



# La Sierra University

## Ascending

The first accreditation review after the reincarnation of La Sierra as a university has removed academic probation.

*by Ed Karlow*

AT ITS FEBRUARY 1992 HEARINGS, THE SENIOR Accrediting Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) removed La Sierra University from probation but deferred reaffirmation of accreditation "because further progress is needed in the areas identified." La Sierra University's progress did not warrant either continued probation or even the lesser sanction of "warning." Graduating students receive accredited degrees. However, the commission also felt it premature to claim that La Sierra University had met all of the association's standards. In WASC's technical terms, "reaffirmation" of accreditation was deferred until the spring of 1995. "You have turned the corner, but you are not yet down the block," quipped one senior WASC official.

When the Western Association of Schools and Colleges visiting team assembled in October 1991, La Sierra University had been inde-

pendent just 14 months. New letterhead, spotlighting its new name—La Sierra University—had been distributed only two months earlier. It is not surprising that La Sierra's 1991 self-study report began with the question, "Who are we?" In many ways the institution seems newborn, yet it has a 70-year past.

Looking at the school's past is one way to begin answering questions about its present—and future. Founded as La Sierra Academy in 1922, the school became Southern California Junior College in 1927, and La Sierra College in 1939. It received accreditation as a four-year college in 1946. These stages of growth are unusual; La Sierra's rise to an independent accredited university, however, is a saga without equal.

Situated in an ethnically and culturally diverse region, "LSC," as it is still fondly remembered by many alumni, grew quickly. Academic programs flourished—especially those offered by departments whose courses were medical school prerequisites, and those that contributed employees to the church's growing educational system. By 1965, La Si-

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erra College boasted a graduate division and the faculty were cultivating an institutional vision that had already birthed graduate programs in more than half a dozen fields.

Through the middle 1960s, academic relationships with Loma Linda University were established. Seeking to convert Loma Linda University from a health-sciences institution to a full-scale university, Loma Linda's leaders pressed for merger with La Sierra College, which occurred in 1967. For the next 23 years, the initials "LSC" identified the "La Sierra Campus" of Loma Linda University.

The union between the two institutions was not without its tensions. The geographical distance between La Sierra and Loma Linda was a minor irritant; the sense that a distinctive ethos prevailed on each campus proved more problematic. Differences in governance styles, salaries, and faculty expectations regarding teaching and research complicated the efforts of many thoughtful persons to galvanize the two campuses into one "university." By the late 1980s, many leaders concluded that consolidation of all university programs in Loma Linda would be the most prudent use of resources and the most promising means to achieve the vision of "university" sought for two decades.

But this meant closing La Sierra's operations, moving a portion of them to Loma Linda, and financing the construction of new facilities there by selling the La Sierra campus and its more than 300 acres of undeveloped farm

land. Such ideas drew fierce opposition from alumni, parents, current and prospective students, and other supporters of La Sierra. The La Sierra faculty in particular struggled to see how their programs and students could benefit from geographic relocation to a more congested campus—albeit one with newer facilities. The potential for productive relationships with Loma Linda faculty was appealing to a few faculty at La Sierra, but most saw Loma Linda's professional pursuits as tangential to La Sierra's academic orientation. These

La Sierra faculty were among those most vocal in their opposition, and consequently La Sierra became the target of severe criticism from those promoting consolidation.

Unification—as consolidation was optimistically labeled—occupied the center stage of university affairs from 1986 until January 1989, when university trustees abandoned the idea after determining the venture to be too expensive. Two months later the Western Association

of Schools and Colleges (WASC) announced, following a site visit, that LLU's accreditation had been placed on probation.

The university's failure to pass WASC inspection was blamed in part on La Sierra's recalcitrance over consolidation. Moreover, since the professional programs in Loma Linda must meet the standards of the accrediting boards of their respective professional associations, WASC accreditation was viewed by Loma Linda as primarily La Sierra's responsibility. WASC's probationary sanction implied to Loma

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—The Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Linda that La Sierra had betrayed the university.

The shock inflicted by the announcement of probation on the institution already fatigued by three years of tumultuous consolidation debate induced another 18 months of convulsive behavior. With the present two-campus system under sanction, and consolidation rejected, the trustees sought to reorganize the university into two semi-autonomous units, each with a chancellor, and a president over the entire university. This model was pursued despite its obvious shortcoming of leaving the "university" undefined. It lasted only six months when then-president Norman Woods announced his resignation in January 1990, declaring the model unworkable. Complete separation of Loma Linda and La Sierra was seen as the only remaining choice.

Divorce came on August 25, 1990. Returned to its parent organization, Pacific Union Conference, La Sierra temporarily took the name "Loma Linda University Riverside." On March 7, 1991, its trustees adopted the name "La Sierra University," in order to distinguish it from Loma Linda while preserving some of its past heritage. Of course, the decision on its name also committed the trustees to developing the policies and resources required for La Sierra to fulfill the various responsibilities of a modern university.

Following the formal division of assets, Loma Linda University and La Sierra University were still under WASC's probationary sanction. While on probation, accreditation continued for both institutions. The problems that had led to probation were not the responsibility of either campus alone. The citations applied to the university as a whole prior to separation: administrative dysfunction, financial instability, faculty governance confusion, trustee conflict of interest, and salary inequity.

Several of WASC's concerns, such as lack of trustee autonomy and the incompatibility of the campuses' salary scales, had been identified 10 years before by WASC as issues the

university could not ignore. Thus, separated, each institution needed to respond to the accrediting commission's citations as though they applied uniquely to it. And each institution needed to demonstrate that it met WASC's accreditation standards independently.

The 1991 WASC team quickly saw La Sierra for what it is—a university in the state of becoming. Nevertheless, the team found that significant progress had been made toward addressing the issues that had led to probation. "There is an energy on campus that is driving the machinery of change," the team wrote. "LSU . . . has a new name, . . . a new mission statement. The faculty, staff, students, and administrators appear to be empowered to continue the growth and development of their new university."

WASC judged that separation from Loma Linda University had been good for La Sierra. "Thus, while several of the concerns that led to probation persist," the commission's executive secretary wrote, "they do so in a very changed environment."

The WASC report is sprinkled with recommendations and suggestions for improving and strengthening operations. The team reminded La Sierra that major attention still needs to be given to strategic and financial planning, faculty salaries, support for faculty scholarship and research, and the adequacy of extended campus programs. But they commended La Sierra's vibrancy of character, strong tradition of service, spirit of open inquiry, and high regard for quality teaching. They saw the university as "a regional and even national model in the area of student diversity." Support systems that promote student learning were noted. And the school's honors program was lauded as "a jewel in the crown of the institution."

What makes a university? WASC makes no distinction in its standards among institutes, colleges, or universities. There is no

checklist against which to measure institutional stature and thereby select an appropriate name or category. An institution is a university if it behaves like one. Universities generally have stiffer admissions standards, engage in more extensive professional service to their various communities, foster more varied scholarship among their faculty, and offer a broader range of graduate programs than colleges do.

In all of these areas La Sierra University has an impressive record. It has raised admissions standards from a high school GPA of 2.0 to 2.5. Recent freshman classes have had more students electing the honors program and fewer placed in developmental courses. The self-study report of the university prepared for WASC detailed the extensive public service LSU provides to the Adventist constituency, the general public, and local schools and colleges. La Sierra has been the site of national events like the Claude Gordon Brass Camp and the national competition of the United States Sports Acrobatics Federation. The WASC team praised three facilities for their significant contribution to the university's culture: the World Museum of Natural History, the Brandstater Gallery of Art, and the Stahl Center for World Mission.

Since their inception in the mid 1960s, La Sierra's graduate programs have produced nearly 700 graduate degrees, more than 80 of which are at the doctoral level. And in the most recent three years its 100-plus faculty, of

whom 76 percent hold the doctorate or terminal degree in their field, have raised their combined annual scholarly output from 89 to 140 professional publication and presentations, including books, papers, and artistic performances and exhibitions.

But WASC has challenged La Sierra University "to come up a little higher." In the spring of 1995, when WASC returns for a special visit, La Sierra expects to be able to report a 15-percent increase in enrollment, with a full-time equivalent student body of nearly 1,300; the achievement of a balanced budget of approximately \$16 million; increases in faculty salaries, approaching parity with those of similar institutions in Southern California; invigorated faculty and graduate-level scholarship; and a well-focused vision of La Sierra University's niche in Adventist higher education.

The university's confidence that it can meet these goals was bolstered by the September 28, 1992, report in *U.S. News and World Report*. For the third straight year, La Sierra was listed among the top universities in the nation, based on measures of perceived prestige and factors such as ACT/SAT scores of entering freshmen, percentage of faculty with Ph.D.'s, financial investment per student, and rate of graduation. After citing the 25 top universities, the report included a list of 179 of "the best of the rest." La Sierra University was one of only two Adventist institutions appearing on that list.