

ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

BY GARY B. ARNOLD

In a tedious landscape of incessant polling, the *Cardus Education Survey* (Pennings, et al. 2011) stands tall on a foundation of solid statistical analysis, asking the question, “In what ways do our Protestant Christian school outcomes match or exceed our schools’ motivations?” As educators, we cannot underestimate the findings.

Yes, the list of positive effects of our schooling is satisfying. Our children possess tangible hope and optimism for the future. As a group, we display graduates with discernible social intelligence. Gratitude, direction and purpose, and resiliency are detected in measures above and beyond the other groups in the study. Yet, despite these positive findings, the data indicates Protestant Christian schools are not fulfilling their academic purpose as effectively as we may surmise.

There are telling indicators that Protestant Christian schooling is not setting the academic pace. Sadly, according to *Cardus*, these indicators—less intense coursework, less selective college placement, fewer advanced degrees—“closely reflect the values reported by school administrators” (Pennings et al. 2011, 6). This report is not good news to educators who, as Christ-followers, devote their life to academically prepare children for the society they will enter and attempt to make an impact for good. Bluntly, a key *Cardus* observation is this: “Without attention paid to the academic program, of course, a Christian school is nothing more than a tuition-based youth group” (31). This is a wake-up call for all of us. Yet, even with the cordial indictment of the research, the *Cardus* data serve as good leverage for our maturation as academic institutions. Not only can we do better in fulfilling the academic mandate of our vocation, but also we need not fret that academics will dilute our biblical orthodoxy. In the words of *Cardus*, “Academic rigor need not be sacrificed on account of either faith development or commitment to cultural engagement” (35).

The *Cardus* report places our schools at a monumental intersection. What shall we do with the data and recommendations of the study? Is there substantial agreement among Protestant Christian schools about what our academic motivations should be? Are our academic outcomes sturdy enough for our students facing the new challenges of a new century? Like many

of our schools, Little Rock Christian Academy wrestles with these questions and is compelled to respond with a renewed focus on academic competitiveness.

Little Rock Christian Academy is a K4–12 independent Christian college-preparatory school serving a community of 1,437 students, over 900 families, and over 100 churches. One hundred percent of our graduates pursue higher education. This fall, Little Rock Christian was deemed a 2012 Exemplary High-Performing school by the U.S. Department of Education and was a recipient of the National Blue Ribbon award. Upon the news, we rejoiced in the Lord and thanked our professionals for the diligence required to raise the educational bar. The accomplishment did not come easily.

Five years earlier, our school community viscerally grappled with the word *excellence* embedded in our mission statement. Like many other schools, we pledge that the education we provide our families will be “characterized with excellence.” But, as the new head of school, I encountered a large K–12 school that was a divided camp on the question of whether the excellence was real. Half the community was satisfied with the status quo; the other half saw a pressing need for change, especially in regard to academic rigor. Over the course of five years, by God’s grace and an enormous amount of hard work, we successfully navigated the rocky shoals of change and have become a stronger school in the process.

Our change mandate was two-dimensional. We needed to come to terms with the meaning of the threadbare term *excellence*, and we needed to reshape our school culture into an environment that was hungry to “play up.” When we studied the ancient Greek word for excellence, *arête*, we learned that it means to fulfill one’s potential or one’s purpose. This was a liberating moment. Such a definition virtually eliminated the trap of *hubris* in the aspiration to “go for the gold.” By pursuing *arête*, we could fulfill our God-given potential and, ultimately, God’s purpose for our school, bringing more glory to the God-head. Could our school’s outcomes match our motivation and promise? The answer depended on our ability to cast a renewed vision for fulfilling our potential and purpose.

Atop our strategic map, our school board formulated a calculated goal: we would seek to be a preeminent

academic institution that modeled and taught the truth and person of Jesus without compromise. This board mandate was crucial to our success, compelling us to refashion the instructional architecture of our houses of learning—elementary, middle, and high school.

We began with our vocabulary. Instead of the word *excellence*, we referred to our *pursuit* of excellence. We declared a fundamental truth: we are first and foremost a school—a school that is permeated with a Christ-centered worldview. To those who fretted about compromise to our core values, we would confidently assure them: no Jesus, no school. We defined ourselves to the general public as a school that is Christian, independent, and collegiate. We reminded our faculty and parents that our primary task is to ready our students for entry into 13th grade at the highest possible level, equipped with patterns for lifelong discipleship. We pushed for a growth mind-set by asking all staff to read and discuss Carol Dweck’s *Mindset*. Would our school possess a mind-set characterized by an open eagerness to learn, or would our school be averse to learning new ideas, stuck with a fixed mind-set?

Motivated by the writings of Nicholas Wolterstorff, we meditated on the concept of biblical *shalom* (a flourishing life) as the end product of our 16,000 hours of student engagement. We toiled to maintain a fair balance between academics, arts, athletics, and authentic service. Resting on the nonnegotiable reality of Jesus Christ as Lord, we were able to layer up and shore up our educational program to the glory of God. We oriented and trained professional staff to envision our instructional philosophies as intricately related components of a vibrant house of learning.

Founded securely on a set of nonnegotiable core values, we affirmed a pedagogy respecting “blended instruction,” expanding our digital access to knowledge. Curriculum was redesigned using backward mapping. Starting with the end of the 12th-grade year, we worked back through the grade levels to rebuild our academic objectives while taking pains to align ourselves with appropriate components of the Common Core. We retooled our biblical worldview curriculum on all fronts. A revitalized team of ten biblical worldview teachers was commissioned for the high school. The middle school adopted age-appropriate biblical worldview content and structure, while elementary grades deepened their focus on biblical foundations. All faculty members were charged and trained to infuse biblical worldview into their academic fields. Differentiated instruction became a pedagogical

expectation; we recruited teachers who displayed a talent to incorporate differentiated instruction into the fabric of the classroom. Finally, we deployed two strategic maps that would yield the school a robust enrollment, a fruitful capital campaign, a balanced budget, and a National Blue Ribbon—an explicit goal of the school’s education team.

Because we are a declared college preparatory school, our director of college guidance was a critical hire. Her philosophy and skill in building bridges with competitive schools and selective colleges was quickly noted by school families and prospective school families. In May 2012, our graduating students were offered a total of \$11,900,000 in scholarship money; 110 graduates were admitted to over 60 universities. Our upper school principal shared the vision to improve our academic reputation in the community and among colleges and universities. His focus on ACT composite scores, his push for more Advanced Placement courses, and his cultivation of the National Merit Scholar program lifted all boats. The lower school principal capitalized on our indisputable reputation for nurture and raised

expectations for achievement and learning. The school-wide implementation of value-added student assessment told our families we cared about measurable year-to-year learning. Elevating the stature of academic achievement took time, training, and resources. Required summer reading for teachers modeled the growth mind-set we held as a community standard. The academic contagion quickly spread.

I recall attending a briefing on the Cardus study soon after its initial release. Skeptics abounded. What statistical methods were used? How many participants were in the study? How were participants selected? Was the study biased? What does Cardus mean by “Protestant Christian?” One year later, we are more open than ever to heed the research. Having experienced the joy of responding to the Cardus challenge for a higher standard, perhaps now we will have a new opportunity to press even higher—to the glory of God.

Reference

Pennings, et al.. 2011. *Cardus education survey*. Hamilton, ON: Cardus.

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THERE ARE SEVERAL TELLING INDICATORS THAT PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING IS NOT PRESENTLY SETTING THE ACADEMIC PAGE.