STUDENT GOVERNANCE
Purpose and Practice

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BY JOSEPH F. DENT, JR.

How do church leaders feel about student governance? Although some are supportive, the impression I have gotten from talking with others is not very positive. When I began researching this article I had the idea, from previous reading and my understanding of Ellen White's philosophy of Christian education, that she encouraged Adventist educators to share governance with students. However, I wasn't sure, so I asked a few church leaders. Answers I received varied from expressions of personal discomfort with the idea of shared governance to assertions that "students are just there [at the school] to learn; the administrators, the teachers and the board are the ones who are supposed to be in charge of governing the school." I am glad I continued my investigation, however, because Ellen White, as well as other prominent educators and researchers, wholeheartedly support the idea of involving students in campus governance.

Involving college students in campus governance is neither novel nor new. According to Klopf, "having students responsible for and exercising control over their conduct and activities extends over a period of many centuries."[1] Certain aspects of student government can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Klopf says that, unlike the present, when student governance is promoted for its philosophical benefits, early policies evolved from the practical needs of students.[2]

Klopf cites two examples. Foreign students who came to the University of Paris in the 12th century found themselves virtually on their own. They were forced to form "nations" or guilds for their protection. These early student organizations

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acquired so much prestige and power that the idea spread throughout Europe and England.[3]

Early student government also evolved because of crowded dormitories that necessitated management. Educational historians assert that students first undertook this task, but soon formed democratic communities and selected principals.[4]

Student Governance in the 20th Century

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sufficiently into social relation with their children or scholars.[7]

The Professional Literature

The professional literature in the past two decades is full of appeals, proposals, and exhortations in support of students' rights to participate in the collegiate decision-making processes.[8] In his classic volume, *Why Teenagers Reject Religion and What to Do About It,* Roger Dudley asks the question:

How could we (school administrators) possibly make all the rules and impose them on the student until graduation and think we are training him for self-government? You can't learn self-government by having somebody else govern you any more than you can learn swimming by watching somebody else swim. You have to practice it. Of course, you practice either skill under a trained instructor.[9]

He goes on to quote Ohlsen, who declared:

A person ceases to be reactive and contrary in respect to a desirable course of conduct only when he himself has had a hand in declaring that course of conduct to be desirable.[10]

Kohlberg and Turiel illustrate this point by stating that "students should participate through action in the . . . decisions of the school. Rather than attempting to inculcate a predetermined and unquestioned set of values, students should be challenged with the . . . issues faced by the school community as problems to be solved, not merely situations in which rules are to be mechanically applied."[11] Although Kohlberg and Turiel were specifically discussing moral values in this context, the same principle should apply to a variety of issues, especially those that relate most directly to young people's lives.

According to Keeton, students have the right to share in decision-making on the college campus for three reasons:

1. Students' concerns and lives are those most affected by the decisions made.

2. Student cooperation is essential to the effective operation of the campus.

3. Student sponsorship and resources create and sustain the institution.[12]

Ellen White advocates that students play a part in making rules.

20th century student decision-making on college campuses was mostly limited to issues relating to the quality of student life. Undergraduates, like college administrators and trustees, seemed content to confine student interest in decision-making to the selection of homecoming queens, the election of prom committees and cheerleaders, and the writing of school songs.[5]

The 1960s saw an upturn in student activism, with college campuses being taken over by militant students protesting school policies and actions. By the mid-1970s, however, student participation in faculty and administration decision-making bodies had become generally accepted throughout the nation.

Is There Any Word From Ellen G. White?

Although it was not a widely held view in her day, Ellen White seems to have favored in principle some form of student participation in the decision-making process in our schools. In the book *Education* she advocates that students play a part in making rules:

Rules should be few and well considered; and when once made, they should be enforced. . . . Every principle involved in them should be so placed before the student that he may be convinced of its justice. Thus he will feel a responsibility to see that the rules which he himself has helped to frame are obeyed.[6]

Although teachers and administrators are ultimately responsible for school policy, students are to share the responsibility for establishing regulations. Participative government appropriate to the age and maturity of the student appears to be an educational principle that Ellen White advocates for all levels.

Mrs. White also wrote that teachers and parents should strive for a democratic, social relationship with young people so that the youth may sense that they are part of a well-ordered, self-governing society:

There is a danger of both parents and teachers commanding and dictating too much, while they fail to come

We might now ask, What kinds of decision-making responsibilities should students have? In 1973 the Carnegie Commission recommended that college students have a vote on joint or parallel college committees in areas in which they have special interest or competence. It also recommended that students be given the opportunity to inform the decision-making agencies about their experiences and desires, give advice, exercise good judgment, and support innovation.

Although student participation in college governance has been a fixture in American higher education for several decades, people still wonder what kinds of policy-making committees are appropriate for students to be given voice and vote. A recent telephone survey of several SDA colleges revealed that their students serve on such committees as the following:

Academic Affairs Committee
Human Relations Committee
Campus Life Committee
Library Committee
College Relations Committee
Non-voting observers on the
   board
Convocation Committee
Orientation Council
Discipline/Government Committee
Retention Committee
Dormitory Discipline Committee
Student Affairs Committee
General Studies Committee
Traffic and Parking Committee
Health Committee
Honor Core Committee[17]

Bond has observed that students should not be content with observer status. They should seek to be not only consumers of higher education, but also co-producers of higher education as well. He recommends a participatory governance model to involve students in the following areas:

1. Evaluation of teaching as part of the faculty promotion and review process.

2. Academic committees.

3. Academic planning and curriculum review processes.

4. Decisions about class size and the diversity and frequency of course offerings.

5. Grading policies.

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This compares well with Ellen White's views:

Cooperation should be the spirit of the schoolroom, the law of its life. The teacher who gains the cooperation of his pupils secures an invaluable aid in maintaining order.[13]

On the same principle it is better to request than to command; the one thus addressed has opportunity to prove himself loyal to right principles. His obedience is a result of choice rather than compulsion.[14]

Richardson makes the same point:

It has been pointed out that the zone of acceptance for policies which result in effective action broadens as those who are affected participate in their determination. We know, too, that authority in an organization is dependent upon the assent of those governed. From these two statements we may conclude that if we are to achieve acceptance by students of organizational policies, we will need to involve them in the development of such policies or run the risk of arriving at conclusions that are unacceptable to those whom they are designed to serve.[15]

The Valuegenesis Study

How many SDA students are actively participating in shared gover-

More than half our youth seem to believe that there is little student input on policies at their schools.

nance opportunities at our elementary and academy schools? Let's ask the youth themselves. In the recently completed Valuegenesis survey of more than 12,000 Seventh-day Adventist youth in North America in grades six to twelve, 44 percent of SDA youth in grades 6-8 and 48 percent of SDA youth in grades 9-12 reported that students in SDA schools have a voice in school policy. More than half our youth, by contrast, seem to believe that there is little student input on policies at their schools. "Students having a voice in school policy," by the way, was one of six school effectiveness factors found by the Valuegenesis study to predict both faith maturity and denominational loyalty.[16]

6. Allocation of income from student fees.

7. Staffing.

8. Management of student services.[18]

Effects of Student Participation in College Governance

Does participating in campus governance have any long-term effects on students? Research indicates that college leadership and governance experiences have a long-term positive impact on personal growth and development. In a major longitudinal study by an AT&T Human Resources Study Group, collegiate leadership experiences were shown to be more powerful predictors of managerial success than were college grades or selectivity of the college attended.[19]

Participation in governance also enhances students' ability to achieve self-confidence. A study conducted in 1983 suggested that college students who were involved in leadership experiences were more likely than nonleaders to feel confident about their ability to make future career choices and to have a successful family life.[20]

Francis quotes MacGregor as saying that many administrators view student participation in governance as a desirable goal, not just because it affords the students experience, but also because it also serves to reduce disorder due to student activism and militancy.[21]

Schwartz says that student leaders' interactions with college administrators often develop into meaningful relationships. These student leaders view college administrators as role models, mentors, and even "parent" figures. A review of these students' leadership experiences in relation to student development theories suggests that they can have developmentally powerful effects. Student leaders who have frequent contact with the college president, or who have had the misfortune of observing their president embroiled in ethical controversies, often describe their president as a parent figure or mentor. This indicates the potential intensity of the relationship and implies the potential for a significantly positive experience.[22]

Schwartz noted that participation in extracurricular leadership activities

Participation in extracurricular leadership activities creates communal relationships that may increase students' sense of moral awareness and responsibility toward others.

Many administrators believe student participation in governance provides students with experience while reducing student activism and militancy.

creates communal relationships that may increase students' sense of moral awareness and responsibility toward others. She suggests that student leaders faced with ethical challenges may benefit from the advice of experienced mentors.[23]

Criticisms of Student Governance

Several common complaints are voiced against student participation in campus governance.. Some argue that students do not understand the complexity of the various situations or have only superficial knowledge. (This can also be said of some adult committee members!) Others argue that few issue-

oriented student groups or leaders ever sustain their efforts, and that students usually play a protest role, using committee membership to deal with authority problems.[24] (Again, students often emulate their mentors, and who has not heard of adults on campus who fit these descriptions?)

Trustees and administrators also complain that students feel inadequate to deal with the issues involved, that students become frustrated, lose their motivation, and withdraw either physically or psychologically.[25]

Kloph states that college students have long been noted for their boundless energy and abundant enthusiasm,

which "have all too seldom been channeled into activities which have befitted [their] dignity as a student or an individual." When the question arises of allowing students to use some of this energy to participate in campus governance, administration and faculty are apt to venture, "Oh, but they are too immature to use good judgment if we give them the authority."

Kloph refutes this criticism and simultaneously echoes Ellen White when he asks the following question: "[H]ow [can] responsibility in any walk of life . . . be taught without practical experience? . . . [T]he method of trial and error is one which is bound up with our whole educational process. Learning results from experience as well as books and lectures." He concludes by stating, "Certainly practice in the university community, where mistakes can be corrected, is far better than carrying forth untested theories into the community where such mistakes are less tolerated and more disastrous."[26] Perhaps we would see better quality leadership in our schools, homes, and churches if we provided more and better opportunities for students to learn how to effectively lead and govern. ✂

Joseph F. Dent, Jr. is Vice President for Student Services at Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland.

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What kinds of decision-making responsibilities should students have?

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