A couple months ago Educate Truth temporarily halted because the news related to La Sierra University had come to a standstill; however, at the beginning of March things got very interesting. We've compiled a list of the most relevant articles that have been published recently. Many of you may have already read these, but for those who have been out of the loop for the last few months, please take the time to read them. Some really good things are happening. If you recall, Inside Higher Ed and Press Enterprise covered the La Sierra conflict in 2009, and have now published follow-up articles "Creation and Accreditation" and "Creation vs. evolution debate at La Sierra University."

**LSU Board says 'we apologize'**
*Educate Truth*
March 9, 2011

**La Sierra University won't neglect creation teaching, president, chairman vow**
*Adventist News Network*
March 12, 2011

**LSU memorandum confirms Educate Truth’s allegations**
*Educate Truth*
March 20, 2011

**La Sierra University granted window to show its faithfulness to church’s creation belief**
*Adventist News Network*
April 5, 2011

**AAA Board Votes Extension of University’s Accreditation; Schedules Interim Visit in 2012**
*La Sierra University*
April 5, 2011
Creation and Accreditation

April 12, 2011

A Seventh-day Adventist university in California that ran afoul of the church for emphasizing evolution alongside creationism in biology classrooms will keep its religious accreditation -- for now.

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.

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.

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.

"They aren't on probation, they're not on any kind of disciplinary move by the church at all -- none," 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."

— Libby A. Nelson

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Nearly two years of pressure on La Sierra University to better incorporate Biblical creationism into its biology classes is leading to warnings from key oversight organizations.

A Seventh-day Adventist Church board says the college hasn't gone far enough to address creationists’ concerns, while a secular commission is worried that the outside lobbying could impinge on academic freedom.

The belief that God created the world in six days is one of the Adventist church’s fundamental beliefs, and the worldwide church’s president in 2009 urged all Adventist university professors to advocate that belief.

University leaders last month publicly apologized for not adequately emphasizing church teaching in biology classes and promised to do more. A pro-creationist group that gathered more than 6,300 petition signatures critical of the university says some biology professors promote the theory of evolution over Adventist beliefs.

But the pledge wasn't enough for the Adventist Accrediting Association board, which last week declined to extend La Sierra's Adventist church accreditation for a full five years. Instead, the university received a provisional one-year extension, to Dec. 31, 2012, to give the university more time to infuse Adventist religious beliefs into science classes and make other changes.

"The real crux of the matter is whether the Bible has a privileged position as a source of knowledge," said Lisa Beardsley, director of education for the worldwide Adventist church.

The inadequate teaching of Biblical creation "is a symptom of a problem," an indication that La Sierra hasn't done enough to ensure students are thoroughly exposed to the Adventist worldview, she said. Beardsley said the board's actions were not in response to the actions of the pro-creationist group.

Beardsley said a loss of accreditation from the association would not necessarily mean La Sierra would lose its Adventist affiliation or funding. Nearly 10 percent of La Sierra's budget comes from a regional Adventist body, university officials said.

But she said it would be a signal to parents and others that the association could not guarantee that the university meets the Adventist association's standards.

WIDER IMPACT

The pressure on La Sierra is causing concern at the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, a federally approved accreditation agency that, among other things, measures academic quality and integrity at public and private colleges and universities. Federally approved accreditation is required for acceptance of university class credits by most other universities and many employers, and for most financial aid.

The association in August extended its accreditation of La Sierra for eight years but said the controversy over creationism could threaten La Sierra's academic autonomy. It is sending a team to the university in the next several weeks to review the university's handling of the situation, said Ralph Wolff, president of the association.

"What we want to make sure of is that non-academic outside forces are not controlling the curriculum," he said. "While we respect that it is a faith-based institution, it is still an academic institution."
A university can lose its accreditation if it allows outside groups to dictate its academic curriculum and policies. Wolff said he did not expect La Sierra to lose accreditation.

An accredited university can require faculty to present a religious denomination's beliefs on creation, as long as faculty accurately explain that the scientific consensus is in favor of evolution, Wolff said.

University officials say evolution will continue to be taught, and even La Sierra's creationist critics support continued teaching of evolution.

Some parents and students have expressed concern over La Sierra's biology classes for years, but the generally quiet criticism spiraled into a high-profile controversy after Beaumont resident and La Sierra graduate Shane Hilde founded Educatetruth.com in June 2009. The website sponsored the online petition and has been relentless in its push to ensure that Adventist beliefs are reflected in the biology curriculum.

Hilde praised the accreditation board's decision.

"They're the ones with the power," he said. "We're just former students and laypeople who have no official position in the church. All we can do is shout from the rooftops. It doesn't do anything unless somebody listens. Fortunately for us, the leadership listened."

A CATALYST

The La Sierra board of trustees last year formed a committee to investigate allegations that some biology professors taught students that evolution has greater scientific merit than creationism and did not always respect creationist students' beliefs. The committee conducted a survey of current and former biology students and concluded that only half agreed that the Adventist view of creation was presented in their classes and that even fewer said that view was "supported."

"This is not acceptable, and we apologize," university President Randal Wisbey and board Chairman Ricardo Graham said in an open letter last month.

Graham said by phone that the university has "great respect" for its biology professors. But, he said, "an academic position that denies church teaching is not appropriate. ... Academic freedom in a secular institution is much different that the processes of academic freedom in a faith-based institution."

University spokesman Larry Becker said the university has already taken steps to more fully expose students to Adventist creation beliefs -- a 1½-year-old required seminar for all biology majors discusses the intersection of religion and science -- and continues to talk with faculty members about better integrating those beliefs in classroom instruction.

Becker said the university believes those discussions will lead to changes in classroom instruction without mandates to professors.

Repeated phone calls to four biology faculty members were not returned. One of them, Professor Gary Bradley, told the website Inside Higher Ed in 2009 that he would not denounce or contradict evolutionary theory in his class.

Sean Pitman, moderator of Educatetruth.com, said statements like that indicate that Bradley and two other professors the website targets reject Adventist beliefs on creation. He wondered whether they could in good conscience teach Biblical creation in the classroom, "and not just present it in a positive manner but support it."

Reach David Olson at 951-368-9462 or dolson@PE.com
In a surprising turn of events, LSU Board’s appointed Creation-Evolution Study Group issued a detailed memorandum to the board, outlining their report and recommendations regarding the allegations against LSU.

In addition to the memorandum, Randal Wisbey and Ricardo Graham issued an open letter, summarizing much of the memorandum. There are some noteworthy revelations in the letter, such as an apology and a concession to what Educate Truth and others have been claiming was occurring in the biology department:

[1] “We found that only 50 percent of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that our Adventist view of creation was presented, and only 40 percent agreed or strongly agreed that our Adventist view was supported. This is not acceptable, and we apologize.”

[2] “Instruction at the university, while being strong in many areas, has not adequately presented the denomination’s position on the subject of creation.”

[3] “There is some evidence that students have not always been respected for their belief in the Biblical creation position.”

The letter ends with this final thought:

“La Sierra University is committed to being an institution that does not just present the Church’s view of creation, but fully supports it. We pledge our commitment to work prayerfully and diligently to ensure that our mission to provide a rigorous and faith-affirming Seventh-day Adventist education is carried out on behalf of our students and our Church.”
La Sierra University won’t neglect creation teaching, president, chairman vow

March 12, 2011  48 Comments

Educate Truth shares the following article from the Adventist Review as a service to readers.

By Mark A. Kellner

In an open letter welcomed by many Seventh-day Adventist Church leaders and members across North America, La Sierra University on March 9 acknowledged serious problems in its teaching of origins over the last several years, and apologized for not having adequately communicated Seventh-day Adventist beliefs about creationism to its students.

“We found that only 50 percent of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that our Adventist view of creation was presented, and only 40 percent agreed or strongly agreed that our Adventist view was supported,” LSU President Randall Wisbey and LSU Board Chairman Ricardo Graham wrote in the open letter.

The letter accompanied the release of a Board-approved report on the controversy that has focused on the Riverside, California, campus for nearly two years.

“This is not acceptable, and we apologize,” the two leaders added.

Dr. Lisa Beardsley, Education director for the Adventist Church world headquarters, called the statement “a step in the right direction.”

“My prayer is that Adventist education at La Sierra University will grow and acknowledge its redemptive purposes,” Beardsley said.

Larry Blackmer, vice president for Education for the church’s North American Division, also saw promise in the university’s letter.

“I am so pleased with the board and administration’s openness in addressing the issues that have concerned the church for the past few years,” Blackmer said. “I found their statements to be sincere, looking to do what is right.

“This issue has been a controversy regarding the university for the past two years, and I hope with strong administrative follow-through, with monitoring by the board of directors and a continued commitment to the core values of the church, that this chapter can be closed and we can focus on the many wonderful things that are happening on the LSU campus,” he said.

A team from Adventist Accreditation Association (AAA) — which recently conducted a site visit at La Sierra — concluded that, subject to AAA approval, the university “should receive the maximum accreditation possible under AAA guidelines.” La Sierra announced the team’s findings online on February 8, but has since removed the statement from the university’s website.

The full board of AAA will vote next month on a final accrediting recommendation for the school.

In its place, La Sierra has posted “An Open Letter Regarding the Teaching of Creation,” in which the school states its apology, adding, “Instruction at the university, while being strong in many
areas, has not adequately presented the denomination’s position on the subject of creation.”

“There is some evidence that students have not always been respected for their belief in the Biblical creation position,” the La Sierra statement said.

In 2009, one LaSierra student said he’d felt that lack of respect. Louie Bishop told Adventist Review he was placed on “citizenship probation” by the school for circulating letters opposing the teaching of evolutionary concepts and for posting notes of a professor’s classroom lecture online.

Following consultation with its Board of Trustees at a February 10 meeting, the university announced, “The Board adopted, and directed campus administration to implement, the following measures:

* Accept and implement the recommendations from the Adventist Accrediting Association.
* Develop faculty workshops regarding the challenges of teaching controversial topics such as those in biology.
* Continue the work in progress, (as identified [elsewhere in the statement]).
* Conduct regular follow-up surveys of biology students.
* Provide the Board with ongoing candid and prompt reports of both progress and challenges in dealing with this issue.”

Moreover, the school said, “The university president and provost identified steps to address this issue that have already been taken or are currently in progress. These include:

* Ensuring that all biology students discuss key documents relating to our Adventist belief regarding origins, including Fundamental Belief #6 [and] the 2004 Annual Council Reaffirmation of Creation, and Genesis 1 and 2.
* Increased participation by the Church’s Geoscience Research Institute in planning the General Biology Seminar.
* Ongoing refinement of the General Biology Seminar, based on student exit surveys and other input.
* Attendance of biology faculty members at the Geoscience Research Institute summer workshop.
* Continue the lecture series that presents a range of Adventist views on the integration of faith and science.
* Establish dialogue with biology professors from sister Adventist colleges and universities.”

According to the statement, La Sierra’s “biology department specifically commits to:

* Faithfully present the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s position on creation.
* Respect every student’s religious beliefs.
* Help students learn how to grapple with issues of faith and science in faith-affirming ways.

In conclusion, the statement said, “La Sierra University is committed to being an institution that does not just present the Church’s view of creation, but fully supports it. We pledge our commitment to work prayerfully and diligently to ensure that our mission to provide a rigorous and faith-affirming Seventh-day Adventist education is carried out on behalf of our students and our Church.”

Daniel Jackson, president of the church’s North American Division, expressed hope at the news.

“I appreciate the expression of the La Sierra University administration and the Board in terms of
their stated determination to promote the teachings of Scripture, in particular creation,” Jackson said in a telephone interview.

“My prayer would be that God would give them the commitment and resolve to see this matter through in a way that will be a blessing to students, faculty and the constituency at large,” Jackson said. “La Sierra University has had a reputation as an excellent institution.”

David Asscherick, the Adventist pastor and evangelist whose open letter to church leaders in 2009 brought attention to the concerns at La Sierra University, also expressed optimism.

“I’m happy to see the university affirm the reality and seriousness of these issues, and I look forward to observing the implementation of their plan,” he said during a March 10 visit to the Adventist Church headquarters.
La Sierra University released a memorandum on its website March 9, 2011 from The Creation-Evolution Study Group, an ad hoc committee of the La Sierra University Board of Trustees, tasked to investigate the allegations against the LSU biology program.

The memorandum includes an interim report, accepted by the board Nov. 2010, that states the biology department “generally” supports and respects the faith of students, explains the strengths and weaknesses of evolution, but should make a greater effort to present and support the church’s view of creation. This report is in significant contrast with the Adventist Accrediting Association’s (AAA) findings, which was given to LSU Feb. 2011.

The Adventist Accrediting Association’s visiting team reported the biology department disrespects and marginalizes some students for their position on creation, supports and teaches evolutionary processes as the plausible explanation of life, and inadequately presents the church’s position on creation. Without AAA’s findings, the ad hoc committee’s memorandum would have had little substance, as it relied almost exclusively on a student survey created by the university provost.

In the process of investigating the allegations, the committee examined four documents: a student survey, an informal report on the creation-evolution issue, and the Adventist Accrediting Association’s (AAA) draft report and consulting letter.

The Survey

Educate Truth has several concerns regarding the validity of the survey and its ability to accurately represent student perceptions as a whole. There were 49 comments from students, none of which were included in the memorandum, and given the seriousness of the situation, it seems LSU should have assigned the survey-creating task to an unbiased party. Many of the questions do not address the allegations, and in some cases the language requires insider knowledge of the church’s beliefs in order to answer accurately. It’s shocking the committee gave “a great deal of weight to the survey results” instead of interviewing faculty, reviewing curriculum or interviewing the creationist students who were humiliated and punished for exposing what was occurring in the biology department.

LSU said the survey was created to determine student perceptions of what is actually being taught at La Sierra. It was delivered to 369 general biology and biology major students from the past four years plus students from 2000. Only one in four individuals completed the survey; twenty-six percent of these
individuals were non-Adventist, according to survey question number 20.

The committee was concerned with the results of survey questions six, eight and nine, which had to do with many students thinking evolution was touted over creation or that creation wasn’t taught at all. But the committee claimed the only way to benchmark results was to have the same survey conducted by La Sierra’s sister institutions in North America. However, LSU isn’t being benchmarked by other schools, but by the stated position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The survey fell short, but luckily AAA picked up the slack in their observations of the biology department.

The AAA Report

In an unscheduled interview with the biology faculty during AAA’s Nov. 2010 visit, the AAA team made some revealing observations, six of which are listed here:

1. Some biology faculty use evolution to explain creation.
2. Some faculty seem averse to sharing the position of the church on creation.
3. Biology faculty are honest in admitting the struggle to reconcile faith and science.
4. La Sierra’s reputation on this issue was damaged by public statements by some biology faculty. La Sierra exacerbated the problem by using some of these same faculty to teach a course meant to help address the church’s view of creation. That further damaged the school’s credibility with respect to the teaching of the Adventist view of creation.
5. Faculty from the School of Religion have not helped to clarify the issue and may have added to the controversy.
6. Some faculty statements could be construed as intimidating to those students believing in a Biblical creation, and students are given little classroom support of their faith.

AAA made three recommendations that deserve highlighting. First, they recommended the biology department ensure high quality science within the Adventist faith-based context. Obviously “the Adventist faith-based context” was not being promoted, or AAA wouldn’t have recommended that it be done. In Nov. 2009, the LSU Board said, “The board is committed to assuring that the teaching of the theory of evolution takes place within the context of the Adventist belief regarding creation.” After the board made this statement, the biology faculty continued to teach evolution to the exclusion of the Adventist view of creation.

The second recommendation was that the new seminar class (BOIL 111A), which is supposed to support the Adventist view of origins, include professors who are overtly creationist. The seminar class had been exposed in 2010 for promoting theological ideas contrary to the church’s position on creation. How could it be otherwise, when the class was taught by known evolutionists? In an interview with the Adventist Review, LSU Board Chair described the course, saying, “We realize the first iteration of it did not really have the results we desired. So, we will be looking at that for revision.”

In the third recommendation, AAA appeared to acknowledge LSU’s questionable PR campaign in their statement, “Be honest in all your communications.” Over the last two years LSU has made numerous misleading PR statements.

What seemed to be lacking from AAA’s recommendations, as presented in the memorandum, was a timeline for immediate action to ensure that evolution is taught in the context of Adventist beliefs. A cursory look at Attachment 4 in the memorandum, a report provided by the provost about what they are doing regarding the teaching of evolution, also reveals no action ensuring immediate change. Words like “continuing,” “ongoing,” “beginning,” “refine,” “recommend,” and “discover” are sprinkled throughout the attachment. There are no voted actions or deadlines that show how and when the professors will change the way evolution is presented in their classrooms. But the conundrum remains: How can LSU biology professors promote creation when they don’t believe it’s true?
**The Informal Report**

An early 2010 report prepared by several LSU Board members, regarding how evolution was being taught at LSU, was never published and was only referenced once in the ad hoc committee’s memorandum. It appeared the ad hoc committee initially thought the document worthy of review, but after giving vague and unsupported reasons relating to its inability to evaluate curriculum, the report was given “little weight.” Instead of evaluating the curriculum itself, the committee waited to see what AAA would do. However, the AAA team didn’t review the biology curriculum by direct examination of syllabi and lecture notes either, but in significant contrast to the committee’s approach was AAA’s three-hour interview with the entire biology faculty. This had not been done by the committee. Not surprisingly, both groups came to different conclusions in key areas.

**Conclusion**

The *ad hoc* committee’s memorandum concluded that the board should leave the curriculum management to the faculty and administration, which is interesting when the administration denied there was a problem for two years and would still be denying it had the pressure been lifted.

LSU said summer 2010, “It should be pointed out that the theory of evolution is discussed, but not promoted, at La Sierra University,” according to a [document](http://www.educatetruth.com/la-sierra-evidence/lsu-memorandum-confirms-educate-truths-allegations) passed out at the GC Session in Atlanta. Contrast this statement with a AAA statement that the biology faculty support and teach evolutionary processes as a plausible explanation of the origin of life.

The committee also told the board should focus on more positive aspects of the university, and to affirm its support for the LSU President and his administration and their ability to handle this situation. Is the committee suggesting the president and administration be left responsible when they have covered up the truth and continue to shield and support professors who are destroying student faith in Biblical creation?

In the memorandum’s conclusion, the latest “findings” of the *ad hoc* committee supported AAA research. LSU’s subsequent and belated apology is a nice first step, but only came after having its arm twisted to the breaking point. What happens now?

The full AAA board must still accept or reject the AAA visiting team’s recommendation that LSU receive maximum accreditation. It’s unclear why the visiting team would recommend LSU receive maximum accreditation, considering how biology faculty and administration have handled themselves the past two years. The theory of evolution is still being promoted after all administration’s diplomatic promises, and students are still leaving LSU with their faith shaken or entirely gone. Educate Truth is very grateful the church appears to be taking this seriously and that AAA has put investigative effort into this issue.
La Sierra University Granted Window to Show its Faithfulness to Church’s Creation Belief

April 5, 2011  54 Comments

Educate Truth shares the following article published by the Adventist News Network as a service to readers.

By Mark A. Kellner

La Sierra University (LSU), a Seventh-day Adventist Church-owned school in Riverside, California, will have a year to demonstrate its faithfulness to church teaching on creation, at which time its current accreditation by the Adventist Accrediting Association, or AAA, will be reviewed. The school’s denominational accreditation has been extended to December 31 of next year, with reaccreditation subject to an on-site review by a AAA panel in the second quarter of 2012, and AAA board action in October 2012.

The unusual action followed two years of controversy that has roiled the southeastern California campus and generated extensive comment by Seventh-day Adventist leaders and members across North America and the world church. The La Sierra decision, during which a wide range of options were debated, came among several actions taken the regular biennial AAA board meeting held at the General Conference’s headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, on April 4, 2011.

“Although La Sierra University has deviated from the philosophy and objectives of Seventh-day Adventist education,” the voted action reads, “it is moved that the university be granted an extension of accreditation to December 31, 2012 in order for the university to act upon its commitments and implement changes and enhancements” involving the teaching of origins at the school. The action extending the university’s current term of accreditation did not address the prospect of a new term, up to five years in length.

Accrediting executives’ rationale

“This was a challenging and complex decision,” said Lisa M. Beardsley, director of the General Conference Education Department. “The AAA board took into consideration the report of the AAA team that visited the campus in November 2010, and events that have transpired since, such as the actions of the institutional board, the finding of its special subcommittee, and the open letter published in March by the university. After careful and prayerful consideration, the board expressed its will as a body by means of a written ballot so that all views could be honored.”

Ella Smith Simmons, a general vice president of the world church and member of the AAA board, said, “Given the recent acknowledgement made by the La Sierra University board and administration, this action seeks to create a bridge for the university to meet its stated commitments and the accrediting requirements to give priority to the standards of Seventh-day Adventist education in harmony with the Church’s official beliefs.”

“The AAA Board has attempted to find a balance between punitive and redemptive help to the university in
support of the LSU Board’s recent statements,” added Larry Blackmer, vice president for Education of the North American Division and another AAA board member.

Membership in the Adventist Accrediting Association board includes the director and associate directors of the General Conference Education department; General Conference vice presidential advisers for education; directors of education from each of the church’s 13 world divisions; one representative each from a college/university board chair; a college/university president; an academic vice president or dean; a registrar or admissions officer; a finance officer; an academic department chair of education; a union conference education director; and a local conference education director. Also included are three individuals with international Adventist educational experience; two education specialists not employed by the church; and the General Conference officers — specifically the president, secretary and treasurer.

What lies ahead

In order to retain AAA accreditation, the school administration and board of trustees will, among other steps, have to demonstrate that it is honoring its commitments to “continue to endorse the official Seventh-day Adventist Church statement on creation”; “resource and nurture faculty in an atmosphere in which official Seventh-day Adventist Church positions on creation and origins are taught and honored”; so that the Church’s creation position “is presented in instructional contexts” and also is “presented as the university’s position on origins.”

The university will also have to show it is fulfilling its pledge to develop “specific goals” to assist “LSU students of other faiths to find meaning in and understanding of Seventh-day Adventist values and official beliefs, including those regarding creation and human origins.” According to one of the examples set forth in the voted action, “decisions regarding faculty appointments and development [must be] aligned with board and university commitments to ensure the acceptance and teaching of official Seventh-day Adventist beliefs regarding creation and origins within instructional and co-curricular contexts.”

The AAA is also requiring that LSU’s “board governance structure and function are enhanced to provide fuller participation in its fiduciary responsibility for the university,” again, in keeping with a commitment the school has made.

Decision was a surprise

Following a protracted discussion that lengthened a scheduled three-hour meeting into four hours, the AAA board voted to extend the school’s current church-based accreditation, but did not offer the full new term La Sierra had anticipated. On February 8, La Sierra announced a AAA site visit team’s recommendation “that ‘in their opinion, and subject to AAA approval, La Sierra University should receive the maximum accreditation possible under AAA guidelines.’” The school has since removed that statement from its website.

The accreditation issue — which includes denominational recognition by the church and qualifies a school for certain appropriations from denominational funds — arose following a two-year controversy over La Sierra’s teachings on human origins. Beginning in 2009, critics, including some church leaders, laypersons and LSU students claimed that the school taught the theory of evolution to biology students as the explanation for the origin of life.

Seventh-day Adventists believe “God is Creator of all things, and has revealed in Scripture the authentic account of His creative activity. In six days the Lord made ‘the heaven and the earth’ and all living things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of that first week,” as noted in the church’s Fundamental Beliefs.

La Sierra responds
In a statement to Adventist Review, La Sierra spokesman Larry Becker said, “Although La Sierra University has taken affirmative steps toward resolution of the controversy regarding how creation and evolution are taught in its classes, the AAA Board believed that it is necessary for more time to transpire in order for the university board, faculty, and administration to demonstrate its determination to put in place the steps that the faculty and administration have agreed with the board to implement.”

The LSU statement continued: “University administration appreciates the extension of its current full accreditation as a Seventh-day Adventist university through December 31, 2012. The AAA Board has outlined a specific process moving forward, and we recognize the need for these steps. We look forward to the AAA visit to our campus next year. The board, administration and faculty are already working together to ensure that we provide the outstanding Adventist education desired by our students, our constituents, and our Church.”

La Sierra President Randal R. Wisbey and Ricardo Graham, Pacific Union Conference president and La Sierra trustee board chairman, admitted La Sierra’s shortcomings on the subject in a March 9 open letter.

“We found that only 50 percent of the students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that our Adventist view of creation was presented, and only 40 percent agreed or strongly agreed that our Adventist view was supported,” Wisbey and Graham wrote. “This is not acceptable, and we apologize,” they added.

Further, “instruction at the university, while being strong in many areas, has not adequately presented the denomination’s position on the subject of creation,” according to the document.

And, “there is some evidence that students have not always been respected for their belief in the Biblical creation position,” the March 9 La Sierra statement said.

According to the AAA’s accreditation handbook, “Accreditation of an institution by AAA signifies that the institution has a purpose appropriate to service the educational needs of those in its constituency and has the resources, programs, and services sufficient to accomplish the institution’s goals.”

School’s history

Founded in 1922 as a Seventh-day Adventist academy, La Sierra grew over the years and became a full-fledged college in 1946. In 1967, it merged with Loma Linda University and became that school’s liberal arts wing, reorganizing as an independent institution in 1990.

In 2010, the school reported 2,098 students had registered at the start of the current school year. Last year’s registration of 440 freshman surpassed 2009’s freshman class of 348 by 26.4 percent, La Sierra said in a statement.
On April 4, 2011, in Silver Spring, Maryland, the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) Board met for its annual Spring meeting. Their main agenda was to review reports of AAA visiting teams and their recommendations for respective Seventh-day Adventist universities and colleges of the North American Division and the General Conference. After lengthy discussion, the AAA Board decided to not accept the recommendation of the 10-member AAA team that visited the University in November 2011. Instead, the Board has announced that they are extending our University’s current accreditation through December 31, 2012.

La Sierra University has taken a number of affirmative steps toward resolution of the controversy regarding how creation and evolution are taught in our classes. The AAA Board believed that it is necessary for more time to transpire in order for the University to demonstrate our determination to put in place the steps that the faculty and administration have agreed with the La Sierra University Board of Trustees to implement. This AAA action offers us time to demonstrate our ability to fulfill our commitments, while retaining our status as a fully-accredited Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher education.

The AAA Board affirmed the steps that the university is taking. The visiting team report indicated that we should expect an interim visit from the AAA prior to December 2012, and that has now been formalized in the voted action.

The university’s faculty, administration and trustees are already working together to ensure that we provide the outstanding Adventist education desired by our students, our constituents, and our Church. As we continue to refine our understanding of God’s ways and our ability to teach them effectively, we solicit your prayers and suggestions, the prayerful support of our constituents, as well as the counsel and assistance of our sister institutions and church organizations.

PR Contact: Larry Becker
Executive Director of University Relations
La Sierra University
Riverside, California
951.785.2460 (voice)