No mind left behind

Colleges where students hear God’s call

Did mission schools plant seeds for the Arab Spring?

Please see article about Johnson C. Smith University on reverse side.
At Johnson C. Smith University, learning includes making a better world.

By Jessica Reid

The president of Johnson C. Smith University says his goal is to foster a state of “creative insecurity” among students. That approach, says Ronald L. Carter, president of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)-related school, leads to graduates who are innovators and problem solvers and who use their professions to improve their communities.

“We want students to learn how to measure risks and understand that a vision may not be perfect and you may fail, but you dust yourself off, adjust and keep going,” Carter says. “You can take your profession and use it in new ways to positively impact the quality of life of others.”

Students and faculty at the university, which is in Charlotte, N.C., put Carter’s vision into practice daily. Every department is expected to design a project that uses research to improve economic or social conditions in the surrounding region.

“We believe we should work within and with the community,” Carter says. “Our students see this as how you do research and learn this way of actively being involved with others. They take that lesson with them.”

A systems engineer graduate of the university has developed Charlotte’s Web, a program that uses technology to mentor young men of color. Other projects have brought together neighborhood associations to look at the needs of residents and have provided educational support for young people who are leaving foster care because of their age.

Johnson C. Smith was founded in 1867 by two Presbyterian ministers to prepare African Americans for careers as teachers and ministers. Today, 79 percent of the college’s students are African American.

The university provides support for students’ spiritual development and welcomes those from a myriad of religious backgrounds.

As the population of the United States becomes increasingly diverse, Carter believes universities must become more diverse to survive. They also must work with public schools to better prepare students so that not just the elite get into college. “We can’t just bemoan the fact of what’s happening in public education,” he says. “We’ve got to roll up our shirtsleeves and work together to create a better way.”

To learn more about Johnson C. Smith University, visit www.jesu.edu or call (704) 378-1000.

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