

Students, professors opening minds to evangelical colleges

Strong academia, moral values make schools popular

By **STUART SILVERSTEIN**
and **ANDY OLSEN**
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When Stanford-trained physicist Ken Kihlstrom took a job teaching at Westmont College, an evangelical Christian school near Santa Barbara, Calif., some of his counterparts at top research universities were baffled.

Their attitude seemed to be, "Are you basically a backwoods fundamentalist right out of the Scopes monkey trial?" he recalled.

Two decades later, Kihlstrom is sending some of his top students off to graduate school at elite universities. And he gets fewer questions from skeptics about whether Westmont embraces modern science.

Across the United States, evangelical colleges and universities are gaining broader acceptance and moving closer to the academic mainstream.

Enrollments are surging, especially in Southern California, home to two of the largest schools. The percentage of students heading to graduate school is rising and some of the institutions have edged up in college rankings. Evangelical scholars, meanwhile, are having a bigger effect in academic circles, occasionally attracting job offers from Ivy League schools.

These scholars "are being seen more as peers than would have been the case 20 years ago," said Alexander Astin, director of the University of California, Los Angeles' Higher Education Research Institute. And many of the schools themselves are trying "to pursue academic excellence in traditional terms, by which I mean recruiting students with higher SAT scores and faculty who are known scholars in their fields."

The rising stature of evangelical schools stems in part from growing attention to diversity in academia, which

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opened the door not just to ethnic and racial minorities but also to evangelical thinkers.

At the same time, parents and students increasingly are seeking out colleges that emphasize conservative moral values, which still set evangelical schools apart from most of academia. They look to schools like Wheaton College in Illinois, a prestigious evangelical liberal arts college, which only this month held its first social dance — other than a square dance — since the school's founding in 1860.

Although evangelical schools account for only 3.1 percent of students in U.S. four-year colleges, the schools' enrollment growth has outpaced that of public and other private institutions.

According to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, the nation's largest umbrella organization for evangelical undergraduate institutions, U.S. enrollment at its schools climbed 26.6 percent from 1997 to 2002, to 215,593.

Perhaps nowhere is the growth in evangelical schools more dramatic than in Southern California. Azusa Pacific University in the San Gabriel Valley, with 8,200 students, is the second-largest of the council's schools. Biola University of La Mirada, just outside Los Angeles, appears to have moved up to

fourth-largest this fall with an enrollment of 5,300.

Current students and recent graduates often say they were attracted by the schools' blend of religious and ethical values with scholarship. They also appreciated the opportunities for close relationships with professors.

Melissa Durkee, a 25-year-old Westmont graduate now in her third year at Yale Law School, said her alma mater had "a culture that encouraged professors to play a mentoring role and really have a deep presence in their students' lives. It wasn't a sterile, removed, academic distance."

Another attraction is the price. A council survey found that tuition averages \$14,730, nearly \$5,000 less than the norm for U.S. private colleges and universities, without considering scholarships.

But many academics remain concerned that the schools bend their instruction to conform with religious doctrine, stifling intellectual inquiry. They note that the colleges commonly require faculty members to make faith pledges attesting to their Christian religious beliefs and refuse to hire homosexuals.

"Sex and science are difficult issues for them to deal with in terms of mainstream educational thought," said Martin Snyder, director of planning and development for the American Association of University Professors.

At Azusa Pacific and at other evangelical schools, the atmosphere and course content sometimes are very different from those of secular institutions.

But for an increasing number of students, the schools offer a haven that secular campuses can't match.

Meehan Dellar, a freshman at Azusa Pacific, said she hadn't even been sure she wanted to go to college, but had been won over after visiting the campus.

"It's like one big family," she said of the campus atmosphere. "Everybody is so accepting and loving. You are put in a classroom with teachers who pray before classes and who share the same passion for serving Christ that you do."