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THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION publishes articles concerned with a variety of topics pertinent to Adventist education. Opinions expressed by our writers do not necessarily represent the views of the staff or the official position of the Department of Education of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION (ISSN 0021-8480) is published bimonthly, October through May, and a summer issue for June, July, August, and September by the Department of Education, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600. TELEPHONE (301) 680-5075, FAX (301) 622-9627; E-mail: 74617.1231 (CompuServe). Subscription price, U.S. \$17.25. Single copy, U.S. \$3.50. Periodical postage paid at Silver Spring, Maryland, and additional mailing office. Please send all changes of address to Southwestern ColorGraphics, P. O. Box 677, Keene, TX 76059, including both old and new address. Address all editorial and advertising correspondence to the Editor. © Copyright 1998 General Conference of SDA. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION, P. O. Box 677, Keene, TX 76059.

# Spiritual Assessment—Making Widgets or Nurturing Christians?

I've found that one sure way to get a lively discussion going is to mention "spiritual assessment" to a group of Seventh-day Adventist teachers.

The Adventist Church's "Total Commitment" document, excerpted on pages 4 and 11, has generated a number of seminars, evaluation plans, surveys, statistical analyses, and a great deal of soul searching and concern. What's all this discussion about? Basically, it's focused on trying to improve what we are doing—and for a Seventh-day Adventist school, that means providing a wholistic education that prepares young people for a heavenly kingdom as well as for life here on earth.

To that end, this issue of the JOURNAL combines presentations made at the Adventist Higher Education Summit, held in Loma Linda, California, in March 1997 with related materials from other sources.

All of us want our students to grow spiritually. We want teachers to integrate faith and learning and to model Christian values. We want our schools to be shining examples of Christian grace and academic achievement. But how do we make these things a reality? And how do we most accurately measure whether we have achieved our goals?

A recurring concern that I hear from educators is whether it is really possible to define or measure spirituality. They also worry that measurements made at a certain point in a student's experience will not accurately reflect the totality of a developing relationship with God. One of the common elements of successful assessment programs is their use of multiple methods in a variety of settings over a period of time. This means that students are interviewed in some depth two or more times while they are enrolled, and again several years after they have left the school. Bailey Gillespie offers helpful ideas for designing and using assessment instruments.

Another dilemma is this: Can we design instruments that identify the effects of specific things that we do? Students are not little widgets that we create from scratch in our institutions. As Duane McBride points out, they come to us already formed, from diverse backgrounds. Even while they are on our campuses, friends, family, the media, and other influences continue to shape their lives. Therefore, we need a better understanding of how various factors affect spirituality and moral development. This will help us create an environment that encourages our students to thoughtfully embrace positive values. Roger Dudley offers some insights on how spiritual development occurs.

Once we have done interviews and collected data, how should the information be interpreted and used? Who will have access to it? Will it become a marketing tool? Will it be used to judge the orthodoxy of school employees? Will positive results tempt schools to "rest on their laurels" or make unfavorable comparisons with other institutions that don't score as well as they do? These are serious concerns, and deserve further study.

This brings us to the last, and perhaps the most important concern: If we discover that things are not going so well, or just want to do better, what steps should we take? Carole Kilcher and Julian Melgosa look at the effect that Christian schools and teachers can have on students' spirituality, drawing on their own experiences and those of their students. Gordon Bietz recommends conversation among the college's many elements—administrators, teachers and staff, students, and constituents—as one means of developing a community of faith, while Gerald Winslow reflects on the value of teaching critical thinking.

These articles should help you think more clearly about spiritual assessment and how to implement it in your school. After sufficient time has elapsed for schools to conduct longitudinal studies and evaluate the reliability of their instruments and methodology, the JOURNAL will print reports on evaluation efforts at various Adventist institutions.—B.J.R.