

# Assessing Student Spirituality

## *The Andrews University Experience*

In order to fulfill its mission, every Christian college needs to embed—within both its curriculum and its co-curriculum—plans to nurture students in their spiritual journey. After those plans are implemented, there will be intense interest in how well the curriculum helped the college meet its objectives. That's where assessment comes in. How can student *spiritual* outcomes be assessed?

Attempting to assess spirituality is like trying to cross a field with land mines. No matter where one turns, there may be trouble, big trouble. However, it is not an impossible challenge.

Since the spring of 1997, Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, has been exploring ways to assess the spirituality of our students and to determine the impact of the college experience on their spirituality.

The assessment effort has been primarily motivated by and has grown out of activities that occur during the natural rhythms and changes of academic life. Changes in curriculum, in personnel, in the board of trustees' focus—even a restatement of the university's mission—have spurred the work of spiritual assessment.

Although faculty response to our attempt to assess student spirituality (or to any kind of assessment) has not been very vocal, it includes both positive and

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### **How can student spiritual outcomes be assessed?**

BY JANE THAYER

negative reactions, with the negative responses ranging from uneasiness to hostility. Faculty concerns about assessing spirituality are not entirely unfounded. Two key concerns: that spiritual transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit, and that it is the nature of research to be reductionistic. In response to those concerns, we have clarified our assumptions about the assessment of spirituality.

#### **Spiritual Growth Comes From God**

Spiritual growth is both the gift of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, which effects a change in human nature. Since it is impossible to measure an internal state, it is obvious that spirituality cannot be studied directly. We can observe “only its concomitants, correlates, and consequences.”<sup>1</sup> For that reason, at Andrews University, we talk about measuring “spiritual indicators” instead of measuring “spirituality.”

Jesus Himself gave us insight into how to assess the work of the Holy Spirit. When Nicodemus responded with incredulity to the statement that a person must be born again, Jesus explained how to perceive the work of the Holy Spirit: “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or

where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:7, 8, NIV). There is much that we cannot know about the work of the Holy Spirit, but we can “hear its sound” and see its effects.

### Reductionism of Research

Those who question whether we can measure spirituality are often repelled by the reductionism that is necessary in empirical study. Social-science research does not completely represent reality. When variables are operationalized, Basinger admits they are “always impoverished representations of the phenomena of interest,”<sup>32</sup> and “some phenomena (such as religious beliefs) are more prone to impoverishment than others.”<sup>33</sup> What faculty fear is that this will lead to a focus on behaviors and a “check-list religiosity.” The threat is real, but a behavioral check-list is not an inevitable consequence.

**I**n fact, “whether we acknowledge it or not, we make judgments all the time, especially about religious attitudes, beliefs and behaviors in ourselves and others.”<sup>34</sup> And without reliable measurements, Moberg says evaluation remains “on the level of non-representative illustrations, philosophical arguments, theological exhortations, common-sense folk wisdom (ingrained with unrecognized folly), and careless ‘trial-and-error’ experimentation rather than systematically tested conclusions.”<sup>35</sup> The assessment process is not the problem.

Anyone who has children can understand that although human beings are limited to reductionistic procedures for measuring spirituality, the information thus gained can have value. Parents continually evaluate the words and actions of their children in an attempt to determine whether they are choosing to follow Christ or not. They rejoice at positive indicators and weep at negative ones—even though they cannot read the heart or determine their children’s actual relationship with God. Whether they observe positive or negative behaviors and attitudes, they use those indicators to determine the type of guidance to offer.

Christian colleges still retain, to some extent, a commitment to serve *in loco parentis*. The faculty, staff, and administra-

tion need to know the spiritual indicators of their students in order to provide for their spiritual growth.

### A Tale Told Chronologically

Academic assessment began at Andrews University in 1991 when President Richard Leshner formed the Committee for the Assessment of Student Academic Achievement. By 1994, a university-wide assessment plan was ready to be implemented. In 1996, a faculty member was hired part-time to oversee university assessment; later, a second faculty member was assigned to assist part-time. Since then, the university has made a serious financial commitment to the assessment of student outcomes, which include spiritual

outcomes. The University Assessment Office oversees assessment efforts, and the Center for Statistical Services provides statistical analysis and other technical services.

In the fall of 1996, when the university made major revisions in the general-education curriculum, the faculty wanted to gather baseline data and make continuing plans to assess the outcomes of the new curriculum. Because the religion component was a major piece of the new general-education curriculum and one of the first to be implemented, the university decided to include, in the survey of those who completed the undergraduate program, a section on religious outcomes. The section included additional spiritual/religious out-

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comes that were part of the university's mission statement.

The board of trustees asked President Neils-Erik Andraesen in 1997 to restate Andrews University's lengthy mission statement in a much shorter and more focused form. After obtaining faculty input and approval, Andraesen's work resulted in a one-sentence mission statement accompanied by an additional one-sentence list of goals, which was approved by the board. All parts of the university—academic departments and student-services departments—have now nearly completed the task of designing their own goals and assessment around the new statement of the university's mission.

**G**rowing in part out of the challenge given by the General Conference's Total Commitment document, in 1998 the board of trustees established the Committee on Spiritual Life, chaired by the same member who chairs the board's Committee on Academic Administration. Assigning the same chair for both committees indicates that the university considers both academics and spirituality to be important.

About the same time, the university administration formed the Spiritual Development Committee to clarify and state the university's goals for student spiritual outcomes and to oversee intentional initiatives that foster student spiritual development. This committee is chaired by the president.

In 1998, the board of trustees approved the formation of the Center for College Faith, a "think tank" and research group of faculty who collaborate to understand how young adult spirituality develops and how the college experience affects that development.

In preparing the self-studies needed for the spring 1999 site visits of both the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) and the North Central Association (NCA)—our regional accrediting agency—many faculty invested long hours to bring together, from many sources, data relating to the religious and spiritual goals of the university's mission statement. (Regional accrediting agencies are now requiring

Christian colleges to assess spiritual outcomes because these outcomes are central to their mission.)

### **Assessment Measures and Procedures**

Assessment data on student spiritual indicators have been collected through freshmen surveys, individual academic program assessment procedures, student evaluations of faculty, alumni surveys, and special one-time assessment efforts that have included student interviews and focus groups.

First, to assess the spiritual indicators of our graduates, we inserted a lengthy section in our survey of alumni who ob-

has been changed to make it shorter or to collect different information. Among the measures embedded in the first *FRLP* was the *Christian Spiritual Participation Profile*, a 50-item questionnaire that measures participation in 10 spiritual disciplines.

In its current shorter form, the *FRLP* takes up the back and front of one scannable sheet. It contains a Christian practices scale, a volunteer activities scale, the Christian Commitments Scale, and a Discipleship Index, which was developed to provide baseline data for a discipleship initiative undertaken by Campus Ministries. Based on their self-reported levels of involvement in prayer, Bible reading, service/ministry, and a few other activities,

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tained undergraduate degrees from the university. It contained demographic information related to spirituality (church membership), items on worldview and beliefs, the Christian Commitments Scale, a Christian practices scale, and items that sought to determine the influence of mentors as well as what spiritual/religious activities alumni participated in as undergraduate students and how they valued those experiences. The survey, which included much more than the spiritual indicator items, grew to six pages in length. Originally, we planned to send this survey every spring to two classes: those three years and 10 years past graduation. This we did in 1997 and 1998. The current plan calls for sending the survey less frequently but to more classes.

For the past three years, the *Freshman Religious Life Profile (FRLP)* has been given to incoming freshmen. Each year, it

students are classified by the way they relate to discipleship: (1) no commitment, (2) open to commitment, (3) nominal commitment, (4) active commitment, or (5) commitment to leadership by discipling others. The purpose of the Index is to establish a baseline to help Campus Ministries determine how the level of commitment changes during the years that a student attends Andrews University.

For the university's self-study reports for AAA and NCA, the Center for Statistical Services compiled data we had collected from student evaluations of teachers and courses since 1995. Most courses throughout the university are assessed each quarter. Two of the items relate to faculty nurturing of student spiritual development: One asks about the professor's "Christlike behavior, attitudes, and relationships," while the other deals with how well "Christian concepts were integrated

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into the course when appropriate.”

When university means for all 19 items on the teacher-evaluation form were ranked in descending order, the item related to “the instructor’s Christlike behavior,” ranked the highest of any item, and the item dealing with the integration of faith and learning ranked third.

A class of graduate students studying young adult spiritual development worked in teams to conduct focus groups among both graduate and undergraduate students. They studied married and single graduate students; graduate students from West African nations; both male and female undergraduate students who were involved in campus spiritual activities; and two groups of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students who were perceived to be “spiritual shakers and movers on the campus.” Their findings provide a rich source of commendations and recommendations for administrators and faculty charged with responsibility of oversight for student spiritual growth.

In the spring of 1997, we did a study of how students perceive faculty spirituality. Because research on college student spirituality indicates that teachers play an important mentoring and modeling role for students, the researchers wanted to find out what criteria students use to evaluate faculty spirituality. Twenty-one seniors were interviewed. A detailed report of the findings will be published later.

### **The Exploration Continues**

Our continuing challenge is to keep refining *what* we assess and *how* we assess it. The *what* requires theoretical research; the *how* requires finding or designing and validating new measures. The list below de-

scribes our current projects and challenges.

• All of the measures that we currently use, with the exception of the *Christian Spiritual Participation Profile*, need additional testing for validity and reliability.

• The Center for College Faith, I believe, will play an increasingly important role in the assessment of spirituality on our campus. Since approximately 60 Andrews faculty across many disciplines par-

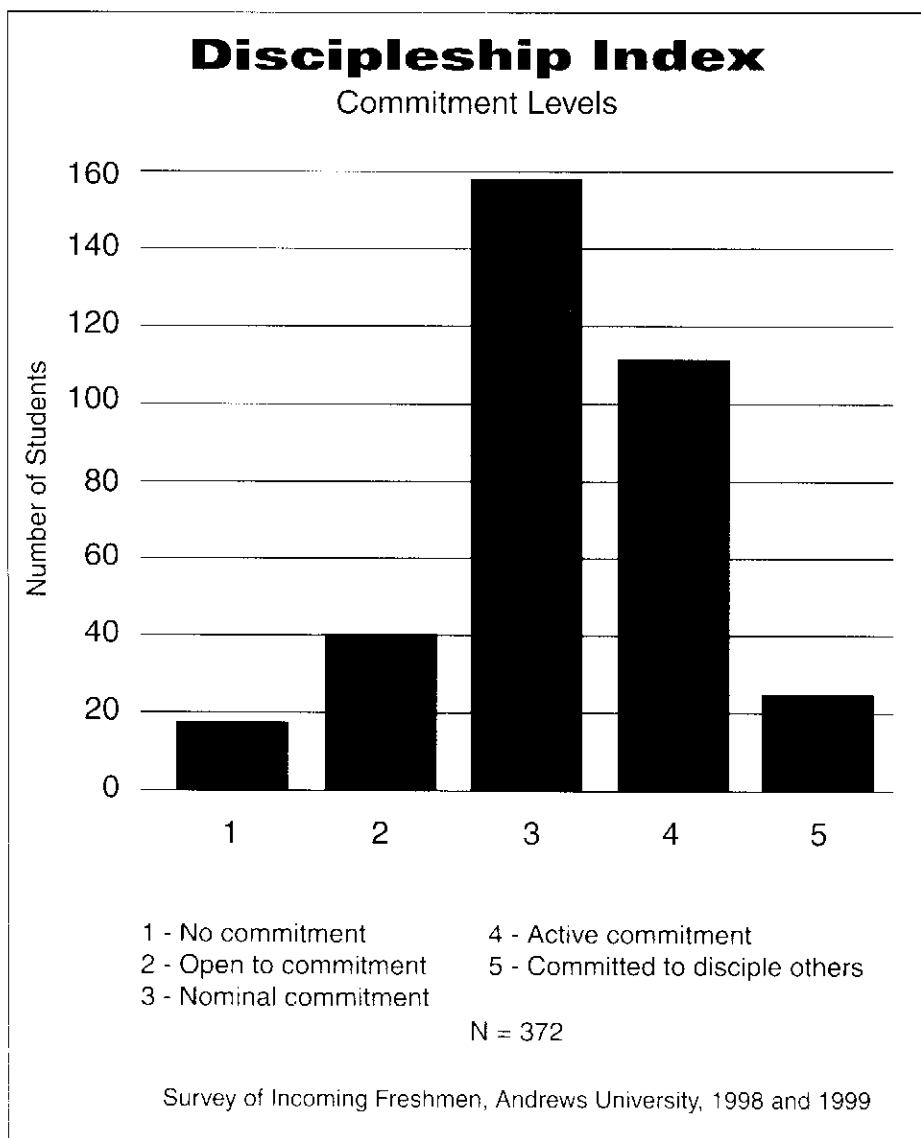
ticipate as center faculty, we have a unique opportunity to do experimental research on college student spirituality and its assessment. The literature on young-adult spirituality indicates that most research in

### **What We Are Learning About College Student Spirituality A Sample\***

- Finding:** That work supervisors who befriend students contribute in important ways to student spiritual growth. (On this point, work supervisors are second only to faculty in importance.)
- Suggestion:** *When training events are designed to teach college personnel how to nurture students spiritually, both faculty and work supervisors should be included.*
- Finding:** That students say attending church services and having personal devotions rank first and second, respectively (among a list of 14 basic campus religious activities) in importance toward contributing to their spiritual growth.
- Suggestion:** *A campus church should recognize its opportunity to contribute to students' spiritual growth by devoting the best creative effort to make its worship service Christ-centered and appealing to college students and by finding ways to invite them to attend.*
- Finding:** That students say attending chapel contributes the least (among a list of 14 basic campus religious activities) to their spiritual growth.
- Suggestion:** *A careful, Seventh-day Adventist education system-wide study needs to be made on the purposes and outcomes of chapel and what can be done to help chapel play a more significant role in the spiritual life of students or to find alternative ways to reach intended outcomes.*
- Finding:** That "reading and studying the Bible" is the best predictor (among spiritual disciplines) for a student to make strong commitments to submit to God's will, to live by biblical principles of sexual morality, to give systematic tithes and offerings, to participate in the life and work of a local church, and to tell others of the Christian message.
- Suggestion:** *That Christian colleges make use of every appropriate opportunity to encourage students to read their Bibles.*
- Finding:** That students rate their having an "assurance of God's love" the highest among eight religious attitudes.
- Implication:** *Perhaps the denomination's post-Valuegenesis focus on grace has had an impact on its young adults.*
- Finding:** That both entering freshmen and alumni have the highest commitment (among 15 Christian commitments) to "accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior" and the lowest commitment to "supporting world evangelism through personal participation or financial contribution."
- Suggestion:** *If colleges value students' commitment to support world evangelism, they will need to find ways to make support of world evangelism meaningful and important to young adults.*
- Finding:** That the most effective motivation to get college women to participate in religious or service activities is for someone to invite them to attend; the most effective motivation to get college men to participate is for someone to specifically ask them to do something in the activity.
- Suggestion:** *Student religious leaders should be informed of these motivators.*
- Finding:** That the most important criterion students use to evaluate a faculty member's spirituality is the faculty member's "concern for and care of" students.
- Suggestion:** *Faculty need to be aware of the significance that students place on their interpersonal relationships with students.*

\*These findings, which are based on data supplied by Andrews University students or alumni and/or incoming freshmen, should be read with the understanding that they are being investigated and added to on a continuing basis. The implication statements and suggestions reflect only the opinion of the writer, not official Andrews University positions.

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this area is either theoretical or descriptive. Very few good experimental studies have been done. The center offers us the opportunity to make a contribution to the knowledge base on young adult spirituality by engaging in and reporting experimental studies.

- As a result of the relatively new emphasis on academic assessment and quality improvement in all areas of the university, academic departments are becoming increasingly interested in finding ways to assess the impact of their faculty and programs on the spiritual development of students. We need to develop a bank of assessment items and procedures from which faculty can select the most appropriate for their discipline and their students.

- All the student-services departments have developed goal statements and assessment plans. Most of the directors and staff in these departments will need assistance to develop assessment measures.

- The simple task of deciding which outcomes would be best assessed at what time still remains to be done. Preferred times, in terms of students' progress through college, are as follows: entering freshmen, students midway through their program, exiting seniors, recent alumni, and long-term alumni.

- We need to discover methods of increasing the percentage of returns from our alumni surveys.

- We must find ways to assess spiritual outcomes for graduate students who do major portions of their study or even entire programs by distance education.

- One gaping hole in our assessment is the lack of an instrument to measure ethical/moral reasoning and behavior. The commercially available Defining Issues Test, although widely used in secular colleges and universities, is problematic for use in Christian institutions because of its underlying naturalistic assumptions.

Unless assessment findings lead to improved student spiritual life, it is pointless to invest human and financial resources in spiritual assessment. We have learned that our findings point directly to the need for faculty and staff development.

From the literature and our own limited data, we are learning that key components of spirituality are transmitted through faculty-student relationships, both in and out of the classroom. We cannot as-

sume that all faculty and staff know intuitively how to play well their important role in student spiritual development. For that reason, the university administration has financed the wide distribution of assessment findings to department chairs and faculty and to directors of service departments, and has provided time in general faculty meetings to report assessment findings.

**T**he university administration also provides opportunities for faculty development through Fall Fellowships, general faculty meetings, the Faculty Development Committee, the university assessment office, and the human resources office. As an example of the administration's investment in university-wide faculty development, last school year it purchased a copy of Arthur Holmes' *The Idea of a Christian University* for each faculty member, and this year, George Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. At each faculty meeting, 45 minutes is devoted to a faculty presentation on the assigned chapter, followed by an open discussion. This past school year, Holmes made a presentation at one faculty meet-

ing, and this year, Marsden is scheduled to speak.

Andrews University would like to encourage the sharing of spiritual-assessment measures and procedures among Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities. Some of the measures and procedures that are being used at Andrews University can be found at our Academic Assessment Web site: [www.andrews.edu/assessment](http://www.andrews.edu/assessment). The Religious Education Program in Andrews University's School of Education is planning to develop a Web-based course on spiritual master planning and assessment.

While the exploration of spiritual assessment at Andrews University is far from complete, we have at least begun the journey. ☺

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