we are doing?

A news release about the annual enrollment statistics of Adventist primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions in the North American Division recently came across my desk. Naturally, as a university president, I looked first at the tertiary statistics, noting that the 2006 college enrollment was up by about 300 over the previous year, an increase of approximately 1.3 percent. The release included the usual disclaimers—that the report had inaccuracies and did not tell the whole story. I checked the Andrews University numbers and found them to be essentially accurate—after all, they were self-reported!

Even before the report came out, I had been approached by several people who claimed to have previewed some of these stats and congratulated Andrews on doing well, observing that the university enrollment appeared to be up again in 2006-2007. I thanked them, but the conversation bothered me. Let me explain why.

Enrollment does not tell the whole story.

Enrollment numbers are an important indicator of success, but certainly not the only one. They do not tell the whole story, and may even lead us astray if we rely on them too much. Consider the auto industry by way of comparison. Here in Michigan, this has been the big news story the last few years. Which car company is the biggest, General Motors or Toyota? How many cars, trucks, and SUVs do these companies sell each year? These questions correspond to the enrollment question, i.e., how many credits do we produce and deliver? How many students do we enroll? But they do not tell the whole story. Some small car manufacturers sell fewer units, yet do very well. Clearly, factors other than market share matter when assess-

ing success in the car industry. For example, how much of the profit per unit sold is eaten up by rebates? The answer to that may be more important than market share. How many recalls were necessary to correct manufacturing flaws? The answer relates to quality and reliability and is very important to owners. In short, enrollment numbers for schools and colleges, like market share in the car industry, can be a poor indicator of product quality, economic stability, or contributions to the common good.

Perhaps more closely related to education is the health-

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care industry. Its success is sometimes measured by the size of the hospital, the number of beds, or market share achieved by the various units or departments, such as surgery, obstetrics/gynecology, Emergency Room, cardiology, etc. Profitability is another important indicator. Does the hospital make enough money to afford the most advanced diagnostic equipment and to attract the best technicians? However, equally important is the competence of the health-care providers when diagnosing illnesses, adopting and following the best protocols available for treatments, controlling infections, reducing recovery time and unnecessary deaths, and so on. In the future, reimbursement of health-care costs may be tied to the proven quality and treatment outcomes, and various indicators of effective health-care service in a given hospital will become public record. Such openness might be worrisome to some hospital administrators, but it would give patients and their families a sense of confidence when selecting a health-care provider.

Schools and colleges

By Niels-Erik Andreasen



Undergraduate research opportunities in various science fields can give Adventist college students an extra edge.

are likely to face similar scrutiny. Are high schools and academies really preparing their graduates for success in college? Can students readily transfer credits from institution to institution? Will colleges offer credit for demonstrated knowledge or competencies that match their published expectations? Can college students actually graduate in four years? Do they acquire the moral and spiritual values they and their parents seek? Have they received what the school catalogue promises? Do they get good educational value for the money spent? These questions are asked not only by concerned parents who have to pay the school fees, but also by employers, national leaders, legislators, and others concerned with the economy, civic engagement, personal and professional integrity, and family and social responsibility of our graduates. Clearly, these important questions cannot be answered by the enrollment statistics alone, yet educators and administrators must address these concerns.

The story of our schools, academies, and colleges goes beyond enrollment statistics.

So how good are our schools, academies, and colleges? How well prepared are our graduates to meet the expectations of society and the church? Is our educational system succeeding in its mission? Enrollment statistics alone do not answer those questions. The demands of accreditation agencies help ensure quality, but not as much as we might think. How do we answer these questions?

Just the thought of raising such questions and then publishing the findings for all to see may seem like an intrusion of privacy. And in the case of our schools and colleges, some may consider such scrutiny a breach of the separation clause in the U.S. Bill of Rights. But that objection will not do, for in fact we educate our students for service both in the church and in society, and so we have to meet the educational expectations of both. Indeed, nearly all our professional programs must prepare our graduates to pass their boards, licensure, or certification before they can enter their professions. We do not educate our young people in a vacuum, but in front of the whole world to see. So what does the world see when it looks at us? How well are we doing?

Having worked many years in Adventist higher education, I have observed some things. I believe we are doing many things very well, but we rarely report them in a serious and scientific way. Schools tend to make great, sometimes exaggerated, claims in their promotional material. I do not know how truthful some of these advertising claims are, but I do know that I have serious doubts about many of the public relations and marketing claims car manufacturers make about their products. I have driven the cars, and they are not all that good! And I know that not all hospitals offer the best care in all areas of service. If they did, why would doctors refer patients with major health problems to special institutions? Public relations claims are probably useful in

making potential students aware of what we offer, but they do not offer any assurance that we are performing well. So what does?

Here are some things we can find out about our higher

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education system (I will limit my suggestions to the college level, which I know best). I believe many of them will show that we do very well.

How many of our students devote themselves to service while enrolled? It would be impressive and inspiring to measure that achievement. Forms of service would include not only student missionaries and task force workers, but also mentoring services, religious outreach, and local student ministry. The report would be the envy of many schools.

How effectively do Adventist teachers inspire students to



Andrews University's monthly Fusion vespers highlight the rich diversity that students experience on Adventist campuses.



Andrews University's annual Passion Play brings the story of Jesus to life for thousands of attendees and helps to grow its students' faith.

perform well? We could show the extent to which Adventist teachers inspire student performance. Our institutions are not very selective in admitting students, but the quality of our "output" is higher than what our "intake" would suggest. Science education at Andrews has caught the attention of the National Science Foundation (NSF) for just that reason. How do we succeed in moving a fairly ordinary and very diverse student population so far in four years of science study—farther than some elite colleges do? Grants from National Science Foundation to study this are in the works, and we expect that the report will be impressive and instructive to educators across the land.

How many of our freshmen become sophomores in their second year? How does this percentage compare to that of similar colleges? If we do better than average, how do we manage it, and if not, what can we do to improve this important statistic?

How many of our college students graduate in four years? Public college students commonly take five to six years to earn a college degree. I do not know how good our report card would be in this area. But unless our students work their way through college and therefore have to take a lighter load, would it not be better and cheaper for them to complete their degree in four years by careful academic advice, and a curriculum designed to be completed in four years of study? The cost of tuition, room, board, books, and incidentals before financial aid in U.S. religious private colleges approaches \$25,000 per year; in selective colleges, that cost exceeds \$35,000 per year. Indeed, it has been shown that spending four years to graduate from an Adventist college will cost much less than five to six years in other colleges, considering the cost and lost earnings from the additional years of study.

How prepared are our graduates to enter professional schools (such as medicine and law), or other graduate programs? I suspect that, given our generally small classes and close relationship between teachers and students, our graduates will do very well. If we were to establish a solid program in undergraduate research—a national priority in good colleges these days—we would do even better. A good report on this achievement could move our colleges and departments to national prominence.

Finally, we all believe our schools and colleges are faith-building, but we can't know this for certain unless we can show it by some means. Growing our students in faith by inches will be more impressive than growing our enrollment by scores, and I think the whole world would pick up its ears at such a prospect. Can we not show it?

Conclusion

Of course, I believe we must continue to grow our enrollments, and I look for positive reports each year. Our budgets depend on it, after all! But I would advise us not to conclude that we have a good thing going in Adventist education from kindergarten through college just because of rising enrollment numbers. Christian education must also be "good education" in every way, and we must be able to show it. Come to think of it, would it even be possible for us to offer a "not particularly good" or even "so-so" Christian education? That would seem like an oxymoron. If we dare call it Christian, our education must be first rate! ✍️



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