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La Sierra University, in Riverside, Calif., has until the end of 2012 to resolve the clash to the satisfaction of religious accreditors or risk losing recognition from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a loss that could put $4 million in financial support from the Christian denomination in jeopardy.

For the past two years, La Sierra and its campus of about 2,000 students have been at the center of a controversy about evolution, creationism and the role of religious belief in a science classroom. The university, one of 14 Seventh-day Adventist higher education institutions in the United States, adheres to the principles of its faith, including a belief that the earth and all living things were created in six days as described in the Book of Genesis.

As well as conferring official recognition, Adventist accreditation makes a college or university eligible for funding from the church or its regional branches. La Sierra receives about $4 million annually, he said.

He emphasized that the accreditation group’s actions so far were not intended to punish the university.

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Blackmer said, "We have just said, 'We want to see some tangible evidence that you’re moving forward, and we’re going to give you a year and a half — two years, basically — to show us that.'"

The university has taken steps to resolve the controversy, Becker said. They include a lecture series on faith and science and a broad review of freshman seminars, syllabuses and lectures. The biology department has written a statement of support for creationism, and La Sierra is recruiting a new faculty member for the department.

“We’re looking for ways in which we can teach science and balance the needs of the church, particularly by spotlighting and honoring the Adventist position on origin — creation,” he said. “We haven’t done as good a job as we’d wished in the past. We’ll try to do it better.”

University officials are confident that they will satisfy the church accreditors’ requests, he said.

Blackmer said the church did not want La Sierra to be defined by controversy. “We’re only dealing with a finite number of individuals and it has a tendency to cloud the whole university,” he said. “That’s not a fair characterization of who they are.” (Read more)

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Inside Higher Ed
Creating Controversy by Jack Stripling
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In 2009, a website that accused the school of abandoning its Biblical roots published e-mails between a recent graduate and a biology professor. The student, Carlos Cerna, proposed inserting arguments in favor of the church’s view of creation into a paper on evolutionary theory, and the professor, Gary Bradley, agreed. But when Cerna turned in the paper, Bradley told him it was unacceptable because it did not demonstrate an understanding of the data and its mainstream interpretation before delving into creationist arguments.

The leaked e-mails sparked an uproar: the university reexamined its science classes, adding a seminar for freshman biology students to examine the relationship between science and faith, and reaffirmed its commitment to church principles. A study group convened by the Board of Trustees in June surveyed a group of 369 students who had taken biology classes in the previous four years, as well as some students from 2000; 91 of them participated in the study, which issued a report in February. Of those students, 50 percent said they thought the church’s view of creation was presented in the classroom and 40 percent thought it was “supported.” Other questions in the survey asked whether professors explained “the changing and always tentative nature of even strongly established theories.”

Many of the responses were positive, the committee wrote in its report. But some -- especially the 49 percent of students who either agreed with or were neutral on the statement that evolution was presented as fact and the 40 percent who thought the church’s view was supported in biology class -- were troubling to the committee. Randal Wisbey, La Sierra's president, and Ricardo Graham, the chairman of the university's Board of Trustees, called those figures "unacceptable" in an open letter in March 2011. "Instruction at the university, while being strong in many areas, has not adequately presented the denomination's position on the subject of creation," Graham and Wisbey wrote.

At first the university's reaction appeared to have eased the controversy. The 10-member group from the Adventist Accrediting Association that visited the campus in November 2010 unanimously recommended that the institution receive its maximum accreditation, valid for five years plus an additional three years to match the expiration date of the university's regional accreditation. The group also told La Sierra to present a range of views and honor student expression and to “resolve the creation-evolution controversy, rebuild the reputation of the university, and regain the confidence of the constituency,” according to a statement later removed from the university's website but reprinted in Seventh-day Adventist media outlets.
But on April 4, the accrediting association rejected the visiting group’s recommendation, voting instead to extend the accreditation until Dec. 31, 2012, with an additional campus visit next year. In an official statement, the university called the decision “unprecedented” and troubling.

“The university is very disappointed that Adventist Accrediting Association Board chose to not accept the unanimous recommendation of the 10-member AAA team who spent a week on our campus interviewing faculty members, administrators, and students,” a La Sierra spokesman, Larry Becker, said in the statement.

In the controversy, La Sierra is caught between two accrediting groups using different measuring sticks. There is the Adventist association, which measures the university’s fidelity to church beliefs and judges whether it will remain an Adventist institution. And there is the academic accreditor, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges’ Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities, which includes measures of academic freedom and institutional autonomy in its evaluation. WASC renewed La Sierra’s accreditation for another eight years in August 2010.

The two groups do not usually conflict: the Adventist accreditor relies on WASC to judge administrative, financial and educational issues, while focusing its own analysis on whether the institution fulfills the mission of the church. But what raises red flags for one committee might trouble the other for different reasons.

In the dispute over evolution, WASC sees threats to the university’s autonomy and academic freedom, Becker wrote in a press release in August: “WASC clearly understands that this is a denominational issue, but it also sees the efforts of some outside the university as threatening to La Sierra’s institutional autonomy.”

WASC is planning a special visit to campus in the coming weeks to review the situation.

For its part, the Adventist accreditation process is a way to “focus in on ensuring the institution is following the mission, that they have developed as an institution, and to be sure that that mission and their programs align with the mission of the church,” said Larry Blackmer, vice president of education for the Seventh-day Adventist Church North American Division.

The religious accreditation process examines support services for students, the volume and substance of Biblical and spiritual courses, and how many professors are members of the denomination, as well as other factors, he said. Those factors can include curriculum content, as is the case at La Sierra: the accrediting association wants to verify that the university is not teaching just evolution -- which he said was “a legitimate role for a higher education institution” -- but also the church’s values and beliefs. They want to make sure that “they’re not only getting the evolutionary side, but they’re also getting the creation side,” he said.

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— Libby A. Nelson