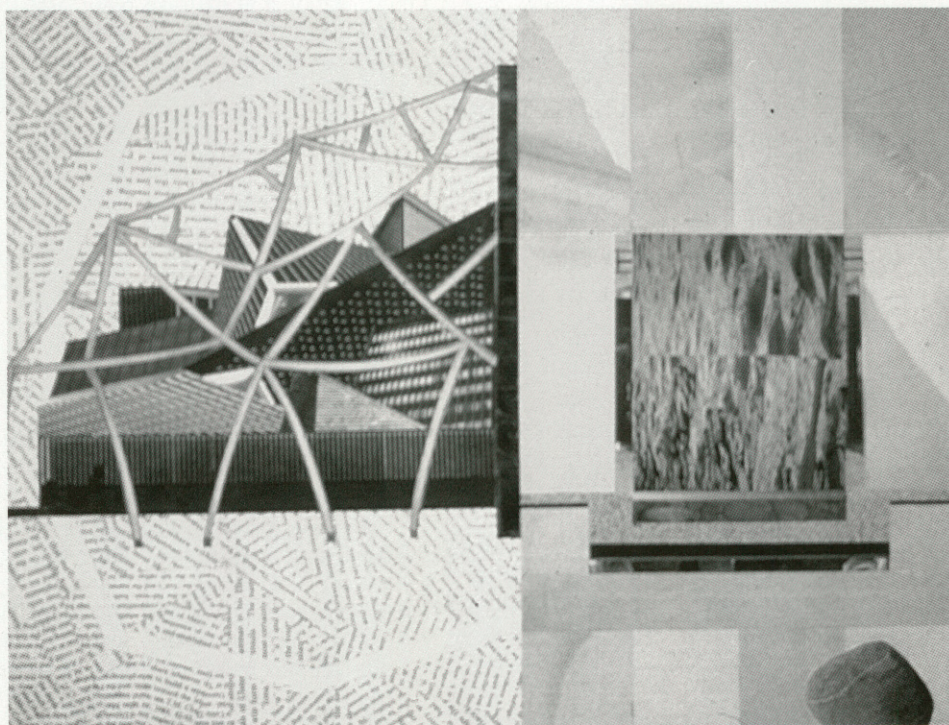


Creative Designs for Higher Education



"English" by Thomas Morphis | COLLAGE, 1998

THE DISTRIBUTED UNIVERSITY

HAVING OUR CAKE AND EATING IT, TOO

By J. Mailen Kootsey

Academic administrators of Adventist colleges and universities constantly walk a narrow ridge between the abyss of poor quality and failed accreditation, on one side, and the chasm of budget overruns, on the other. Tuition is the primary source of

income and budget shortages encourage more open enrollment to get a few more students and dollars. Open enrollment, on the other hand, tends to dilute academic excellence. Administrators want to build the reputation and academic quality of their campuses, but drops in enrollment of only a few students can put a faculty salary, department, or program at risk.

Two examples from my own recent experience illustrate the pull of the opposing forces. A department of computer science and information systems needed a new chair. Because the department offered masters as well as bachelors degrees, the minimum requirements for candidates included having a doctorate as well as some administrative experience. The supply of doctorally trained computer scientists in the Church is meager. What's worse, we were only able to offer a maximum salary thousands of dollars less than graduates with bachelors degrees from the same department found in industry. Why would anyone want to subject themselves (and their families, if they were married) to another four to six years of study, research, and graduate student's income to qualify for this job, as well as a cut in pay?

In the past, colleges could appeal to altruism: Serve your Church for a low salary, and your family's essential financial needs will be met in full—health care, your children's education, retirement, and so on. Now these "benefits" have been trimmed to balance budgets and Adventist colleges and universities are moving toward market-based salary scales. The dean or academic vice president looking to fill the vacant chair position is thus faced with the difficult constraints of few candidates, low salary, and high academic requirements.

A second example is a basic science department in a medical school. Two or three decades ago, the principal expectation for a faculty member in this department was to teach and to do it well. Research was welcomed, but not required. Times have changed. Now research is mandatory for the medical faculty member to keep courses lively and current. Where does the money come from to train faculty in the latest research techniques and provide adequate space and core facilities? Because faculty members are already teaching significant loads, it is not easy to add retraining, research, and grant writing as additional responsibilities.

Recognizing that no new source of money is on the horizon for North American Adventist colleges and

universities, several writers have suggested consolidation to increase campus efficiency. A 1994 article by Myron Widmer reported on presentations at a North American Division Board of Higher Education meeting. At that meeting, Fritz Guy suggested consolidation for better campus efficiency and Peter Bath made a similar suggestion for centralization.¹ In 1997, *Spectrum* printed a debate: Should the fourteen colleges and universities in the United States and Canada merge into two? Frank Knittel spoke in favor of the merger: Present facilities are not being used to capacity, physical plants are in decline, broad admission policies are lowering academic standards, and faculty are being underpaid because of weak budgets. Consolidation would increase campus efficiency and address these issues, he argued. Lawrence Geraty wrote that merger would not work: Students want to stay near home, union boards and loyal alumni could not accept the loss of their colleges, and constituencies would not give up local control. The change from the present situation would be too abrupt.²

The Adventist academic administrator must choose between conflicting options: To stay separate and risk survival, or attempt consolidation and risk failing at the attempt. Fortunately, there is now a third possibility available to Adventist colleges and universities through technological developments: the distributed university. There is a way to link campuses and services to achieve the benefits of both the multicampus and consolidated models—having our cake and eating it, too!

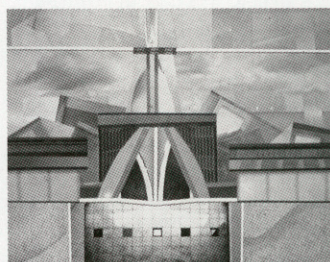
The idea of the distributed university is suggested by analogy with a similar development in the technology itself: distributed computing. A conventional computer is composed of a processor (CPU), memory (RAM), and storage devices such as hard disks. When more computational power is needed, each of these components can be increased in size. The processor can be replaced by a faster processor, more memory can be added, and additional or larger storage devices added. There are limitations to the expansion that can be achieved by this method, however. Processor speed can only be increased up to a limit set by current technology. Also, technology sets limits to the amount of internal memory and storage devices that can be added.

The advent of high-speed networking has opened new possibilities for linking computer components. Networking was originally invented to connect one computer to another and has developed to provide many services, such as electronic mail and the worldwide web. It was realized later that networks could also connect computer components themselves. A high-speed network could be used to connect a hard disk at one loca-

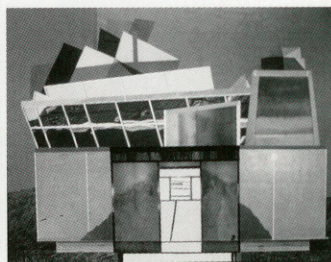
tion to a processor at another location, for example. Even multiple processors could be connected together by network to contribute to the same task. As long as the network connections are fast enough, a user sitting at a terminal or workstation would not even realize that some of the hardware participating in the active task is located many feet or even many miles away. Once this concept was hard to visualize; now, however, wide use of the web has made it a familiar experience.

A distributed university can be built by combining

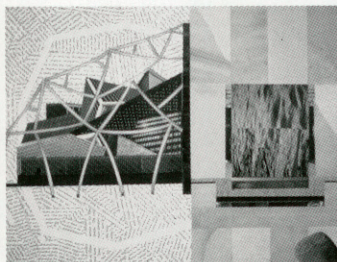
several existing college and university campuses into a consortium that uses high-speed data networks and other electronic forms of communication along with policies that encourage intercampus sharing. Administrative and academic functions can be subdivided into shared and local activities. Through sharing, functions do not have to be duplicated on each campus and economies of scale can be realized. Some functions could be provided locally, but there would be room for each campus to develop a unique personality and to tailor its



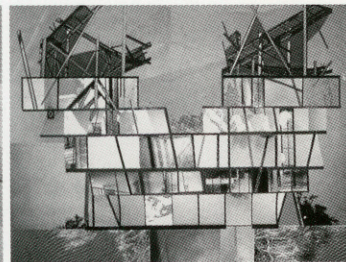
"Religion Chapel" by Thomas Morphis



"Art" by Thomas Morphis

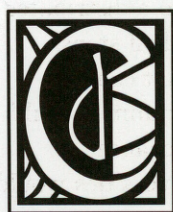


"English" by Thomas Morphis



"Library" by Thomas Morphis

Reflecting the Vitality, Optimism, and Ultimate Creative Excellence of God's Character on a Christian Liberal Arts Campus



Can a Christian liberal arts college determine what its buildings will express regarding its spiritual and educational philosophy? Just as an individual's faith is expressed by striving toward excellence in all areas—spiritual, mental, and physical—can a college's buildings be seen as a physical interpretation of its commitment to aesthetic excellence? As majestic Gothic cathedrals expressed the faith of an earlier culture, as Frank Gehry's new Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Spain) is being heralded as the first great building of the twenty-first century, can the architecture of a campus for higher education make a strong aesthetic and philosophical statement of contemporary experience and timeless spiritual truths?

Pacific Union College art professor Thomas Morphis asked those questions in 1998 and answered them with a series of collages informed by Deconstructivist architects Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Liebeskind, and the team known as Coop Himmelblau. Although Morphis said

he did not expect the college actually to construct any architecturally radical new structures, he did view the collages as a way of suggesting how a Christian liberal arts campus of truly contemporary, extremely innovative structures might appear. His intention was to stimulate viewers of the artworks to broaden their thinking regarding the architectural possibilities for creating a college environment that truly fosters inspiration, exploration, and discovery.

With a Summer Faculty Research Grant funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts he produced a dozen exterior elevations for structures to house various campus disciplines. The project has been exhibited both at Pacific Union College and at Walla Walla College.

Discernment is a primary theme in Morphis' work. He strives for "discernment of spatial relationships through the prolonged, receptive visual observation of shifting colors, lines and shapes; discernment of boundaries where multiple interpretations can simultaneously coexist." He says these types of visual, formal concerns also serve as metaphors for the unhurried, open-minded study and reflection that are needed to discern or understand life's relationships, realities, and truths.

"As man is a reflection of God the Creator in whose image he is made, each work a Christian artist produces is a reflection of himself and of his faith. Through this project I hope to reflect the vitality, optimism, and ultimate creative excellence of God's character," Morphis concludes.

offerings to local needs.

A large part of the administration of a college campus is fundamentally data management. Examples of administrative data management include processing of student applications for admission and financial aid, class registration, student accounts and payments, purchasing, payroll, human resources, student academic records, class scheduling, room assignments, bookstore ordering and sales, and food service management. All of these activities should now be implemented by computer systems, preferably linked together on a campus for good overall management. All of these services can be provided to a campus by remote computers with appropriate networking.

One computer facility could thus provide data management services for several campuses, with a genuine opportunity for economies of scale in computer personnel, hardware, and software. For some activities, such as application for admission and registration, and grade reporting, students would interact directly with the information system. Other activities would require local personnel on each campus to make decisions and deliver services, but the expensive hardware and software and scarce skilled personnel would not have to be duplicated. Keeping all documents in electronic form would also minimize the time and overhead required to process them. A well-designed information management system for a campus can also provide timely and essential summaries of performance as a basis for good administrative decisions.

A centralized data management system could serve several campuses without any local change in policy or practice. However, the central facility would be even more efficient if the administrations of the linked campuses would decide some issues together. Common standards for course numbers and finance account structure, for example, would greatly simplify the operation of the central system and impose only modest limitations on the local campus.

Network and communication technology also make it possible to share academic resources between campuses. Several methods are available for delivering education at a distance. Audio and video links can connect remote groups of students to a live professor and class. Complete courses can be delivered by computer network to individual students on their own schedule: assignments, quizzes, homework, and even tests. Electronic mail and threaded discussions stimulate communication within a class. All these technologies are known by Adventist colleges and universities, but usage has been limited to date.

In the distributed university, each campus can offer both locally taught and shared courses. General education and lower division courses can be taught economically by resident faculty because of their larger class sizes. Upper division and specialty courses usually have small enrollments and can be shared between campuses through technology links.

While the campuses of a distributed university enjoy the benefits of economies of scale in data management and classes, there is room for unique qualities on each campus. Locally taught classes, student services such as residence halls, and campus activities can all be unique and chosen to give character to a participating campus. Enough individuality can exist to nurture alumni loyalty and support. Special majors can be offered to meet local needs. Students would have a campus to choose in their geographical region. The small campus atmosphere could be maintained along with the academic advantages of a much larger university.

In summary, the distributed university concept could strengthen the financial and academic status of higher education campuses in the Adventist system. Cooperation between campuses would be required, but individuality could continue. Transition to a distributed university consortium could occur in gradual steps, avoiding the trauma of a drastic and abrupt change. Most important, better educational opportunities could be offered to Adventist students and the chances of survival for the Church's colleges and universities would be significantly improved.

Notes and References

1. *Adventist Review*, Apr. 4, 1994, 15-17.
2. Knittel, "Merge 14 North American Colleges Into Two? Yes!" *Spectrum* (Jan. 1997) vol. 26, no. 1, 20-28; Geraty, "Merge 14 North American Colleges Into Two? No!" *ibid.*, 29-35.

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