The Essential Characteristics of SDA Higher Education

What makes an Adventist college Adventist?

BY LAWRENCE T. GERATY

In his keynote address at the 1992 Annual Council, Robert Folkenberg, General Conference president, reminded us that "the Lord has not called us to operate institutions, large or small, whose services can be delivered just as effectively by similar secular institutions." He added that "every element of the entire church organization needs to evaluate its activities, priorities, and products in the light of our unique, God-given mission. . . . Both budgets and policies must reflect the reason for our existence. As leaders we must hold ourselves accountable to measurable progress and quantifiable objectives."[1]

Identity

In responding to that challenge, let us review the *essential characteristics* of SDA colleges and universities. Obviously, Adventist institutions are similar to others in many ways, so what makes an Adventist college *Adventist?* One of Adventist higher education's essential characteristics is its *identity.* No other group of institutions reflects the same history or collection of customs and traditions distilled from the past.

Mission

Another essential characteristic is the *mission* of Adventist higher education. Mission, according to Arthur De Jong, describes our future—where we wish to go, what we want to become, the impact we wish to have on students.[2] It focuses on the values, customs, and traditions that colleges wish to pass on, the kind of world we wish to shape. So we need to look at our mission statements. Do they provide a unique vision and direction?

Have we set in place a process to bring them into being? Do we review them on an annual basis?

One function of a school is to critically evaluate and then pass on to the new generation the worthwhile aspects of the culture and values of society. Adventism has developed certain important and unique social and cultural values. SDA institutions seek to expose their students to the ideas and culture of their constituencies. The predominant influences shaping the life-style on an Adventist college campus are the teachings of the Bible, the counsels of church founder Ellen White, and the ideals and beliefs of the faculty, student body, and supporting constituency.[3]

In effect, the church says to its students: "The ideals, the practices, the life-style of this college indicate what we have found to be of value. In some ways they may be different from the mores of society at large, but we want you to experience them in the setting of this Adventist college so that you will have a fair basis for making an intelligent decision about the standards you will choose to order your own lives." Along with this process, the college must continue to develop new insights for the church within a changing society. This obviously requires more than just passing on the culture.

One characteristic of this Adventist educational mission deals with the totality of a person's life, both earthly and eternal. Ellen White articulated this well when she wrote,

True education means more than the pursual of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.[4]

Physical

A primary objective of Christian higher education is to lead students into self-knowledge. In the *physical* realm, this begins with an understanding of the human organism, its functions, needs, and care. The curriculum must therefore include physiology, health principles, psychology, physical education, and nutrition. Principles of healthful living must influence the regulation of the college program, the management of the residence halls, the direction of the food service, and recreation programs.

Do our mission statements provide a unique vision and direction?

Traditionally, this emphasis on physical development centered on abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and premarital sex; the advantages of a vegetarian diet, natural remedies, and exercise in the form of physical labor, such as farming; and the area of personal appearance, with emphasis on natural rather than artificial beauty, simplicity, and modesty in dress without undue adornment.

In addition, Adventist colleges are now moving into wellness programs for faculty, staff, and students. This, of course, includes exercise apart from work. Since we have moved away from an agrarian/manufacturing economy to a service/information-based economy, we need to make some adjustments. For example, we must do a better job in the area of sports and competition within an Adventist context. We need strong education and coaching in sportsmanship, teamwork, proper behavior for spectators, etc. But although this is a crucial developmental need for college-aged youth, we also need to teach them that team sports are only one small segment of a wellness program that prepares them for a healthful, responsible lifestyle.

Mental

In the *mental* realm, Adventist colleges have traditionally sought to provide God-centered liberal arts, professional, and vocational education with high quality teaching and learning. Again, Ellen White succinctly described our approach when she said,

Every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think and to do. . . . It is the work of true education to develop this power, to train the youth

to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts.[5]

For this reason, Adventist colleges have a tradition of excellence to live up to. Our heritage is one of innovation, of challenging widely held assumptions. One thinks, for example, of the age when we begin formal instruction. Adventists have challenged the prevailing view, believing that small children should be as free as lambs.

But now there seems to be an erosion of confidence in the excellence of the education we offer. We are compared to, and measured against, both private and public universities and find ourselves scrambling to measure up.

Recognizing we can't do everything they can do, with their superior resources, what vision of excellence can we adopt at the threshold of the 21st century? Out of a broadly based vision at Atlantic Union College, for instance, came a planning document called, "Priorities for Excellence." These priorities included some pretty traditional-sounding Adventist emphases. I see this happening around the circle of Adventist colleges, perhaps spurred on by the findings of Project Affirmation and the efforts of the NAD Board of High Education.

What we need, however, is a new boldness that will produce new levels of excellence. We must strive for intellectual excellence but also creativity and aesthetics, as well as respect for varying styles and talents—and all in a context of humility. The arts afford opportunities for emotion to be objectified or externalized and for feeling to blend with intellect.

In the rush to compete and acquire these skills, we need to stand ready to challenge the unfair pressure placed on those who may be unsuited for these activities, and stand boldly for developing in our students not only skills but also attitudes—pride in the accomplishment of a job well done, honesty, reliability, and respect for different human endowments.

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Spiritual

Adventist colleges particularly need to be known for what they offer in the *spiritual* realm. They must develop Christian character, nurture spiritual sensitivity and awareness, encourage the internalization of Christian doctrine and practice as understood by Adventists, foster understanding and respect for other persuasions, and make religion—worship, faith, and participation—an integrating and unifying force in learning and thereby inspire commitment to Christian mission.

Traditionally, this has been approached through required worships and chapels, certain Sabbath prohibitions, required religion courses that covered mostly propositional truth, weeks of prayer, and emphasis on correct behavior. Most of these things are still *de rigeur* to some extent, though there are signs of change—not because these things are wrong or bad but because in today's world, at least, they don't seem to be producing vibrant, growing, committed Christians in the numbers we would like to see.

What we need is a renewed emphasis on the relational, spiritual life. For instance, Atlantic Union College has worked hard on a spiritual master plan for the campus that attempts to harness the spiritual resources at the college on behalf of the students' spiritual development. To assist students in their prayer life, the student services office has put out a weekly prayer resource guide and sponsored a "dial-a-prayer" service. Each student has been given the One Year Bible and encouraged to make daily Bible study a part of his or her experience. All students receive the weekly *Adventist Review* to get them into the habit of staying updated with the progress and issues of their church. The general education committee has encouraged all departments to find ways to integrate faith into disciplinary agendas. The religion department has begun some very popular spiritual growth courses while approaching propositional

truth in a way that encourages loyalty and devotion to the personal God who inspired those propositions.

Much more could be said along these lines, but we must remind ourselves of the importance of *balance* when it comes to mental, physical, and spiritual nurture. The natural forces that exist on college campuses seem to work against this balance, so if it is to occur, it has to be by design.

One essential characteristic that Adventist higher education shares with other institutions of higher learning is a concern, not only with the person taught, but also with the *body of knowledge* to be learned and investigated. After all, colleges are designed and operated to speed knowledge through direct personal experience, the recorded experience of others, and logical reasoning. Adventist colleges, therefore, must pursue every academic discipline by using the methods and materials appropriate to it. They must inculcate within the learner an urge to roll back the frontiers of human knowledge, following truth wherever it leads. Although the involvement of our scholars in such creative and critical pursuits may disturb the complacency of some within the church, the scholars' obligation to pursue knowledge must be upheld by trustees true to our mission. This is one of the most important ways for the church to renew itself, to come to grips with "present truth." As Ellen White said, "Those who sincerely desire truth will not be reluctant to lay open their positions for investigation and criticism, and will not be annoyed if their opinions and ideas are crossed."[6]

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The wise administrator understands that the development of understanding means reappropriating reality at increasingly more complex levels as one's thinking expands to envelop the increasing richness and intricacy of experience. For example, the biblical injunction "Thou shalt not kill" says more to us as educated adults than just "murder is forbidden." The Adventist student goes beyond his or her secular colleagues when these learning processes become avenues to contact with the work and will of the Creator.

Seventh-day Adventist higher education takes place in the setting of a worldview that long undergirded all higher education. Roots of the university idea may be found in the belief that a superior education occurs when the program fosters intellectual growth and the acquisition of knowledge within an atmosphere of Christian faith and commitment.

Thus an essential characteristic of Adventist higher education is the introduction of *particular views* about the nature of the universe, of humanity, knowledge, and values, including a belief in God's creating, sustaining, enlightening, and redeeming activities through His Son, Jesus. For that reason, one of higher education's most important goals is helping students to develop a relationship with God. As Jesus said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33, NIV). And Ellen White described it succinctly: "In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one."[7]

In a practical sense, this means that all disciplines are placed under the scrutiny of faith. For example, what does it mean to be an Adventist Christian in business? The ethics of honesty means more than fairness in remuneration and hiring; it means one cannot be involved in exploitation of anyone anywhere. What does it mean to be an Adventist Christian in science? It means earth-preserving and destruction-avoiding. In art it means communicating non-verbally. In literature it means examining premises and challenging assumptions—

all of which are scrutinized by Christian values.

One of the foremost reasons for operating church colleges and universities is to prepare leaders who will fulfill the church's mission throughout the world. Historically, the organizational support for the threefold development of our spiritual, physical, and mental powers has been, respectively, our churches, hospitals, and schools. Were we to eliminate any one of these institutions, we would lose a strong witness to our emphasis on wholeness. We do not compartmentalize our religion. Our commitment permeates every aspect of our lives. Ellen White's familiar statement of purpose for the first Adventist college is valid today for the denomination's entire system of higher education:

God designs that the college at Battle Creek shall reach a higher standard of intellectual and moral culture than any other institution of the kind in our land. The youth should be taught the importance of cultivating their physical, mental, and moral powers, that they may not only reach the highest attainments in science, but, through a knowledge of God, may be educated to glorify Him; that they may develop symmetrical characters, and thus be fully prepared for usefulness in this world and obtain a moral fitness for the immortal life.[8]

Developing the Intellect

Do we take seriously Ellen White's statements about the *development* of intellect as an essential of Adventist higher education? While the denomination was yet in its infancy (1872), she warned against the anti-intellectualism that too often flourishes in movements with a strong sense of spiritual mission. She said,

Ignorance will not increase the humility or spirituality of any professed follower of Christ. The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Education will discipline the mind, develop its powers, and understandingly direct them, that we may be useful in advancing the glory of God.[9]

Adventist colleges particularly need to be known for what they offer in the spiritual realm.

How can SDA institutions of higher learning achieve these essential characteristics? *First*, by the persuasiveness of knowledge, insight, reason, and understanding that results from serious involvement in the college or university program. *Second*, through the example of the lives of faculty and the majority of students—hence the importance of their being in harmony with the philosophy of Adventist education. And *third*, by rules and regulations that require at least minimal conformity by all students, not to mention teachers. These three means, as a minimum, must not only be expected, but also demanded by the constituencies of Adventist colleges and universities.

The international nature and genius of Seventh-day Adventism also demands that its educational institutions be committed in philosophy and practice to human rights. This is as a Bible doctrine, not merely a matter of public policy. Our mission is to "'every tribe and language and people and nation'" (Revelation 5:9, NIV). And as President Folkenberg said in his Annual Council keynote address already referred to, "Part of our witness to the world today is to demonstrate that the body of Christ can unite divergent groups, cultures, races and nations into one body." Nowhere should that be more true than on our campuses. So each college should work hard, not only to compose human relations statements, but also to implement them throughout its planning and decision making.

The value of a church-operated system of higher education can be judged by how well it fulfills the mission of its sponsoring church. So President Folkenberg, picking up on an idea generated by the NAD president's Youth Kitchen Cabinet, suggested that each year colleges evaluate their spiritual impact on students. In responding to the challenge, I used President Folkenberg's questions in a survey of AUC's student body at the conclusion of the first semester of that school year. I received some 300 responses. In response to the question, "Did your semester's education bring you closer to Christ?" 56 percent said Yes, 44 percent said No. In response to the question, "Do you enjoy assurance in Christ?" 87 percent said Yes, 13 percent said No. Two-thirds said that as a result of that semester's education, they had increased confidence in the authority of Scripture and in each of our fundamental beliefs. In the list of classes that contributed to their spiritual progress, it was natural to find religion classes at the top, but high on the list were such courses as fitness

and wellness, anatomy and physiology, and choir. It was clear that most departments were contributing positively—and happily, none negatively—to students' spiritual progress.

As I pondered the results of this survey, I was reminded of a statement attributed to Thurgood Marshall, that "the issue is not how far we've come, but rather how close we are to the goal." Obviously, we must continue to press toward the mark (collecting data, evaluating our progress in the light of our mission), yet we can feel buoyed by evidence that we're on our way.

Conclusion

Having discussed the essential characteristics of Adventist higher education, we must also look at some of its challenges—though many are very familiar. They obviously include escalating costs and diminishing denominational support, creating budgets and strategic plans that reflect the deepest values of our institutions rather than merely what attracts public funds; recruitment, selection, and development of faculty who will support the school's mission without growing stagnant or inbreeding, and the cultivation of a campus culture that both honors our historical Adventist identity and responds with energy and imagination to the needs and interests of its participants. Gordon Kingsley summarizes it well: "The major question is not whether an institution *can* survive but whether it *should*. It is better to cease to exist than to cease to matter."[11]

As Richard Noftzger has said:

Since church-related institutions exist side by side with public and other private institutions, in order to be distinctive they must speak with a different voice. This voice, although different in tone, quality, and emphasis, must be apparent in both theory and practice, in the mission statement and in institutional culture, in the curriculum and in the expected conduct of students, in the projected majors and vocations of students and in the shared commitments of Christian vocation, and in administrative policies and classroom teaching.[12]

As they do this, Adventist higher education will need to

- challenge and question widely held assumptions,

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- be known for its prophetic, countercultural institutions,
- be a place where the church's brightest minds will feel supported in their search for "present truth" and new paradigms to better articulate and define what it means to be Adventist Christians in today's world,
- be known for measuring all it does against the demands of the gospel,
- be known for encouraging students to enter lives of service. Beyond that, it must help them bring Adventist values to bear on whatever occupations they enter.

In some ways our challenge is not dissimilar from *Newsweek*'s description of President Clinton's challenge at the beginning of his presidency: It "is . . . conceptual: to impart to his impatient people goals and strategies for an era whose turmoils reflect the painful initiations into a new international order. He will, moreover, have to do so while being inundated by daily cables alleged to inquire immediate answers, and by the pleadings of bureaucracies that subtly—or not so subtly—will try to push him in their preferred directions. . . . If Clinton permits himself to be engulfed by the minutiae of diplomacy, he risks losing, or never establishing, a sense of direction."[13]

Finally, we can benefit from the guidance provided in *A Statement Respecting SDA Philosophy of Higher Education*, which was published some 20 years ago by the NAD Board of Higher Education:

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has accepted the task of conveying to the world a message of God's grace ultimately to culminate in the establishment of His ideal society on earth. Its colleges and universities are indispensable to the fulfillment of this task. Whatever degree of success they have may be attributed to the strong support the church gives to them, to the dedication of the faculties to the philosophy and objectives of these unique institutions, to the serious purpose of the ever-growing numbers of young people [and older ones as well] seeking such an education and finding it significant, and above all to the blessing of God on an enterprise which endeavors to pattern its existence, its purposes, and its activities after His revealed will.[14]

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