

# MEMORANDUM

To: A (present or future) trustee  
From: A member of the college/university faculty\*  
Subject: What I (and my colleagues) need for you to do

As a faculty member, I have a vested interest in the way you function on the board of trustees. To me, you are more than just a “member of the board”; you are a trustee, a person entrusted with the future of the whole educational endeavor on this campus. Your reasoning, judgment, and decisions are important factors in my professional and personal future. I use the first-person singular because, although I believe I represent the attitudes and feelings of many of my colleagues, they haven’t authorized me to be their spokesperson and don’t know I’m writing this memo.

Unfortunately, I’m not certain that all our trustees are aware of the nature and magnitude of their responsibility. As I understand the process, you and the others get together, usually on campus, for a day or two several times a year. You meet for a few hours in subcommittees—finance, personnel, student life, etc. Then you convene as the full board and listen to reports and presentations, address budget issues, discuss faculty appointments, and approve (or don’t approve) recommendations from our administration. Then you disperse. As a rule I don’t see you, and you don’t see me.

While in a sense trustees and faculty are “all in this together,” the relationship is far from symmetrical. How you trustees think and what you decide about what happens on the campus matters a great deal to me because my professional life is centered here. What you do as a trustee affects my working conditions, my enthusiasm, my effectiveness as a teacher, my productivity as a scholar, and my overall well-being as a person. No matter how seriously you take your role, what you do as a trustee is even more important to me than it is to you. I don’t affect you in anything like the same way. What I do as a faculty member may gratify, surprise, puzzle, or disappoint you, but I don’t make much overall difference in your life.

Because of this asymmetry, I’ve decided to presume on your patience and share with you my perspective on your role as a trustee, and ways you can fulfill this role in order to be most helpful to the campus and to me personally. I will put my convictions in the form of seven things I as a faculty member need for you to do as a trustee.

## 1. Understand the nature and scope of our educational enterprise.

This means knowing the various kinds of things that happen here, including how my colleagues and I spend our time. In your scheduled meetings you can’t possibly learn all you need to know, so you have to spend time on the campus.

You can walk around, visit departments, talk to administrators and faculty in our offices, sit in on some of our large lecture classes and small seminar discussions, observe lab sessions, and maybe even go on a field trip. I would welcome a chance to tell you what I do and why I love doing it, how I am trying to get my students excited about learning, what my favorite subjects are, what kind of research I’m doing, and what sort of dreams I have for the future.

You have to listen to our students on the campus and in the dining halls, and maybe stay overnight in one of the residence halls. (You might plan to come a day early for one of the scheduled board sessions. After recovering from their amazement at this unusual request, the administrative staff would be delighted to make the necessary arrangements.)

Another thing you have to do is read. You have to read all that mate-

rial you get from the president’s office before you come to board meetings. You have to read the introductory sections of the academic bulletin(s) and get familiar with the rest, so you can have some idea of the nature and scope of the educational operation entrusted to your care. Since we’re in an era of assessment in higher education, I’m tempted to suggest that once in a while you should take a quiz on these materials!

Of course, all this is going to involve lots of time. But how else are you going to know who the faculty and students are and what we’re doing here? And if you don’t know us and what makes us tick, how can you make the best decisions for our future, for my future?

## 2. Be a cheerleader for the work my colleagues and I are trying to do.

Although I sometimes object to the paternalistic and condescending attitude of some trustees I’ve known, there’s a certain usefulness in thinking of our relationship as analogous to that of a huge—my students would say “humungous”—family. It’s a three-generation campus family of parents, adult children, and young-adult grandchildren. We’d all agree that it would be highly improper for grandparents to complain publicly about their children or grandchildren.

But once upon a time I knew a trustee who went throughout the constituency telling people what terrible things were happening on the campus, and then came back and reported with great seriousness that the church members didn’t have much confidence in the place. If there were such a thing as “trustee malpractice,” that behavior would certainly qualify. If you can’t be a cheerleader for the campus and its work, you can’t be a good trustee, and you should invest your time in a place or project you *can* cheer for.

This is not to say you shouldn’t think critically about the work we’re doing here. All families, including healthy ones, have dysfunctional aspects. No place is perfect, and I know this campus isn’t. My colleagues and I need, and at least in our better moments actually want, the benefit of your informed and thoughtful feedback. We want to know what you think and what you hear, and what you think about what you hear. But please, when something causes you concern, when you hear of a situation where someone here has messed up and ought to do better in the future, talk to us, not about us. If you don’t feel comfortable talking to one of us personally, talk to our president, who’ll get the word to someone who can try to fix the problem.

## 3. Respect me professionally.

For most members of the faculty, this institution is not the employer of last resort. In fact, there is an ongoing interchange of personnel not only between this campus and other Adventist campuses, but also between this place and comparable public institutions. Given the difference in pay, the surprising thing is that talented, experienced people



leave more lucrative positions to come to work here. At the same time, some of us have worked here and/or on other Adventist campuses for our entire careers because we believe in the mission of places like this and want to be part of it.

To invoke the parental analogy again, we all know that parents of adult children do not relate to their offspring as “children” who need instruction and discipline. Indeed, the parents of adult children often need the children more than the children need the parents; wise parents recognize this and function accordingly. The analogy is obvious. While administrators, trustees, and students are all essential in an endeavor like this, it is the faculty who are most responsible for the teaching, research, and service that are the primary tasks of higher education. We typically stay here longer than do our students, and—like our administrators—we have invested more of ourselves than our trustees can.

#### 4. Rise above any conflict of interest.

Because being a trustee is not a full-time, paid position, you necessarily have other commitments, which may not always be compatible with the best interests of this campus. This is the case especially if you’re professionally connected to another church or educational institution. But when you participate in a meeting of our board of trustees or one of its committees, or in any other way function as a trustee, your first loyalty has to be to this place and its mission. This is a matter of personal integrity.

Once upon another time, I encountered a trustee of a General Conference-affiliated university and asked how he understood his function. Without any hesitation he answered, “Protecting the interests of my union conference.” I thought at the time, and am now more convinced than ever, that he was simply not able to function with integrity as a trustee.

Whatever your other personal and professional responsibilities, loy-

alties, and commitments (all of which I expect you to have), when you are meeting with our board of trustees, and at any other time when you are functioning as a trustee, your primary responsibility is—and so your primary loyalty and commitment must be—to the fulfillment of the mission of this campus. No other stance is ethically acceptable.

#### 5. Think broadly and strategically.

At meetings of the trustees, you and the others have to spend much of your time addressing immediate challenges, principally related to matters of budget and personnel, and sometimes academic programs or curriculum ideas. But you need to think also about the long-term future (if any) of Adventist higher education in general and this campus in particular.

The parenthetical “if any” may disturb you, especially when you discover that it’s not just a rhetorical ploy to make sure you’re still paying attention. I want you to be disturbed because this issue is as crucial as it is unrecognized. As the cost of higher education increases at something like twice the rate of the general cost of living, we all need to address the question whether Adventist higher education will continue to be economically viable or will sooner or later “price itself out of the market.” How long will Adventist families believe the product is worth the cost?

An accreditation team visiting our campus once asked, “Why are you here? What are you doing that can’t be done just as well by the neighboring community colleges and state university?” Contrary to a common Adventist assumption, the team’s concern was not that we were too different from secular campuses, public and private, but that we were not different enough to justify our existence. What makes Adventist higher education authentically and irreducibly Adventist? It must be something far more profound than having Adventist teachers and staff, recruiting mostly Adventist students, and requiring that students take



courses in religion and attend scheduled religious services. All these may be necessary components, but Adventist education must also entail the intelligent and effective incorporation of Adventist values into courses throughout our various curricula.

Ellen White's great axiom, "Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children" (*Education*, p. 18), is often quoted but seldom applied to academic standards. Although no one dares to say so openly, the reality is that current Adventist higher education is designed primarily for average and marginal students. As one of my senior colleagues observed sadly but for the most part accurately, "Adventist higher education talks quality and practices mediocrity."

I wonder about the implications of another Ellen White conviction as well: "God requires the training of the mental faculties. He designs that His servants shall possess more intelligence and clearer discernment than the worldling, and He is displeased with those who are too careless or too indolent to become efficient, well-informed workers. If placed under the control of His Spirit, the more thoroughly the intellect is cultivated, the more effectively it can be used in the service of God" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 333).

If we in Adventist higher education take this advice seriously, we have our own ethical choice to make: Do we urge the most intellectually gifted Adventist students to settle for an academically second-rate education on an Adventist campus, or do we encourage them to go to some other campus where the intellect can be cultivated "more thoroughly" and thus result in "more intelligence and clearer discernment"?

The present situation on Adventist campuses forces too many of the most capable Adventist students to choose between academically excellent education and Adventist education. Should providing excellent education for the best-equipped Adventist students be an explicit part of the mission of some Adventist campuses? Is this not merely a strategic option but the fulfillment of an Adventist obligation to these students and to the Adventist future?

Evidently not everybody thinks so. After I gave a presentation about forthcoming curriculum changes on our campus at a meeting of Adventist secondary-school administrators, a principal came to me with this advice: "You shouldn't worry about the best students. You've already lost them. Your job is to provide a college education for Adventist students who can't get in anywhere else." Is it significant that he didn't say "We've already lost them"?

## 6. Ask whether Adventist colleges and universities should try to be alike.

Can any college or university campus—public or private, secular or religious—meet the needs of the entire range of students who seek an Adventist education? Apart from our location, should we be different from other Adventist campuses? Or should every campus be (or try to be) the "right" place for every Adventist student? Should prospective students have reasons other than geography and social relationships for choosing a particular Adventist campus?

A team of consultants on our campus once asked, "What kind of Adventist students should not come here?" This came as a surprising question. Most of us had supposed that "here" was the right place for every Adventist college student in the United States! But could the

consultants' question be a good one? If so, I hope you and our other trustees will press the question, "What are we doing, and what should we be doing here that can't be done or isn't being done just as well on other Adventist campuses? Should we be specializing in certain academic areas (like architecture at Andrews University or engineering at Walla Walla University)? If so, which areas? And why? Should we be trying to attract certain kinds of students? If so, which students? And why?"

## 7. Finally, be hopefully realistic.

Or perhaps I should say "be realistically hopeful." No matter. My point is that, to adapt an old line from the philosopher Immanuel Kant, hope without realism is empty, and realism without hope is blind. Hope sees the possibilities of the future; realism takes seriously the facts of the present. Hope is the motivation of our commitment; realism is the justification for "putting our money where our mouth is"—for us faculty members continuing to invest our lives, and for Adventist families and constituencies continuing to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in higher education.

I realize that all this constitutes a tall order. And I know you don't get paid for the time and effort you invest several days a year as a trustee. If you're an ex officio trustee, it's one more responsibility in an



already over-filled role in the church; if you are an elected trustee, it's purely a labor of love. In either case, my colleagues and I want you to know that we appreciate your investment.

On the other hand, if you don't have the interest, time, and energy to take on this responsibility, you have no moral obligation to do so. If for whatever reason you can't make the necessary commitment, I hope you excuse yourself from the responsibility of trusteeship and let it be filled by someone else. If your position as a trustee is ex officio rather than elective, such a move may be awkward; but in that case you have to make a moral choice: either you reorder your other responsibilities and priorities to allow you to fill your role as trustee properly, or you sacrifice your integrity.

You may suppose that I'm exaggerating, and maybe I am. But I don't think so. As I said, it's my professional and personal existence that you deal with and affect. As long as I work here, I'm committed to giving this place my very best efforts, and I need you to take your responsibility just as seriously. ☞

\* For some years, the author has been involved in teaching, administration, and research on three Adventist campuses in North America.