

# PERSPECTIVES ON EDUCATION

## Some Thoughts on Academic Quality

by Helen Ward Thompson

Our schools are to take a higher position academically and intellectually than any other schools in the land” (*IV Testimonies*, p. 425). “Every department is to bear the mark of divine excellence” (*Counsels to Teachers*, p. 57).

I feel uncomfortable when I read this counsel from E. G. White. And I find I am not alone with that feeling. College administrators, past and present, admit the same concern over the apparent inability of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities to produce a larger proportion of especially able scholars.

Perhaps the counsel is simply a goal to be striven for but never reached. Yet, the words

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do not seem to offer much room for such interpretation. Serious acceptance of the statements, however, forces reassessment of the academic success of our colleges. For example, the results of national examinations in various academic areas ought to show that students in our college departments have learned standard material in their fields exceptionally well. And where there are few, if any, national examinations available, student scores on examinations developed by academic departments ought to show that a high calibre of learning is going on by the students in those disciplines.

Yet, the raw scores and percentile ratings for national examinations taken by students from the Adventist colleges that I am acquainted with indicate that many students are not learning as well as their faculty would desire, or perhaps as well as the students themselves would wish. And in many cases, the academic deans of the institutions and the

faculty are involved in studies to see what changes could be made to produce better results.

Some of the policies of the colleges, however, mitigate against much improvement in academic standards. A brief examination of four common policies shows part of the problem.

First, most of our undergraduate colleges want more students. This fact seems to dictate an open-admissions policy, resulting in students' being lured to the college who are ill prepared or even unable to pursue college-level work. The teacher is then faced with two alternatives: to teach "down" to his students, watering his courses so that his pass rate is respectable; or to teach solid college-level classes, helping the unable or unwilling as much as possible, but failing them academ-

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ically if they do not accomplish the necessary level of learning. The former leads to a milquetoast course in which some learning takes place, but not nearly as much as the college students have the right to expect. A teacher who follows the latter course often becomes unpopular and even untenured.

Second, in most Adventist colleges in North America that offer remedial work, the percentage of students directed into those classes has increased over the last few years. This increase may have come about because advisors have better recognized the need for such skills as reading and writing and mathematics, but it may also be because the colleges are accepting more students with low abilities. At any rate, remedial classes are booming.

This increase in remedial education is probably good if the students are receiving

competent instruction, but when advisors register students for remedial classes, those same students are often *simultaneously* registering for other classes in religion, psychology, history, fine arts and other "core" curriculum requirements. The teachers, then, in these basic classes are faced with an impossible task: to teach college-level courses to large numbers of students admittedly unready for them. And the college need for student retention makes it difficult for the teacher to fail large percentages of these freshman classes. Yet, the college itself has determined that these students are not ready for college-level work, usually because they cannot read or write well enough to handle college classes.

Third, in some cases, less able students are advised to take two-year vocational programs which are devised to lead into four-year programs. Yet, an examination of the requirements of these two-year programs shows that too often the sophomore classes are some of the more difficult courses required in the four-year program. Thus, in his sophomore year, a less able student in a two-year program may actually be taking classes ordinarily taken by juniors or seniors in a four-year curriculum.

Fourth, Seventh-day Adventist colleges all admit some especially able students, yet only a few of our colleges have any programs that are particularly designed to enable those students to march to a different drum. Honors programs are ordinarily expensive: the more individually designed the program, often the more expensive. The exceptional students are usually taught in the same basic classes with the numerous students unready for college work. The result can be unchallenging, even stupefying, so that these potentially able scholars fail to get the stimulation as well as the learning they need to develop to their full capacity.

**A**dministrative policies thus contribute to the academic problems of our colleges. However, faculty also share the responsibility for the academically mediocre product of a college. At least four factors contribute to the problem. For example, fac-

ulty occasionally begin teaching in college when they are ill equipped to teach at a college level. Their background may be successful academy teaching with no college experience and little orientation by colleagues or the dean as to the different academic level of college teaching. Or teachers just out of graduate school with no teaching experience step into the college classrooms and begin teaching as they were taught in graduate school. In either case, the teacher is unprepared to do an excellent job.

Faculty also want to build their departments by generating more programs "for their students." Yet, many of those student needs could well be met with present course offerings if proper attention were given to redesigning one or two existing courses. The result of developing new programs is the teaching of a broader and broader spectrum of courses, many of which the existing faculty (and few new are now being added) are relatively untrained to teach. The outcome often is a weak major taught by faculty not specialized in their teaching areas. Another result may well be faculty overload.

Third, sometimes faculty equate missionary work with mediocre work. Underlying this confusion is the subtle influence of the everpresent knowledge that Adventist college faculty work for less than they would receive in a state system or in many other private systems. The difference varies considerably, from very little difference at the instructor level to considerable at the associate professor and professor levels. Yet, the mental excuse sometimes for not giving that extra measure, for not making that extra push, for not bringing the teaching art to perfection is the knowledge that wages are low, anyway.

But probably the most serious factor in teacher responsibility for the academic level of their students is in the confusion evident when easy and undemanding academics and Christianity are considered synonymous. I still remember a student who came to me to complain about how unchristian one of his teachers was because he refused to give him extra time (and extra academic advantage) to do some assignments. Yet, the student frankly admitted that he had no reason to be

late but had simply procrastinated. Another of his teachers had granted him extra time, and that teacher was quickly labeled "Christian." The "Christian" teacher is confusing, it seems to me, Christianity with sloppy scholarship and faulty character development.

The constituency of the church as a whole also shares the responsibility for the less than ideal academic achievement of the college students. For example, the idea is prevalent that college is for all Adventist young people. And that somehow, when they get there, they should all have a "success" experience. This places the college in the position of babysitting, being a penal institution, and being a recreation center, as well as an educational institution. Now, while a college can do some of the first three, it cannot major in any or all of those and still maintain stature as an educational institution. All Seventh-day Adventists should not go to college, although many or even most should in today's world, provided the colleges are adequately staffed and equipped to handle them.

Another idea that affects the academic level of the college is the lack of understanding among the constituency that Christian education is indeed a doctrine of the church and is the most effective evangelistic agency of the church. The longer a student attends one of our schools, the less likely he is to leave the church in later years. This means that the constituency should make absolutely certain that every Adventist young person who would benefit from a college education has the opportunity to attend an Adventist college. Many very able Seventh-day Adventists are not now in Adventist colleges. They ought to be if the colleges were offering the curricula to fit them for their lifework.

**H**ow can some of these factors be ameliorated, some of the problems solved? Three steps might be helpful. While they are stated generally, they actually are specific and need to be so considered.

First, while Adventist colleges undoubtedly will continue to have an open-admissions policy for some time, they should

immediately give more serious consideration to “complete” programs for students unready for college-level work. No longer should the regular college classes be academically bottom heavy, forcing the teacher to dilute his material or have an undue proportion of failures.

Second, faculty need to teach better. Hiring practices, orientation sessions, philosophy of work considerations, curriculum restrictions — all of these should be focused on the teacher’s doing the best possible job in the classroom. The soundness of a teacher’s academic practices as well as his personal commitment to the church ought to be considered in the hiring process. Search committees need to determine as far as possible whether a faculty member will be an effective teacher, able to hold high standards in a kind way, or whether he will succumb to the multitude of pressures urging him toward popular mediocrity.

In addition, faculty in-service training ought to keep the teacher abreast of the latest developments in teaching techniques and

grading skills. Also, constant feedback for the teacher from his students, both personally and through examinations, is essential for the teacher to know how well his students are learning compared with the students of his colleagues nationwide.

Third, a specific, organized, determined effort should be continued at both the conference and division level to educate the constituency that college is for college-level work, that remedial programs are available for those students who need them, that every Adventist young person should not necessarily go on to college, but that every one whom the college can serve should attend. Then, the constituency needs to see that every deserving student is financially able to go.

Only if the college with its admission policies, the faculty in its teaching expertise, and the constituency with its understanding and financial support work together can we have hope of meeting the goal: “a higher position academically and intellectually than any other schools in the land” with departments of “divine excellence.”