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LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN A LEARNING-CENTERED SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST COLLEGE

By

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Prepared for the
31st International Seminar of the Integration of Faith and Learning
Friedensau Adventist University
July 2003

"What can we do to improve the quality of learning and connect that learning with the development of students' values?" This question is being asked on the campus of Union College by members of the General Education Committee. After a year of research and many discussions by members of this team, and significant efforts to foster holistic learning on our campus, we have found that creating an effective learning environment for the whole person requires commitments to more than academics.

Too often, students respond to a friendly "how are you?" with, "I'm too busy," or, "I am so tired." It makes one wonder if our education helps or hinders their mental and spiritual growth. We have a campus where spiritual activities are always well attended, but it seems that, in the classroom, we focus more on the intellect than on the growth of the whole person. Students do not have the time to think, to feel, to search, or to reflect on the inner life – their sense of meaning, purpose, or connection. What does "knowledgeable" or "educated" mean? These are the measures of value in a materialistic society. What do we, as faculty of an institution of higher education, value and reward? Students' academic achievements frequently receive publication and public mention. For example, the Academic Dean's List is posted on bulletin boards at the end of every semester. Students chase the highest grades because they believe that their employment opportunities after college will depend largely on the Grade Point Average earned during college. Little demand or emphasis is placed on the students' values.

Dr. Cynthia Johnson, senior scholar in residence for the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and Dr. Jennifer Lindholm, project director at UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), are conducting a longitudinal study of college students' beliefs and values. Lindholm found in the study that "integrating spirituality into my life" was essential or

very important to 45% of women and 38% of men. We would expect these numbers to be even higher at Union College, and the study emphasizes that we are educating a generation to which spiritual issues matter.

The General Education Committee at Union College has undertaken this yearlong research and discussion to find out what "educating the whole person" should mean and to learn how to implement it at this institution. As a result, we have developed a framework to improve students' academic, spiritual, and social education.

One might ask why this is an issue now. Part of the answer lies with the students. Today's students are different from those of a generation ago in some key respects. They feel that they have more choices in their educational pursuits, and they are looking for specific experiences during their college education. Also, parents are much more involved in this generation's decision-making process. Thus, we need to be intentional about providing this experience; we need a process for thinking through and providing a true liberal arts Christian education. Statements and clichés about learning-centered institutions abound in current literature. The unifying element is the knowledge that the majority of today's students attend college to prepare for a career – only 4% seek a liberal arts education (Chronicle of Higher Education, April 2003).

Alan Bloom opens a chapter in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* with this quote:

> "A serious life means being fully aware of the alternatives, thinking about them with all the intensity one brings to bear on life-and-death questions, in full recognition that every choice is a great risk with necessary consequences."

In *The Idea of a Christian College*, Arthur F. Holmes writes: "Religion cannot be

compartmentalized; the secular mind attempts to do so but succeeds only in fragmenting life." Only two sentences, but they could have a major impact on liberal arts education and the program we call General Education. For liberal arts learning to exist, continuous and serious discussions need to take place. Learning does not consist so much of answers as of permanent dialogue. This intellectual discourse should involve students, faculty, and administrators, and it will have a significant impact on how work on the Union College campus is done.

As we infer from Bloom and Holmes, liberal arts education was intended to equip a person to serve God and society and to provide the subject matter for rational inquiry. Liberal arts education is a style of learning. It is a community of learners. It is a partnership between faculty and students. This partnership should create an environment in which students are responsible for learning in collaboration with each other and with faculty. Currently, however, most general education programs create a person with fragmented knowledge of a set of disciplines, one of which is Religion. Many students – or perhaps most – leave our colleges without the unity of knowledge and values, and without experiencing the interrelated whole.

Through our common purpose, students, faculty, and administrators become a community of learners that can collaboratively learn and search. We need disagreement and discussion in order to reach understanding. The general education program has been a series of courses for which many graduates cannot see connection or meaning. We have kept the variety of disciplines within the general education programs, sometimes including one or two interdisciplinary courses. Yet the program does not seem to provide intellectual and spiritual strength, which students need after they graduate. Graduates should have confidence in their values and a certainty of spiritual convictions, which are not shaken in confrontational situations.

Discovering the wholeness of Christ and allowing it to encompass all that we are is the mission of all Seventh-day Adventist institutions. We are not lawyers Monday through Friday, Seventh-day Adventists on Sabbath, and a little bit of both on Sunday. We automatically equate Sabbath with spirituality, but does that concept carry over into the practical and intellectual environments of our classrooms and campus? If not, we demonstrate to students a fragmented life instead of the wholeness in Christ. Faculty are professionally responsible for maintaining a rich and vibrant general education program which connects students' professional, intellectual, spiritual, personal, and social lives. This was the original purpose of the liberal arts curriculum, which has now dwindled down to a set of courses that often primarily emphasize content. In some isolated courses, reference is made to the importance of *good* or the role religion plays in a specific situation. This creates a fragmented worldview in which the intellectual or professional life is separate from the spiritual. These bridges can only be crossed when all faculty and all student service personnel take responsibility for the mission of general education. We must develop courses which connect with other disciplines and refer to all aspects of campus life so that a student can connect course to course, year to year, experiences in the classroom to experiences out of the classroom, and courses in their major to general education courses.

It is a necessary and valuable purpose for our institutions to help students prepare for their chosen profession. If we stop there, however, we will not have given them the skills and values that will enable them to make a difference and to live with a sense of purpose and confidence. We must reclaim the initial purpose of liberal arts education and broaden the traditional learning paradigm.

During the school year 2002-2003 the Union College faculty participated in seminars

arranged by the General Education Committee to create a forum for faculty discussions. What follows is the beginning of a framework of topics addressed in these "Faculty Conversations". These conversations reflect the kind of intellectual and creative educational discourse that can provide answers to the question: What can we do to improve the quality of student learning, and how can we connect that with their values?

TRANSFORMING TRADITIONAL ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FACULTY AND STUDENTS

We must respect our students if they are to develop. Life after college will demand people who have discovered their own values and worth. We must recognize and welcome a student's journey through a meaningful general education program. When both professors and students bring their expertise, share insights, and make meaning together, they create respect for each other as learners and contributors. Equally important, they create respect for diversity of thought.

As noted earlier, this generation of college students has specific expectations of its colleges. The number one reason for going to college among freshmen is to obtain a good job. They enter college expecting to learn through collaborative and interactive learning. They learn more by being involved than by being spectators. As faculty, we have generally had the belief that our students learn through exposure, and that content is all-important. We assume that the process in our classrooms should be: "information given by one who knows to those who do not know." Since this pedagogical style works for most faculty, we have not sought other options or spent time inquiring about our new students and their new learning styles. Conceptions of faculty responsibility have not adjusted to the challenge of providing higher learning to this new

learner. Faculty may teach more effectively in a mentoring role than in the traditional role of "the sage on the stage." Students may learn more by inquiry than by absorption. By playing a part in the creation of knowledge in collaboration with each other and the teachers, students become meaningful contributors to the intellectual life of the entire institution.

Academia has long considered liberal education to be the highest quality education. It provides preparation for life, a wholistic worldview, education for civic engagement, and workplace intelligence. A high-quality general education program develops students' analytical and creative capacities, expands their cultural and ethical horizons, and fosters in graduates the inclination and the ability to grapple with the complexity of new developments and unstructured problems. But, regardless of the quality of the individual classes, General Education programs fail when they ignore connectedness between the humanistic, scientific, spiritual, ethical, and societal purposes of college learning.

The traditional hierarchy of educational structure does not put much emphasis on students' contributions. However, a strong working relationship between faculty and students could allow students to contribute and participate in a classroom setting. Seeing students as partners in learning may have a very positive effect on the overall culture of an institution. Faculty may discard the stereotypical views of students as empty vessels that must be filled with knowledge, or as grade grabbers who do not care about the education they receive.

It is quite possible that this will require more than the traditional faculty development. Today's academic environment needs holistic-thinking faculty who have fully clarified their own attitudes and values. In his popular book *The Courage to Teach*, inspirational writer Parker Palmer asserts that "teaching is a deeply emotional process." It seems then, that workshops

which focus on learner needs and course development rather than just traditional teaching skills should lure many interested and caring faculty into faculty discussion groups, mentoring, faculty-helping-faculty programs, and so on.

Furman University in South Carolina (2,500 students) is one of seven liberal arts institutions that took part in a project focusing on student/faculty partnerships. The project was intended to reorient faculty and students to their roles in their educational communities: important participants and successful learners.

The University focused its efforts on its General Education program and collaborated with general education faculty and students during the summer. As a result of this effort, many general education courses were revised and rejuvenated. Curriculum projects in most disciplines have also been implemented. These above benefits relate to the offering of courses, but perhaps more importantly, both students and faculty have fully embraced this process for curriculum design at Furman University. Jane Chew, a professor at Furman stated that "we have been successful beyond our wildest expectations." The success, however, did not come from nowhere. The institution made a strong financial commitment, and both faculty and students made time commitments in order to accomplish this. The main reason for this commitment to the program was that, with increasing demand on faculty during the school year, the General Education program at Furman University was becoming nothing but routine courses with no cross-purpose or connectedness. General Education had, in essence, become a group of courses in which faculty taught their favorite academic areas with primary focus on content. The dynamics of the program had been lost. The faculty was not teaching with a sense of what a Furman University graduate should be.

Much has been written in academic circles about creative collaboration in educational institutions. The next step for Union College will be to bring this information to our faculty. By learning, sharing, and discussing, we can begin the process that will not only fulfill the mission of the college, but produce students who will be uniquely Union College graduates.

Today's faculty faces the challenge of reflecting pedagogically on their disciplines. They must consider how they can help students have learning experiences and then give students the opportunity to demonstrate that learning.

Many members of faculty are rethinking the scope of interdisciplinary scholarship, and recognizing that their own disciplines are richer when connected with other disciplines. Because of this, students have the chance to develop a stronger sense of self and their values as they face life after college.

Who our students are also makes a difference in how we teach. Perhaps the single most important thing students bring to our classrooms is their background. It requires serious reflection about our students and our disciplines to understand what influences students to learn and what teaching strategies enable students to learn.

There are pedagogical skills yet to be discovered and tried by faculty that will meet any need in any class. In general education, the mission of the college is one of the most dominant goals, and one which faculty must have close at heart. Unfortunately, faculty has not gone much beyond the point of discussion as to how to connect any subject matter with spiritual goals. With student involvement in the structure of the courses, they will take on meaning.

At the 2003 Commission of Higher Learning of the North Central Association conference in Chicago, Dr. Thomas Angelo addressed the changing role between faculty and students. He

addressed the students' understanding of value development through their involvement in the way a course is communicated. For example, ask students to write down what they want to learn in a class. The next day, discuss the goals they wrote down which may not be met in the class, but then also discuss what options the students have. Help students to set goals and to act upon them. Discuss with students what influences them in the classroom, such as goals and beliefs ("I cannot learn statistics"), self-concept ("everyone can handle this except me"), expectations ("I have to work harder in Physics than Sociology"), and emotions and anxieties ("I hate this subject"). Most students enter a new class with at least one of these debilitating ideas. The creation of more effective learning requires motivation, organization, rehearsal, and elaboration. When planning an assigned paper, the student and the teacher should spend time discussing areas where they differ, and set the standards high. Never make comments on a final paper with a grade; they are useless because nothing will happen. Give feedback on a draft so that learning can take place. Point out the muddiest points in a paper, talk about why it is muddy, and then help the students work through the process to make it clearer.

Angelo also stresses the importance of making connections throughout the class. For example, ask, "What did we talk about at our last class period?" or "Can you think of some way someone could use this?" The goal here is to make students self-aware, self-directed, and self-managed. In other words, if you teach for factual recall, students will not understand how to use what they know. It is not enough to be simply smart. Knowledge of unconnected facts does not provide the means for students to deliberately consider their values in decision-making.

To teach for values in all aspects of a student's college experience is bound to be a difficult undertaking. First, entrenched educational structures and pedagogy are difficult to

change. Second, many students will not see the purpose of integrating classroom knowledge with other college experiences. It is also more difficult to teach for values than for recollection of facts or ideas. Finally, many faculty and students will agree that a grade should reflect only accumulated knowledge that can be tested via a multiple-choice test. It will also be important that faculty members reexamine their relationship to the college's mission and goals, and that they take responsibility for their fulfillment.

Reorganizing or restructuring general education is not a new or unique concept. However, we as Seventh-day Adventist educators must address it in a unique way in order to raise the expectations of students, professors, and the public. Perhaps the biggest challenge educators will face is the task of raising the expectations of the students themselves. Researchers tell us that students go to college primarily to get a good job. This warns us that our colleges may be nothing more than revolving doors.

However, many students are self-motivated and dedicated young people with outstanding abilities and purpose. Many faculty members, individually, create very rewarding experiences and offer rich knowledge in their classrooms. In collaboration with these leaders, everyone involved with the college – professors, students, and student services personnel – can become lifelong learners. Together, the groups can eliminate the artificial barriers between pre-professional education and the liberal arts establishing values. General education is not defined by its subject matter, but by its wholistic approach to learning and the encompassing of the whole person for life.

Teaching this way will take more than pedagogical skills and subject-knowledge. It will take cooperation, creativity, and ongoing discussions in order to discover and teach the

connections and continuum between all areas of campus life.

STUDENTS' DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

Today's students prefer to take in and process information in different ways: by seeing and hearing, reflecting and acting, reasoning logically and intuitively, and analyzing and visualizing. Some learn continuously, and some learn in spurts. Hence, teaching methods should also vary. Some instructors lecture, others demonstrate or lead students to self-discovery; some focus on principles, and others on applications; some emphasize memory, and others, understanding. However, teachers use these methods because they prefer them, not because of awareness of the need to meet the different learning styles of our students in the classroom.

When a mismatch exists between the learning styles of students in a class and the teaching style of the professor, the students may become bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, or become discouraged about the course, the curriculum, and even themselves. This type of situation may naturally affect the teacher, which may result in a negative attitude towards the students or, in some cases, less effective teaching.

The form and function of teaching and learning have probably been the most affected by the power of information technology. As a result of growing up in a digital world, students *think* differently. They are accustomed to using unlimited online resources, and they expect to try things rather than simply listen to lectures. Students are interested in sharing with both the teacher and each other what they think – they are easily bored by the intellectual regurgitation that has become the norm in many classrooms. This is not to say that students should interact as complete equals with faculty, but neither should they become unquestioning clones of the

faculty.

How might the faculty involve the students in this fashion? How much of the expected material would be covered during a semester? Yes, in most cases, not all traditional material will be covered during a class period or a semester. It is considerably easier to deliver a tidy lecture than to enter a classroom full of interested and involved partners contributing their thoughts and questions.

Faculty nationwide is frustrated and bewildered by students' seemingly poor preparation for college and apparent lack of enthusiasm for learning. While most of today's faculty became college professors because of their love for learning, they were taught in a system based on stored information – information which was then given back to the teacher in test format. Today, those students are now college professors who deliver painstakingly prepared lectures, but face classrooms full of blank stares and students who have not made any connections to other disciplines or topics. Most tragically, the students have not derived any meaning other than series of facts.

Learning styles have been categorized in many ways, but Richard Felder and Barbara Soloman of North Carolina State University have used the categories based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). They conducted a project that included observing the learning styles of four thousand students entering North Carolina State University.

SENSING vs. INTUITIVE LEARNERS.

Sensing learners do not like courses that have no apparent connection to the real world; intuitors do not like courses that involve a lot of memorization. Intuitive learners prefer

concepts, ideas, and abstraction. They also demonstrate a high degree of autonomy in their learning and value knowledge for its own sake. Sensing learners are comfortable with ambiguity and prefer variety in learning options. Intuitive learners, however, trust their intuition and look for the big picture.

Comparing numbers of sensing and intuitive students vs. sensing and intuitive faculty, Felder and Soloman found that seventy-five percent of students prefer the sensing learning pattern while over seventy-five percent of faculty prefers the intuitive learning pattern. The interaction between faculty and students with such differences in learning patterns and approaches to learning can create extremely frustrating situations for today's students. Faculty often creates a classroom environment which is rewarding to them, but not to the students. Also, because of these differences in learning styles, faculty often wrongly assumes that some students have learning deficiencies.

The study also revealed that students who prefer the sensing learning pattern attended the University primarily to be well off financially and to have administrative responsibility, while students preferring the intuitive pattern indicated that they attended the University primarily to contribute to scientific theory, or to write original works.

The question is: how will faculty use the classroom experience to bridge this gap? We must arrive at a greater congruence between faculty teaching styles and student learning styles. We must understand this complex phenomenon in order to meet the needs of the students who come to our classrooms. There are many paths to excellence, and as faculty become aware of the personalities and learning styles of today's students, many new paths to excellence will be discovered. Faculty discussions and the exchange of various pedagogical styles will help the

process go smoothly.

ESTABLISHING CONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN COURSES AND COURSE LEVELS, REINFORCEMENT OF VALUES AND CONTENT BETWEEN COURSES AS WELL AS BETWEEN DISCIPLINES AND HOW THEY CONNECT TO A CHRISTIAN LIFE

Educational goals and learning outcomes are stated in much the same way in college and university catalogues across the United States, but the institutional structures of programs designed to meet these goals vary greatly, and, in reality, the success rate varies just as much. Many educators and administrators have spent the last few decades developing and implementing varieties of both General Education programs and the courses taught within them.

The establishment of values, as an educational goal, is rarely excluded from the list of institutional goals. What it specifically refers to, however, is the unique mission of each institution. All departments and academic divisions must take part in structuring an educational experience for our students that will accomplish this.

True transformation of the curriculum requires much from faculty. We need to stay informed about trends in the disciplines, build interdisciplinary connections and knowledge between courses and content, and make a coherent whole of all aspects of the college experience.

At the University of Washington and Seattle Central Community College, Drs. Vincent Tinto and P. Russo conducted a study to find the level of impact collaborative learning would have on students. Collaborative learning can take on many different forms; in this case it meant that students would enroll for a thematic cluster of courses which included content and faculty from several different disciplines. In the study, three faculty members met with students in one classroom for fifteen hours per week. Once or twice a week, the class separated into three

smaller groups for seminar-type discussions which were led by one of the faculty.

The students evaluated and commented on this multi-disciplinary approach. If we think about what they experienced in the following summary, what an immense value this approach might have for our students as they verbalize these issues of values. For example, students enjoyed seeing faculty grapple with and analyze their own content and then synthesize it with content from other disciplines. Students received the valuable opportunity to think across disciplines, and the faculty benefited from the process. As students began to take part in the experience, they also came to understand the value of diversity, and diversity became an important factor in how they understood the content. Students also felt that because of the amount of time spent together, the setting provided a comfortable environment to express their own ideas and questions. The level of active learning increased, and students experienced more peer support. Students felt that this kind of collaborative learning helped them deal with some of the non-academic issues they faced during their college years. Finally, students stated that they learned concepts more effectively when hearing them presented in a cross-discipline style. They understood better and found a deeper appreciation of the many ways in which knowledge is created.

This study tells us that, through *shared learning*, students get to know each other in a way that becomes both a social and an academic experience. Shared learning also provided *connected learning*. This experience was not about an unconnected array of courses – it was about a group of courses taught as a theme.

There are, of course, other ways to accomplish much the same thing. Students can register for certain groups of classes. Unlike traditional teaching, this method would require a

good deal of faculty collaboration regarding teaching methods and connection points between courses. It would be essential that the courses are taught in preparation for next year's courses so that the process of critical thinking and value building can become progressively more meaningful for the student.

In all the literature and lectures cumulatively read and listened to by the General Education Committee at Union College, one of the most revealing statements is made by Arthur F. Holmes:

> "When a multitude of studies is conducted with no interrelationships the university becomes a multiversity. In theory the university rejects attempts to teach any one conception of the world but in practice it teaches a fragmented view of life."

This reinforces the primary mission of a General Education program: to combat the fragmented view of life..

Many students enter college with questions like "How do I know what to believe?" Answers to their questions vary at different stages of development. As they begin college, most students look to faculty for the answers. They are expecting to live by a formula rather than by inner direction.

By the next stage, they know that their teachers do not have all the answers. They struggle between what they want and meeting the expectations of others. They know they have an inner voice, but they do not know what to do with it.

Learning and the development of values should be reinforced throughout the entire time of a student's attendance at an institution of higher learning. If students understand how they think and how to apply knowledge to experiences using analytical processes, they will find it

easier to live contented Christian lives. It is also important that student learning outcomes are clearly stated and assessed for campus-wide experiences and out-of-the-classroom experiences. The implication of college-wide learning outcomes is that all faculty and departments need to take collective responsibility for student learning.

Lee Schulman describes the transformation of knowledge as an integral part of the process of discovery and investigation. Schulman observes that

> When we begin working on what we understand so that others can understand it as well, then participate in the dialogues that ensue, we test and elaborate and deepen what we thought we knew in isolation. So that when you ask about the relationship between teaching and learning, in one important sense they are part of the same process, inherent parts of what it means to learn something. The two processes - within the individual and within the community of scholars – can't thrive without each other.

The question then becomes whether this type of learning and process of discovery can take place at any time, even when one is still a student. Unquestionably, *Yes* - when the environment on a college campus is a *community of scholars* or a *community of learners*. This implies not only the sharing of knowledge, but also the sharing of the community's quest for success. As one student said: "Life is not multiple choices." Just like questions and problems in the classroom, there are problems in life that do not have answers.

PROCESSES AND RESOURCES FOR STUDENT LEARNING

It is vital that processes and resources are carefully applied to serve the purposes of the institution. Division chairs need to create an environment that promotes faculty responsiveness and self-determination toward the General Education program. To begin with, the chairs should have divisional faculty conversations around some key questions in order to establish the

division's perspectives on general education and its goals and objectives:

- What are the goals and objectives of the departmental General Education curriculum?
- How does the curriculum of the department support the mission of the institution and produce the expected student outcomes?
- Is the curriculum responsive to the values of the institution?
- Is individual autonomy taking precedence over institutional goals?

Division chairs must engage their department colleagues in discussion about how general education courses offered by the department fulfill the mission of the institution. It is equally important that faculty from all departments continue the same conversation in order to bring connectedness of thought from one discipline to another. As mentioned earlier, the discussions also need to include a process for progression of thought. A freshman who enters college for the first time will not have the same level of experience, knowledge, or maturity of thought as a senior, and courses need to be carefully planned to build on each other from one year to another. Students bring needs to today's classrooms that most of the time require changes from the traditional methods of pedagogy as well as from the traditional learning environment. An institution that makes a commitment to truly be a student-friendly, learning-centered institution must align its resources in order to make this happen.

The resources that must be aligned will vary from institution to institution. It is not easy to create enthusiasm for curriculum development, because the demand on faculty is already great. There is little time granted them to review and develop courses and a curriculum that meets the goals and objectives of the institution's General Education program.

One resource, then, must be dedicated faculty who will be rewarded for the time they

must spend in order to develop a General Education program which will educate the whole person and enable students to sustain their personal values. As stated by Alan Bloom and Arthur F. Holmes:

> "A serious life means being fully aware of the alternatives, thinking about them with all the intensity one brings to bear on life-and-death questions, in full recognition that every choice is a great risk with necessary consequences that are hard to bear." (Alan Bloom)

and

> "Religion cannot be compartmentalized; the secular mind attempts to do so but succeeds only in fragmenting life....." (Arthur F. Holmes)

This framework will guide us as we strive to provide a successful General Education program by

- integrating course content across all disciplines,
- providing connectedness between faith and learning throughout the college experience, and
- considering the varying stages of student development.

The issues addressed in this framework will be helpful insofar as faculty has the strength of will and a commitment to what needs to be done. This is an invitation to faculty at Union College and other Seventh-day Adventist institutions to begin to dialogue about what it will take to educate the whole person in a Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher learning. It is an opportunity to help our students experience the joy of a life in Christ that is independent of accidents or circumstances.

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