Faith & Science Sabbath School examines LSU’s apology

La Sierra University recently sent out a letter apologizing for a manner of teaching that left the majority of the (surveyed) biology students with the perception that the university and specifically its biology department did not support the Adventist position on creation. The letter and the survey will be parsed and recommendations for rectifying the situation discussed in this presentation by Paul Giem.

Giem runs the Faith & Science Sabbath School, which meets weekly at Mortenson Hall on Loma Linda University campus. Recent presentations have included “The Genesis Flood Account” by Brian Bull and “Whales and Evolution” by Giem.

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Dr. Giem is assistant professor of emergency medicine at Loma Linda University. He holds a B.A. in chemistry from Union College, Nebraska, an M.A. in religion from Loma Linda University and an M.D. from Loma Linda University. Dr. Giem has published research articles in the areas of religion and medicine. His current research includes work on carbon-14 dating methods. He is author of the book Scientific Theology, which deals with a number of science–Bible areas, including dating methodology and biblical chronology.

Press Enterprise Update: Creation vs. evolution debate at La Sierra University
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Creation vs. evolution debate at La Sierra University

By DAVID OLSON
The Press-Enterprise

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University leaders last month publicly apologized for not adequately emphasizing church teaching in biology classes and promised to do more. A pro-creationist group that gathered more than 6,300 petition signatures critical of the university says some biology professors promote the theory of evolution over Adventist beliefs.

But the pledge wasn't enough for the Adventist Accrediting Association board, which last week declined to extend La Sierra's Adventist church accreditation for a full five years. Instead, the university received a provisional one-year extension, to Dec. 31, 2012, to give the university more time to infuse Adventist religious beliefs into science classes and make other changes.

"The real crux of the matter is whether the Bible has a privileged position as a source of knowledge," said Lisa Beardsley, director of education for the worldwide Adventist church.

The inadequate teaching of Biblical creation "is a symptom of a problem," an indication that La Sierra hasn't done enough to ensure students are thoroughly exposed to the Adventist worldview, she said. Beardsley said the board's actions were not in response to the actions of the pro-creationist group.

Beardsley said a loss of accreditation from the association would not necessarily mean La Sierra would lose its Adventist affiliation or funding. Nearly 10 percent of La Sierra's budget comes from a regional Adventist body, university officials said.

But she said it would be a signal to parents and others that the association could not guarantee that the university meets the Adventist association's standards.

WIDER IMPACT

The pressure on La Sierra is causing concern at the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, a federally approved accreditation agency that, among other things, measures academic quality and integrity at public and private colleges and universities. Federally approved accreditation is required for acceptance of university class credits by most other universities and many employers, and for most financial aid.

The association in August extended its accreditation of La Sierra for eight years but said the controversy over creationism could threaten La Sierra's academic autonomy. It is sending a team to the university in the next several weeks to review the university's handling of the situation, said Ralph Wolff, president of the association.

"What we want to make sure of is that non-academic outside forces are not controlling the curriculum," he said. "While we respect that it is a faith-based institution, it is still an academic institution."
A university can lose its accreditation if it allows outside groups to dictate its academic curriculum and policies. Wolff said he did not expect La Sierra to lose accreditation.

An accredited university can require faculty to present a religious denomination's beliefs on creation, as long as faculty accurately explain that the scientific consensus is in favor of evolution, Wolff said.

University officials say evolution will continue to be taught, and even La Sierra's creationist critics support continued teaching of evolution.

Some parents and students have expressed concern over La Sierra's biology classes for years, but the generally quiet criticism spiraled into a high-profile controversy after Beaumont resident and La Sierra graduate Shane Hilde founded Educatetruth.com in June 2009. The website sponsored the online petition and has been relentless in its push to ensure that Adventist beliefs are reflected in the biology curriculum.

Hilde praised the accreditation board's decision.

"They're the ones with the power," he said. "We're just former students and laypeople who have no official position in the church. All we can do is shout from the rooftops. It doesn't do anything unless somebody listens. Fortunately for us, the leadership listened."

A CATALYST

The La Sierra board of trustees last year formed a committee to investigate allegations that some biology professors taught students that evolution has greater scientific merit than creationism and did not always respect creationist students' beliefs. The committee conducted a survey of current and former biology students and concluded that only half agreed that the Adventist view of creation was presented in their classes and that even fewer said that view was "supported."

"This is not acceptable, and we apologize," university President Randal Wisbey and board Chairman Ricardo Graham said in an open letter last month.

Graham said by phone that the university has "great respect" for its biology professors.

But, he said, "an academic position that denies church teaching is not appropriate. ... Academic freedom in a secular institution is much different that the processes of academic freedom in a faith-based institution."

University spokesman Larry Becker said the university has already taken steps to more fully expose students to Adventist beliefs -- a 1½-year-old required seminar for all biology majors discusses the intersection of religion and science -- and continues to talk with faculty members about better integrating those beliefs in classroom instruction.

Becker said the university believes those discussions will lead to changes in classroom instruction without mandates to professors.

Repeated phone calls to four biology faculty members were not returned. One of them, Professor Gary Bradley, told the website Inside Higher Ed in 2009 that he would not denounce or contradict evolutionary theory in his class.

Sean Pitman, moderator of Educatetruth.com, said statements like that indicate that Bradley and two other professors the website targets reject Adventist beliefs on creation. He wondered whether they could in good conscience teach Biblical creation in the classroom, "and not just present it in a positive manner but support it."

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