

A SURVEY OF GRADUATES FROM MAR ELIAS EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Defiance College enjoys a special relationship with Mar Elias Educational Institutions (MEEI). Three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee and President of MEEI, Archbishop (Abuna) Elias Chacour has spoken on campus and was awarded the college's Humanitarian Award by President Wood. A working partnership between researchers associated with both institutions was a natural outcome of this institutional relationship.

Don Knueve, Raed Mualem, and Haitham Alkateeb designed a survey research project to better understand the lives, culture, religion, future plans, and potential of the June 2007 graduates of Mar Elias Campus of the University of Indianapolis, the institution's first graduating class. MEEI had identified this institutional need in order to improve the recruitment and education of its students. In addition, MEEI considered the information essential to creating a successful petition to the Israeli Ministry of Education for permanent certification and accreditation of their university curriculum.

Mar Elias Campus (MEC) is a part of MEEI and is located in Ibillin, which is in the northern part of Israel. Ibillin is a religiously diverse community primarily comprised of Muslims, Christians, and Druzes. In 1968, Abuna Elias Chacour, the current Archbishop of the Galilee region, founded MEEI with a kindergarten class in the only available room in the village. Today this educational complex includes that same kindergarten, which is called the Mariam Bawardi Kindergarten School, and a host of other education facilities, including the Mariam Bawardi Elementary School (opened in 1998), the Mar Elias High School (1982), Mar Elias College (1994), Mar Elias School for Gifted Students (1998), and Mar Elias Campus of the University of Indianapolis (2004). MEEI's total student population is approximately 3,800 students. All of the educational programs are open to students of all faiths and are taught by faculty and teachers who are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Druze. MEEI also provides professional development for more than 1,200 teachers from 30 schools across the Galilee region through its Mar Elias Regional Teachers' Center. The Teachers' Center is recognized as one of the most successful in Israel.

MEC's nonsectarian educational mission provides a unique and greatly needed place for students and faculty of various faiths to build bridges across differences through educational dialogue. As well as preparing graduates for the responsibilities of future careers, the discussions in the classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, and informal gathering places can lead to the cross-cultural understanding that the region needs in order to move toward peace. Within the context of this interfaith setting, our research took place.

We administered 52 surveys to students. Twenty-five were conducted with representatives from environmental science and chemistry, 18 in communication and marketing, and 9 in computer science. Fifty respondents or 96% indicated that they were between 21 and 25 years of age. Fourteen (27%) were male and 33 (63%) were female. Sixteen (31%) were Christian, and 31 (60%) were Muslim. One important purpose of the survey was to understand the most common and frequent activities of these graduates. A high percentage of these students participated most frequently in fun activities with friends and family (83% with family visits and meals; during school, 80% with friends; and after school, 55% with friends). Education was reported as the most important cultural activity (37%).

The above results suggest that family, friends, and education are important to these graduates. Further examination shows that these graduates are under a lot of pressure balancing their educational, family, and work responsibilities. A higher percentage of these university students, compared to typical traditional American university students, have responsibilities with their spouse and some with their children. In spite of all this pressure, interaction with family and friends and maintaining the cultural family styles are very important to these graduates. The focus on education is likewise very strong.

In examining future goals and career goals, we identified a number of priorities in the responses. Finding a job in their field and continuing their education by going on to graduate school were the most frequent responses. Forty-two of the participants (81%) chose one of these two, with 22 (42%) identifying both. When asked about career goals and proudest moments, responses indicated that the personal goals of marriage, family, and living a good life were important to these respondents. Eleven (21%) of the respondents identified a trip to the United States at the University of Indianapolis as being their proudest moment. When asked what factors prevent students from participating in their favorite activities, financial stress and home issues were the most frequent pressures at home; however, 53.5% of the respondents indicated no pressures at home. Fifty-five percent of the respondents indicated that lack of time, work, homework, and finances

provided the most stress. When asked about pressures from the university, 50% of respondents indicated that academic work and finances were most on their minds. Almost 24% said that they felt some pressure in their dealings with the university. Thirteen (25%) of the respondents identified bringing peace to their region as the most important priority and something that they would do if they were able.

The responses to the survey need to be understood within the context of the lives of these 52 graduates. All are completing their undergraduate degrees, most have job responsibilities, most have familial responsibilities of some kind, and a surprising number have responsibilities to spouses and children. There are also the issues of the political conflict in the region, the limited availability of jobs, and the financial struggles of the people in the northern part of Israel. Mar Elias Campus provides educational opportunities for these students, but moving on to the next step of finding a job or going on to graduate school is a challenge.

This research project provided valuable information about the lives and future plans of 52 graduates of MEC. In addition to the data that the survey provided, we also glimpsed the great potential that these 52 graduates hold for their region if given the opportunity. The research project also reinforced the unique position of the MEC to bring educational opportunity to young people living in a distressed region of the world with few resources. It is clear that MEEI provides an important resource for the future of this region.

