Education for a Sure Future: Eternity

Surveys of higher education in various countries indicate that many nations are seeking to improve the accessibility and performance of their college and university systems. For example, in a September 2006 report, A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education, a commission appointed by the secretary of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) observed that higher education has become one of America’s greatest success stories. Yet despite its overall optimism, the commission acknowledged that American higher education “needs to improve in dramatic ways” to achieve its unfulfilled promises.

Could this same message be applied to Seventh-day Adventist higher education? Could we benefit from a sharper—and perhaps more scholarly—look at our loosely coupled “system” of education? Such an assessment, while not targeting individual institutions, could assess the church’s fundamental commitments to and expectations for higher education.

The Focus

The USDOE challenged higher education to consider change as “nothing less than securing the promise of the future and unleashing the potential of the American people.” It offered several recommendations intended to (1) improve access to higher education and make it more affordable, (2) strengthen its quality and encourage innovation, and (3) bring much-needed transparency and accountability to U.S. colleges and universities. In its self-acclaimed “bold” recommendations, it called for a return to its core values of higher educational philosophy. Could Seventh-day Adventist higher education benefit from dialogue that seeks to re-center our efforts, as well?

Charge in Adventist Higher Education

More than a century ago, in the early decades of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, God’s messenger articulated the fundamental character and aim for our educational endeavors: redemption, and its core: Christ. She said, “In the highest sense the work of education is a miraculous success story throughout the world. Yet, despite its accomplishments, we face an ever more challenging future that calls for reassessment and dramatic change.

Whatever we do, we must remain true to our aim and to our core values. Charles Mankoff, in his critique of the Christian university, asserts that “schools which claim affiliation to their Name, hardly demonstrate in practice that Jesus Christ has any relevance to the matter and spirit of their scientific research and learning.” He believes that many have arrived at this state by “swerving” from their core values, viewing this shift as “progress” while failing...
to discern the compatibility of academic excellence and faith. Our colleges and universities have not yet gone that route, but they are vulnerable to this destabilization. Let us not fall away from our center, or take that excursion into decline.

We must not allow academic progress or scholarly attainment, worthy as these may be, to eclipse Christ as the center of our educational endeavors. While we believe in and embrace peace, justice, the relief of suffering, science, reason, and culture, as valuable as are these worthy goals and pursuits, they cannot replace Christ in Seventh-day Adventist higher education.

Conclusion

The USDOE commission summed up its report with the acknowledgement that reaching its goals will require difficult decisions and major changes. It concluded with optimism that “Working together, we can build on the past successes of U.S. higher education to create an improved and revitalized postsecondary system that is better tailored to the demands, as well as the opportunities, of a new century.” Can we, as Seventh-day Adventists, conclude any less?

Ella Smith Simmons is Vice President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (GC) in Silver Spring, Maryland. As part of her work, she oversees several GC departments, including Education. She has worked as a teacher and administrator in several Adventist higher education institutions.

REFERENCES

2. Ibid., Summary, p. 16.