

Special Focus: Four-Year Christian Schools

Enrollment is up at America's Christian universities, and a new generation of leaders is in training.

A decade ago Christian colleges and universities would never have thought about capping their enrollment. But today, as young adults look for deeper purpose in their lives and vocations, faith-based schools are becoming a popular choice.

Between 1990 and 2005, enrollment at Christian colleges and universities increased 70.6 percent, according to a study conducted by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

"We believe that a big factor in growth is academic quality," says Robert Andringa, who spoke with Charisma shortly before he retired as CCCCU president in June.

"More evangelicals embrace higher learning" such as doctorate degrees, he notes, and the number of these new scholars who want to teach grows each year. More and more, they want "to work where their faith is encouraged and is allowed to be integrated into their teaching," he says.

In Southern California, Azusa Pacific University (APU) has gained about 100 students a year, which administrators say is forcing them to cap enrollment. A four-year university known for its business, nursing and education programs, APU has roughly 4,200 undergraduate students and 9,000 graduate students and distance learners.

"We want our students to have the opportunity to form relationships and possibly a mentorship with their professors; therefore, we have reached a point where we're having to cap the freshman class," says Dave Burke, director of undergraduate admissions at APU. "We want to keep the student enrollment at a size that enables students to have a full, rich college experience in a personal, relational environment."

To accommodate its growing student body, APU plans to plant new campuses. "We're planning to expand Azusa Pacific University global-learning communities all over the world," he says.

With nowhere to expand their campus, administrators at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, also are feeling the heat of increasing enrollment, which is roughly 3,900. "Lee's growth over the past 20 years has forced us to consider the possibility of capping enrollment ... but we're continuing to accept students each semester," says Phil Cook, assistant vice president for enrollment at Lee, which was founded by the Church of God.

Andringa attributes the blossoming enrollment to an emphasis at Christian colleges on preparing students for a calling rather than a career. "Rather than educating for simply a career, our campuses train students to pursue a calling in life that is fulfilling and prepares students to positively impact their communities," he says.

Like many Christian colleges, Lee integrates service opportunities into the curriculum and encourages students to think critically about their role in society. "All Lee students are required to complete a general education core, a

minor in religion, service learning [80 hours in four years] and global perspectives [a study-abroad program]," Cook says. "Also, our Center for Calling and Career assists students in focusing their gifts and talents into the vocation to which God has called them."

Administrators at North Central University in Minneapolis also built service opportunities into the curriculum.

"Students are required to fulfill a number of service hours every semester that can be fulfilled through volunteering at a local ministry, church or charity," says Susan F. Detlefsen, North Central's director of media relations. "This emphasizes our commitment to making sure that students are learning to serve while at college."

Increasingly, Christian colleges also are being recognized for their academic programs. Texas-based Baylor University was listed in U.S. News & World Report's America's Best Colleges 2006 edition, and Asbury College was listed among the most comprehensive colleges in the South. Meanwhile, The Princeton Review and U.S. News & World Report ranked Oral Roberts University (ORU) as one of the best colleges in the western United States.

"We want students to know who they are in Christ," says ORU Dean of Student Development Clarence V. Doyd Jr. "We offer students the whole-person education—mind, spirit and body."

Even secular institutions are finding that spiritual development matters to students. A recent Beliefs and Values Survey given to college freshmen by researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles, found that three-

fourths of college students are searching for meaning and purpose in life.

Similar numbers said they had high expectations that their college experience will help develop them emotionally and spiritually. Nearly half the respondents said it is “very important” that they have opportunities that will help them grow spiritually.

“The recent Spirituality in Higher Education Report by the Higher Education Research Institute clearly identifies the importance of campuses helping students explore their hunger for spiritual things,” Andringa says. “Most people are religious. There is a demand for institutions with a clear purpose and track record in addressing the needs of the mind, body and spirit.”

Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky, met students’ spiritual needs in an unintended way last February when revival unexpectedly broke out.

“It was during the last hour of chapel service,” says Joy O’Neil, assistant director of campus ministries at Asbury. “Students started going down to the altar to worship and pray. The service never ended.”

O’Neil says the week of nonstop ministry brought greater unity to the campus, helped heal broken relationships and motivated some students to “surrender all” to Christ.

“Students said that the revival helped give them direction in their vocation,” she told Charisma, “and it helped deepen their spiritual growth in Christ.”

Nikeya S. Williams worked as a summer intern for Charisma magazine.