



When I served as administrator for an international Christian school in Ecuador, I often found myself in meetings with leaders from secular institutions. When my peers would find out that I represented a Christian school, their eyes would glaze over and they would step back—immediately implying that my school was second-rate.

Why is that? Is it because Christian schools are misperceived, or is our reputation somehow deserved? Can we look honestly at ourselves to evaluate whether we as Christian schools sometimes accept mediocrity?

I wrote in the previous President's Desk column that the *Cardus Education Survey* results produce some good news that causes us to rejoice: our graduates are salt and light in their communities and churches, and their lives are marked by generosity and a commitment to God and family. However, we need to be willing to objectively review some additional Cardus data.

Gary Arnold's article, "Academic Development," in the previous issue of *CSE* pointed out that the Cardus data also indicate that Protestant schools have room for improvement in academic rigor. As Arnold put it, "There are telling indicators that Protestant Christian schooling is not setting the academic pace," and "the Cardus data serve as good leverage for our maturation as academic institutions" (22).

When we at ACSI headquarters saw the initial Cardus findings, a question immediately came to mind: What about ACSI-accredited schools? Could the same statements be made about them? We didn't think so since one standard that's required for accreditation is that a school have a carefully developed, thoroughly documented, and well-executed curriculum.

So ACSI commissioned Cardus to do additional research on our accredited members, and our assumption was proved correct. The Cardus data specific to accredited schools revealed that, on average, these schools require more rigorous course loads in math, science, English, languages, civics, social studies, art or music, and Bible than all other programs surveyed (Pennings et al. 2011, 155–163). Also, ACSI-accredited schools, on average, offer more Advanced Placement courses than other Protestant schools (153). On average, more ACSI-accredited schools offer dual-enrollment options for both college course credits at local universities and distance learning through online courses than any other program surveyed (188, 190).

This is fantastic news! ACSI-accredited schools produce graduates who are the salt and light in their communities and churches, and they also *serve as institutions of academic rigor, as Christian schools*

should. ACSI accreditation services truly help schools improve and strive for excellence in every way.

Obviously, no ACSI school has "arrived" at academic excellence. (Our Academic Affairs Department reviews ACSI-accredited schools regularly to ensure that they still meet the standards in order to be granted another term of accreditation.) However, I think we would all agree that every Christian school should strive for academic excellence. In fact, I believe that Christian schools should at their core be institutions of educational excellence.

A few years ago Dr. Richard Riesen spoke at the ACSI Leadership Academy, and he made a strong statement regarding Christian schools and their academic rigor. He said that if educators want to link *Christian* with *school*, mediocrity is unacceptable. If a Christian school isn't

committed to academic rigor and excellence, then its leaders should drop either *Christian* or *school* from the institution's name. Christian schools must be about excellence in everything they do, including academic rigor; otherwise, the name of Jesus is being tarnished.

Moreover, academic excellence is crucial if Christian schools are going to produce graduates who can transform societies. Riesen wrote in *Piety and Philosophy*, "It will not do for Christians simply to complain of the godlessness of modern science or philosophy. They

must themselves engage the world intellectually, even at the cutting edge" (2002, 107).

And how will they do so if the Christian schools they attend fail to prepare them in this way?

Yes, God has blessed our efforts to prepare students spiritually and help them develop a biblical worldview. But may we all rise to the challenge of preparing them academically with the same intentionality.

Note: In the 2011/2012 school year, just 28 percent of ACSI members were ACSI accredited, and 2 percent were in the Steps Toward Achieving Recognition program. To learn more about either program, visit www.acsi.org/accreditation or contact your regional office.

ACSI-accredited schools produce graduates who are the salt and light in their communities and churches.

References

- Pennings, Ray, et al. 2011. *Cardus education survey: ACSI oversampling report*. Hamilton, ON: Cardus.
- Riesen, Richard A. 2002. *Piety and Philosophy: A primer for Christian schools*. Phoenix, AZ: ACW Press.

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