

Free the College Boards: Toward A Pluralism of Excellence

by Donald R. McAdams

The Adventist system of higher education in North America is in trouble. A few of the 10 colleges and two universities operated by the church are in excellent shape and may become stronger rather than weaker during the next decade; the rest will run very fast to stay in the same place, and one or two may, during this period, cease to operate as free-standing senior colleges. Ideological, enrollment and financial problems have already weakened the system and will likely weaken it further in the years immediately ahead. The system and the colleges that comprise it are at a crossroads.

Some would question the use of the word *system* to describe the colleges. Indeed, they are not legally a system of higher education—each institution operates under a charter granted by a state and each institution is separately accredited by a regional accrediting association. Nor is there a single board governing the institutions like the agencies that govern some state university systems. The North American Division Board of Higher Education plays a valuable role in speaking for the institutions in the committees and hallways of the General Conference, but it is not a governing body

for the colleges. Its main function is to collect and disseminate data on the institutions and to bring together once or twice a year the college presidents, board chairmen and key General Conference personnel for an exchange of information. Each undergraduate union college is governed by what is in effect a standing subcommittee of the union executive committee and is supported financially by the conferences in its union. The enrollment, financial health and personality of each institution reflects the membership of its supporting fields.

Andrews University, comprised of an undergraduate college, a school of graduate studies and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, has emerged as a genuine, developing university. Some very well-known and highly regarded private universities stood a generation ago where Andrews University stands today.

Although it has been slowly changing to a true university organization, Loma Linda University remains two institutions: a flourishing union college on the La Sierra campus and a collection of professional schools, mostly health-related, on the Loma Linda campus. Its size, the affluence of the Adventist people who support it, and the success of its health-related professional schools have given Loma Linda University complexity, sophistication and financial strength. The institution has emerged as a mature regional university and obtained a

Donald R. McAdams, president of the Texas Independent College Fund, was professor of history at Andrews University and for nine years, until 1984, president of Southwestern Adventist College. for the colleges.

measure of independence from church control.

For most of the past decade, Southern College, Pacific Union College and Walla Walla College have been the large and financially strong colleges within the North American Division. During the past several years they, along with Atlantic Union College, have had significant enrollment declines with consequent financial difficulties. Most of the smaller union colleges—Columbia Union College, Southwestern Adventist College and Union College—have lost a smaller percentage of their enrollment.¹ Canadian Union College remains a very small institution with a limited number of majors at the baccalaureate level.

Two special service institutions have prospered during the past decade. Oakwood College, a General Conference institution founded to serve the black youth of the church, has steadily increased in enrollment and quality. The growth of black Adventism and significant annual support from the

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General Conference and the United States Office of Education have made Oakwood College one of the finest black colleges in the nation.

Kettering College of Medical Arts is the one institution that is not owned and operated by an administrative unit of the church. Its constituency is the Kettering Medical Center and its reason for existence is to train health-care professionals at the junior college level to serve the needs of the medical center. Kettering College is so unlike the other institutions that for purposes of analysis it is inappropriate to group it with them. Unlike the other Adventist colleges, Kettering has a highly selective admission standard, charges about half the tuition of the

other colleges and enrolls primarily non-Adventist students. Kettering is an Adventist college, but it is not, like the other institutions, a child of the church.

Despite the many characteristics that make each institution unique, the colleges are really parts of a whole. The governing boards of each institution are, more or less, standing committees of the union executive committees, or in the case of the General Conference institutions, the General Conference Committee. The board chairmen are union presidents or General Conference vice presidents, and the most powerful individuals on the boards are conference presidents or, in the case of the General Conference institutions, union presidents. These church administrators move from college to college during the course of their careers, so that every college board includes conference or union officials who have previously served on other college boards. Since these men manage the conferences and unions that provide annual operating and capital subsidies to the institutions, they wield great power on the institutional boards. And because they are on an upward career path, seeking to move to the presidencies of larger conferences or unions or eventually to positions in the General Conference, and since promotion in the Adventist Church comes from above, these men rigorously enforce the policies of the General Conference.²

Another part of the uniform pattern of governance is the General Conference auditing service, an organization that exists primarily to enforce General Conference policy. Public firms could audit the colleges and assure the governing boards that every dollar was accounted for and proper money-handling procedures were being followed, but they would not inform the governing boards of every deviation from General Conference policy. Of course, governing boards can ignore the policy violations if they choose, and sometimes they do so if administrators convince them that this is in the best interests of the institution. Furthermore,

church employees who decide that climbing the career ladder is more trouble than it is worth often develop very strong attachments to the field or institution they serve and discover reasons to chart their own course rather than dealing with matters as those above them advise.

Still, expressions of autonomy are rare among the system's governing boards and committees. More often than not, institutional boards enforce policy uniformity on Adventist colleges. Except for the authorized deviations from the wage scale at Loma Linda University—in response to market pressure—all the colleges pay the same salary and provide the same fringe benefits, travel allowances and even Christmas bonuses. Uniform statements of academic freedom and responsibility emanate from the General Conference to the colleges, as do every imaginable personnel policy and financial procedure. At the institutional governance level, there is uniformity throughout the system.

Since institutional administrators and faculty members also move from institution to institution, and since teachers in almost all disciplines meet with their Adventist colleagues at professional meetings, there is as much uniformity among the college faculties as there is among the college boards. Almost all of the professors, if they are not graduates of the institutions where they teach, graduated from one of the other Adventist colleges. In nursing, religion, biology and business, there is a fair chance that the teacher also holds a graduate degree from one of the two Adventist universities. Not surprisingly, Adventist colleges have similar curricula, student life policies, campus ministries programs and libraries.

Less uniform than boards or faculties are the students enrolled in the Adventist colleges. Because of regional differences, one college may have more blacks, another more Hispanics or Asians. The students at one school may drive more expensive automobiles than those at another. Academically and spiritually, however, students at one

school would fit in well at another.

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admit all students who have a high school diploma or who have passed a General Educational Development (GED) examination. Unlike most independent universities, which require a minimum score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT), Adventist institutions admit students in the very lowest percentiles.³

This open-admission policy has created a unique mix of students. The best students at Adventist colleges are as good as the best students at any exclusive private school, while the poorer students are comparable to the worst students at any open-admission community college.

Spiritually, Adventist colleges and universities are also open-admission institutions. Unlike some fundamentalist or evangelical colleges that require students to show proof of an active Christian ministry, Adventist institutions admit students who simply agree to live by the rules. The church wants the colleges to be evangelistic centers where young people can make a commitment to Christ and dedicate their lives to Christian ministry in whatever career they choose.

To admit only the academically elite, as do universities like Princeton, Rice and Stanford, or only the spiritually elite, as do universities like Bob Jones and Oral Roberts, would restrict the Adventist colleges to a small fraction of students now served.

From the foregoing evidence, then, it is clear that Adventist colleges, despite their

numerous differences, are basically the same. They show their unique Adventist character at every turn, and they operate, for all practical purposes, as a system of higher education.

This system has undergone a series of serious challenges in the past several years. Ideologically, the church in North America has had to contend with the growing awareness that Ellen White took much of what she wrote from 19th-century historians, clergymen and health reformers—errors and all. College faculty members were among the first to see evidence of this. As the *Adventist Review* and union papers responded to Ellen White's "critics," the members became aware of the challenges to her infallibility and authority. The colleges, some more than others, became the targets of conservative laypeople and some church leaders who charged that liberal college professors were denying the inspiration of Ellen White and undermining her authority in the church.

The Ford controversy created a second credibility problem for the colleges. When Desmond Ford issued his public challenge to the traditional Adventist belief that Christ moved from the holy to the most holy apartment of the heavenly sanctuary on October 22, 1844, beginning the investigative judgment, Ford spoke on a college campus as a college professor. This challenge to doctrines on 1844 and the investigative judgment earned Ford the following of many more laypeople than college faculty members. Most college teachers were already aware of the inconclusive biblical support for the traditional Adventist view and were surprised more by Ford's public challenge than by what he said.

Moreover, college faculty members do not make good followers. Most of them are too independent-minded for that. When the college religion teachers returned from the Sanctuary Review Committee that met at Glacier View, Colorado, August 10-15, 1980, they reported to their colleagues that Ford

had indeed raised important questions and shown weaknesses in the traditional biblical proofs for 1844, but that he had failed to offer convincing alternative interpretations of the texts in question. Though many faculty members were upset by the distorted coverage of the Glacier View conference in the *Adventist Review* and believed that church leaders had not treated Ford fairly, to my knowledge only Smuts Van Rooyen at Andrews University sided openly with Ford. Meanwhile, thousands of laypeople, quite a few pastors and some secondary teachers became the nucleus of gospel fellowships that rejected traditional views on 1844 and the investigative judgment. Still, it was the colleges that were accused of undermining the faith in this area!

It is not surprising that Adventist colleges have been criticized for being too liberal. College faculty members—better educated and more aware of problems than are most of the laypeople and church leaders who support the institutions—are inevitably going to disagree with some church traditions. When it comes to the curriculum and management of their own institutions, faculty members are extraordinarily conservative, but in intellectual, social and political affairs, they tend to be left of center. This is also true of American academics as a whole. One has only to read about the tensions that exist between Catholic and Bap-

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tist universities and their supporting churches to know that the experience of Adventist institutions is not singular. One should note, however, that by the standards of American academia, Adventist academics

are, as a whole, just to the left of Atilla the Hun.

Unfortunately, the controversy over the writings of Ellen White and the public challenge to 1844 doctrines raised by Desmond Ford brought criticism of the colleges into the open. Prominent and affluent laymen publicly accused some faculty members of being heretics and impugned the commitment of many others. When administrators did not summarily fire the accused, they were charged with harboring and perhaps even abetting heresy. Some church leaders took up the cry, and in May 1980 the *Adventist Review* published an editorial by Kenneth Wood suggesting that some Adventist colleges might not deserve the support of their constituents.

Finally the union presidents acted, and heads began to roll. Of course there were other issues involved, but the ideological ones were primary in effecting the forced resignations of two college presidents, several vice presidents and a dozen or so faculty members. Ironically, the two colleges that suffered most, Pacific Union College and Southern College, were no more liberal—perhaps less so—than their sister schools. These colleges, however, had positioned themselves in the Adventist market as very conservative institutions and built up expectations among their constituents that they could not meet.

At the same time that the ideological controversies hit the colleges, enrollments peaked. Cumulative enrollment for the North American Division colleges, including the graduate and professional schools at Andrews University and Loma Linda University, reached 19,602 in the autumn of 1980. The next year saw the beginning of a decline, which is still going on (see Table 1). In 1984, the cumulative enrollment was 17,474.

Some observers of Adventist higher education have assumed that the decline in enrollment is a consequence of the decreasing confidence that Adventists have in their colleges. There may indeed have been a loss

of confidence, but this is only one explanation for the enrollment decrease. The major reason is that there are fewer Adventist young people of college age.

Because of the declining number of college-age students, American higher education enrollments are expected to decline

Table 1

<u>Year</u>	<u>Fall Enrollment</u>	<u>Undergraduate/ Full-time Equivalent</u>
1980	19,602	14,384
1981	19,384	14,262
1982	18,656	13,751
1983	17,894	12,747
1984	17,474	12,340

further during the next 15 years. In 1982 the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges published a booklet by David W. Breneman, *The Coming Enrollment Crisis: What Every Trustee Must Know*. Breneman predicted that total enrollment in American colleges and universities will decline by 18 percent in 1986, by 13 percent in 1988, by 26 percent in 1991 and by 22 percent in 1995. Other forecasters have made similar predictions. While one can project how many young people will turn 18 for at least 18 years into the future, we cannot know how many of these 18-year-olds (or other prospective students) will enroll in colleges or universities. So far, primarily because of increased enrollment of older adult students, the more pessimistic projections have not been met. American higher education enrollment has remained relatively stable since 1980.

Why then has Adventist higher education lost 10 percent of its students during the past four years? Breneman predicted that the institutions that would suffer most during the coming enrollment crisis would be non-selective, private liberal-arts colleges. By 1995 these institutions would lose 47.7 percent of their enrollment, Breneman estimated. They have neither the reputation of the selective private universities nor the low

cost of the public institutions. The performance of Adventist colleges is certainly in line with Breneman's prediction.

Enrollment losses have led to financial difficulties. Since the colleges are tuition-driven, deriving approximately 70 percent of their educational and general income from student tuition, a steady decline in

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enrollment of 2 percent or more per year creates serious financial problems. To put this into concrete figures: the comparison of 1980-1981 and 1984-1985 enrollments shows 2,000 fewer students in 1984; an average loss of \$5,000 tuition per student creates a financial shortfall of \$10 million.

Fortunately, during this period of enrollment decline, church subsidies to the colleges have remained relatively stable in terms of a percentage of the colleges' total income. The table below shows that church subsidies rose from 15.3 percent in 1979-1980 to 16.5 percent of total income in 1980-

1981, then declined gradually back to 15.2 percent in 1983-1984 (see Table 2). The data for 1984-1985 and the years ahead will show whether the decline from 1980-1981 to 1983-1984 is the beginning of a downward trend or whether church subsidies will again stabilize. Hopefully, the church will recognize the importance of maintaining financial subsidies at the present levels.

College administrators have tried to meet the financial needs of their institutions by reducing costs (more than 100 faculty positions have been eliminated during this period), by seeking financial support from the non-Adventist communities that surround the institutions, and by raising tuition. From 1974 to 1981, North American Division college tuition rose from 15.4 percent of the median family income for a family of four to 18.9 percent. If tuition had remained at 15.4 percent the average tuition charge in 1981 would have been \$3,577 instead of \$4,396, and college income would have been reduced by approximately \$11,537,958.

And yet, ever-higher tuition is likely to reduce enrollments. I believe this is already happening. College administrators, faced with the necessity of funding their institutions, have raised tuition, perhaps to the limit. So far the philosophy has been: Let us not concern ourselves with whether our tuition is fair; let us charge what the traffic will bear. The dedication of Adventist parents and students, so far, has been sufficient. Will it continue to be so? How high can tui-

Table 2

<u>Year</u>	<u>Church Subsidy*</u>	<u>Institutional Income</u>	<u>Percent</u>
1979-80	\$11,105,412	\$72,738,863	15.3
1980-81	13,441,526	81,366,232	16.5
1981-82	14,495,241	90,412,281	16.0
1982-83	14,645,764	96,020,452	15.3
1983-84	15,363,170	100,810,259	15.2

*Church subsidies (excluding General Conference subsidies to Andrews University and Loma Linda University) as a percentage of total institutional income (excluding Kettering College and the Loma Linda campus of Loma Linda University).

Enrollment Comparisons							
Institution	Enrollment 1980-1981		Enrollment 1984-1985		Enrollment 1985-1986		Comparison 1984-1985 and 1985-1986 FTE*
	Total	FTE*	Total	FTE*	Total	FTE*	
Andrews University	3,018	2,589	3,034	2,538	3,031	2,534	-4
Atlantic Union College	680	590	627	440	567	397	-43
Canadian Union College	279	239	263	231	302	265	+34
Columbia Union College	869	639	896	538	834	500	-38
Kettering College	397	294	463	334	417	301	-33
Loma Linda University	5,326	4,250	4,610	3,862	4,323	3,623	-239
Oakwood College	1,263	1,123	1,326	1,240	1,148	1,073	-167
Pacific Union College	2,134	1,867	1,403	1,264	1,402	1,262	-2
Southern College	2,091	1,797	1,622	1,225	1,468	1,108	-117
Southwestern Adventist College	700	611	683	570	734	612	+42
Union College	888	815	898	761	749	634	-127
Walla Walla College	1,957	1,769	1,649	1,458	1,569	1,387	-71
Totals	19,602	16,513	17,474	14,461	16,534	13,732	-765

* North American Division Board of Higher Education reports supplied figures for this table. The board determines full-time equivalents (FTE) by dividing the total number of course hour enrollments by 15.5 (the number of hours considered a full load). *Spectrum* estimated the FTE for 1985-1986 based on the 1984-1985 ratio of total enrollments and FTE.

tion go before it keeps away more student tuition dollars than it brings in?

The escalating tuition of the Adventist colleges is one of the clearest indicators of the severity of the financial crisis that confronts them. Elite universities and liberal-arts colleges with four to seven applicants for every position in the freshman class can charge \$10,000 or more per year without decreasing their applicant pool. And since these institutions rely on endowment income, gifts and grants for the majority of their operating income, temporary declines in enrollment do not have a serious negative impact on their financial well-being.

We do not have that luxury. As previously mentioned, tuition provides at least 70 percent of all educational and general income for Adventist colleges, compared to 53 percent for all independent four-year colleges. At the present time, Adventist college tuition, approximately \$5,775 per year, is above the national average of \$5,418 for independent colleges and universities. In Alabama, Nebraska, Tennessee and Texas, the average tuition for independent four-

year colleges is from \$1,500 to \$2,000 below the tuition of the Adventist college in each state. In Maryland and on the West Coast, where independent college tuition is higher, the Adventist colleges are only a few hundred dollars above the state averages. And in New England, where numerous high-priced independent universities are located, the Adventist college tuition of \$6,474 (the highest Adventist college tuition in North America) is well below the average for the region. But with this data in mind, remember that Adventist colleges have the admission standards of community colleges where tuition is only a few hundred dollars. We should not compare our tuition to universities that far surpass our colleges in all the standard measurements of institutional quality. Nationwide, the church-related colleges similar in size and quality to Adventist colleges charge \$1,500 to \$2,000 less tuition.

College administrators have begun to obtain needed money from philanthropic foundations and the communities in which they reside. Aggressive fund raising, with

the active encouragement of the General Conference, has helped to bring in non-Adventist dollars to replace some of the lost tuition income. One should not imagine, however, that this new support from the non-Adventist community will not have an effect on the management of the colleges. Inevitably, administrators listen to those who provide financial support.

The Adventist colleges in North America are indeed a *de facto* system of higher education, and collectively they are in trouble. The problems they face are serious and getting worse. Enrollment declines and financial shortfalls are likely to continue, and ideological pressures are not likely to abate. The entire church is going through a period of transition, and the colleges will inevitably be at the point where new and old meet. Their present problems are not of crisis proportion. The colleges are basically sound, and they are serving the church well, but that is precisely why now is the time to act.

The Adventist people of North America are not all the same, and neither must their colleges be uniform.

What should we do? We should increase the number of laypeople on college boards and foster trusteeship. Board members should recognize that they are not serving on a subcommittee of the union executive committee responsible to the General Conference. They are the legal owners of state-chartered institutions of higher education responsible to their constituents, the Adventist people of their unions.

The college boards do not need to be subject to the union executive committees and the General Conference to guarantee their orthodoxy, honesty or trusteeship; this is guaranteed by their accountability to their constituents, the Adventist people. Coordi-

nation of the college with the church structure is guaranteed by the strong and effective presence of conference presidents and union officers who are—and who must remain—on the college boards. No structural change is needed. What is needed is simply more laypeople on each college board and a recognition by all that the colleges are directly accountable to the people and should coordinate with the church structure, not subordinate themselves to it.⁴

Next, we should employ the best men and women we can find to administer, teach and in other ways serve our students. We should (as an organized church and as individuals) give these educators all the financial support and encouragement we can. And, because they are so central to the thinking and future of the church, we should insist that these faculty and staff members be committed Adventists who believe and act according to biblical truth and are faithful to the fundamental doctrines of the Adventist Church.

Finally, we should decentralize our *de facto* system of higher education and apply to the colleges the principles of free enterprise and individual initiative that have fostered our national strength and prosperity and that many Americans are rediscovering. Let each college become even closer to the people and churches that support it. Free the institutions from the regulating hand of the denominational wage scale, the General Conference auditing service and the policy book that grows thicker each year at Annual Council. Trust the institutional boards and the people below to correct errors, punish wrongdoing and keep the colleges on the Adventist track.

Why must every Adventist college be the same, different only because of its geographic location, the resources of its field and the personalities of its leaders? Why not let the colleges compete for students, faculty members and resources? Let those who think a strong conservative image will attract support market themselves as conservative. Let those who believe a progressive approach will sell become progressive. Let

one college become academically elite, another spiritually elite, while another maintains open admission.

Could our over-regulated system survive such freedom? Would church leaders tolerate such decentralization and loss of power? Some colleges might make the wrong decision and decline rapidly or fail. Others would undoubtedly flourish. The winner, just as in the deregulation of the airlines or the trucking industry, would be the consumer. The system as a whole would be stronger. The church would be healthier. The Baptists have progressive universities like Baylor and conservative ones like Dallas Baptist University. The Church of Christ operates progressive Pepperdine University and conservative Abilene Christian Univer-

sity. The Catholic Church, through its various orders and dioceses, operates institutions as different as Notre Dame University and Incarnate Word College in San Antonio. All are strong and growing.

The Adventist people of North America are not all the same, and neither must their colleges be uniform. In this difficult time, the church should pause for a moment at the crossroads and then choose for its colleges the decentralized, deregulated road. Freedom to succeed means freedom to fail, but I am convinced that the individual initiative and creativity unleashed by such a decision would lead most institutions to greater vitality and, without doubt, strengthen the system and benefit the people of the church the colleges were established to serve.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Based on comparison of full-time equivalent figures for school years 1980-1981 and 1984-1985, enrollment at Pacific Union College declined 29.4 percent; Southern College, 27.9 percent; Atlantic Union College, 22 percent; and Walla Walla College 17.5 percent. In comparison, Columbia Union College lost 15 percent; Union College, 13.2 percent; and Southwestern Adventist College, 4 percent.

2. One should note that promotion from above and a desire for upward mobility, the two forces that have influenced policy uniformity among church institutions in the past, are today being weakened by three countervailing forces. First, since salaries are essentially the same at the conference, union and General Conference levels, and since, with the exception of the union presidents and General Conference officers, there is more power at the local level than at the union or General Conference level, a promotion is not always attractive.

Second, because of rising mortgage rates and real-estate prices in recent years, it is sometimes financially unwise to sell a home and move.

Finally, there is the two-income family and, in many cases, the professionally employed wife. A generation ago one offered the wife of the man receiving a call to a higher position a job as a secretary in the union or General Conference office. What does one offer a wife who is a public high school teacher with several years of seniority, the supervisor of a hospital laboratory, the owner of a large real-estate business, or a CPA in a local accounting firm?

3. The average SAT score of entering freshmen at an Adventist college may be at or only slightly below the national average, but one must keep in mind that the national average includes community colleges

(which enroll 38 percent of all students in post-secondary education and probably 50 percent of all first-time freshmen). At community colleges in the fall of 1983, 56 percent of all freshmen taking the SAT scored at or below 800; 90 percent scored at or below 1,000. On the average, entering freshmen in an Adventist college scored in the low 800s on the SAT. Average scores at most independent colleges were over 1,000.

4. It is important to note that church administrators on institutional boards wear two hats. They not only function to choose what is best for the institution, but also to protect and foster the growth of their own fields. A conference president on a union college board or a union president on the board of a General Conference institution has a strong incentive to divert resources from the institution to his own field so that his conference will flourish and his success will be noticed by the administrators above him who control his future.

This observation is not meant to be cynical. Church administrators to a man, as far as I know, are dedicated Adventists who have a broad vision of the needs of the denomination and a commitment to the church as a whole, not just to their own fields. Still, they are human, and to ignore self-interest in human affairs is to miss an essential part of the overall picture. Church administrators are no different from department chairmen who fight for additional resources for their departments, or college presidents who want their institutions to grow. Leaders at every level believe their department, college, or conference is essential to the entire church. They also want to attract attention to themselves as leaders who are destined for greater responsibilities.