

Point/Counterpoint in the Discussion of Adventist Higher Education

By Steve Pawluk and Don Williams

The wind blows where it wills, but you can't see it. (John 3:8)

Critical challenges remain to Seventh-day Adventist higher education that, if ignored, will compromise the core reason for our education ministry. Among these are the following:

- The risk of institutions sliding into secularism, due particularly to rapidly changing institutional demographics (increased percentages of non-SDA faculty and students) and perceived financial exigency
- The lack of awareness and/or ownership of the philosophy of SDA education by some administrators and faculty
- The lack of defined mission-focused paradigms for non-traditional SDA higher education institutions, such as those with a specific evangelistic or community thrust.¹

So begins the report accepted by Annual Council on Wednesday, October 12, 2005. This *Final Report* created by the General Conference Commission on Higher Education was the third version of the committee's work and did not sound as dismissive as its predecessors. But our experiences on two Seventh-day Adventist campuses that are very different in organization and mission lead us to suggest that the future of Adventist higher education may be much more optimistic than indicated in the General Conference reports.

The first such General Conference report, in 2003, did not fully address some of the initial terms of reference voted by the Annual Council when the commission was created in 2000, according to Andrea Luxton, General Conference associate director of education. That first report did not adequately enable denominational leaders, especially some of those outside of North America, to regulate institutions or programs in ways that ensured their Adventist mission focus or that supported quality educational offerings.

A second draft was produced in 2004 that provided increased leverage, but it did not sufficiently recognize the complexity of the higher education context in areas of the world where Adventist institutions of higher education have developed significant autonomy and have strong external accreditation mechanisms.

The 2005 *Final Report* attempted to speak to higher education in the world church, providing direction and options for regulation through institutional accreditation by the Adventist Accrediting Agency (and for theological programs by the International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education [IBMTE]). These bodies would play a broader role for nascent and non-accredited institutions and a more mission-focused role with accredited and well-established institutions.

In a meeting with the chief academic officers of North American Adventist colleges and universities in November, Luxton made a point of saying that the *Final Report* "is not policy," but that it makes recommendations to division leaders with the goal of stimulating increased discussion between higher education institutions and division and union leaders.

It is important, she stated, for church leaders to understand how they can support the mission of higher education, and equally important for colleges and universities to understand the mission and goals of the divisions, as well as the concerns of denominational leaders.

Within the North American academic community there have been many concerns about precisely what denominational leaders were proposing in the various versions of the report and with the creation of the IBMTE. A reading of the various versions of the General Conference commission reports shows that the writings of Robert Benne, James T. Burtchaell, and George Marsden on the secularization of religious education were influential.² Those authors identified a number of significant factors purported to lead to institutional secularization:

- Increasing numbers of students from other denominations/faith persuasions.
- Diminishing emphasis on education for ministry.
- Gradual disappearance of other expressions of the initial religious vision.
- A growing percentage of faculty from other religious backgrounds.
- Increasing numbers of board members not connected to the sponsoring church/denomination.
- Diminishing financial contributions to the institution by the founding denomination.
- Poorly trained board members who do not take their institutional leadership seriously.

We are very concerned that constituents and at least some denominational leaders have appeared to accept this model uncritically. There also appears to be a serious lack of opportunity for educators from Adventist colleges and universities to engage with church leadership in the formation of these documents.

These factors make us wonder if an underlying assumption that unity of mission in Adventist education should be apparent in uniformity of approach "encouraged" by church oversight has been a driving force behind these reports.

We believe that more conversation is needed about the apparent readiness to believe that students in Adventist colleges are becoming increasingly secular. We need to have a Bible-based discussion of what it means to be spiritual in today's world. There should be an open exchange of ideas about models of Christian education that might serve our constituents well. These are especially timely topics for consideration by all who are interested in the mission of our church and in Christian higher education.

With the future of our educational institutions under consideration, and in view of the important service that Adventist higher education provides to students, the Church, and society, what is needed is vastly more conversation, more seeking of varied viewpoints from an increasingly diverse population of church members, and increased opportunity for informed public comment.



The View from Two Schools

Experiences at our own institutions, Southern Adventist University, near Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences, in Orlando, Florida, compel us to wonder why allegations of secularization at our Adventist colleges and universities seem to be so believable. The students and faculty with whom we interact have actually provided us much cause for encouragement regarding the Church's present and future.

Although these two institutions of higher learning have approached Adventist education from very different directions, they both foster serious commitment to spiritual development on their campuses. The student populations of the two schools also differ from each other in a number of other ways, including the percentages of students affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Yet students from both institutions have demonstrated a very different reality from the allegedly increasing secularization of students about which we hear.

For example:

- Our undergraduate students are required to enroll in religion and Bible courses taught by Seventh-day Adventist professors who are dedicated to Jesus Christ and to the Seventh-day Adventist mission.
- Assessments by external tests and internal measurements indicate that the overwhelming majority of freshmen chose to attend Southern Adventist University precisely because of its spiritual emphasis. In fact, spiritual growth is consistently the primary reason given for attending the university.
- Similarly, in a survey of fall 2003 enrollees, the most frequent reason given (58 percent) for attending Florida Hospital College was its Christian orientation. On the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory[®], students gave faculty a score of 5.63 on a 7-point Likert scale in response to the item, "The faculty show concern for the spiritual development of the student."
- We witness undergraduates participating in both required service learning and in voluntary civic engagement. Our students repeatedly indicate that they want to be actively engaged by their church, not merely entertained. Student response to the recent hurricane devastation has been high and sustained. Students at Southern are involved in our annual

Martin Luther King Day of Service activities. Others teach English as a Second Language in the community; some are helping plant a church; and others volunteer at various community-based agencies. At Florida Hospital College, students participate in a prison ministry and are engaged in a Big Brother/Big Sister program at Orlando Junior Academy.

- Eighty-nine Southern students served as student missionaries or task force volunteers in twenty-six countries during the 2003–2004 academic year. Last year, Florida Hospital College sponsored two mission trips, one to Russia during Christmas break, and one to Honduras during spring break. Southern students engaged in similar projects during Thanksgiving and spring breaks.
- Students at both institutions form and engage in small groups for study and prayer.
- At Southern, administrators have had students walk into their offices, either spontaneously or by appointment, to say hello and pray for them as they provide leadership for the university.
- At Florida Hospital College, a voluntary Friday evening vespers regularly attracts 100–120 students.

We wish that those concerned about the future of our denomination would have an opportunity to meet and work with some of our students. Not only do our students cause us to consider the future with optimism, but they also motivate us to wonder whether there are multiple models of Adventist higher education that can stimulate and encourage spiritual and academic growth among our young people.

Some Questions

- Is the concern regarding allegedly declining spirituality at our colleges and universities perhaps based on too narrow a definition of spirituality? In other words, are orthodoxy and cultural compliance both accurate and sufficient proxies for spirituality?
- Given the mission of our education system, might the benefits of enrolling non-Adventist students in our schools actually outweigh the feared risks, as long as the full-time faculty and the administration are committed Christians and Seventh-day Adventists?
- Is there room—or even a welcoming attitude—within the denomination for more than one paradigm for Adventist higher education?

We do not believe that we can fully answer even one of these questions in this one article, nor are we attempting to disparage the work of the commission. However, we would like to broaden the conversation and approach the question of the spiritual mission of our colleges and universities from a slightly different angle.

The Construct: Spirituality

There are many ways to define and measure spirituality. The most convenient way is to do so in behavioral terms. In the research literature, it is typically termed “religiosity.” This construct involves assessing those measures that are most accessible or most easily quantified, such as attendance at religious meetings or the number of times one prays or studies the Bible during a week.

It is our conviction that traditional ways of defining and measuring spirituality may not be the best, or at least only, way to capture or encourage the spiritual experience of today’s college-age students.

We recognize that an increasing number of students appears to be less than enchanted with some institutional requirements intended to foster spirituality. Many students are less apt to accept uncritically a theological or doctrinal explanation from their pastors or professors than did their counterparts in previous generations. Students appear increasingly to question traditional *applications* of biblical teachings, and some may be less captivated by traditional *methods* of expressing devotion.

A review of the newly published *Valuegenesis—Ten Years Later* would seem to support this observation.³ But didn’t Jesus foretell a time when, instead of debating the correct location or format of spiritual expression, “true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23, 24)?

Our general sense is that the students at Florida Hospital College and Southern Adventist University are, in fact, as spiritual, and perhaps even more so, than their predecessors. They have simply found different ways to develop and express their spiritual journey. We have found our students to be very intentional and thoughtful about their spiritual and theological development, and we imagine that our colleagues at other Adventist institutions of higher education could offer similar testimony.

Our students’ preferences for expression and experience may, in some cases, be quite different from those

of previous generations, and this sometimes makes it difficult for prior generations to see the substance behind their expression. We may be evaluating the religiosity on the outside of the cup while missing the genuine cleansing taking place on the inside (Matt. 23).

High interest in spiritual matters among our students, especially those that focus on relationships and social justice, also aligns with the recent study of student spirituality being done by UCLA.⁴ To us, this finding seems to align well with the mission statement expressed by Jesus in Luke 4:18, 19.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

The initial results of the UCLA study indicate that students in the United States are less religious in the traditional sense, but increasingly interested in meaningful spiritual matters.

It may be helpful, therefore, for educational and denominational leaders to consider carefully what is meant by the term *spiritual* so we don’t inadvertently miss an important opportunity to encourage our students in their walks with God.

There are two biblical passages that might help us in that regard. The first is Luke 4:18, 19, as noted above. Spirit-filled students (as well as faculty, administrators, and alumni) would presumably participate in the same mission mentioned in Luke 4. Although this text takes a religiosity perspective of the Christian life, it very significantly moves the expression of spirituality from an inward focus to a community-oriented focus, very much as Jesus did in Matthew 23 and 25.

Rather than measuring how well one engages in religious activities and programs for personal improvement, this text suggests that spirituality consists of helping others grow and prosper. It speaks of providing hope to the oppressed in our communities, bringing good news to the poor, and proclaiming the good news of God’s grace.

Religious freedom, physical and spiritual sight, and freedom from oppressive circumstances are identified as

part of the proclamation of the Lord's favor. Spirituality is measured less by worship attendance than by giving people of our communities a glimpse of the Kingdom of God and its positive impact on their lives.

The second passage that might inform our definition of spirituality is Galatians 5:22, 23. The apostle Paul recommends that we judge spirituality by more internal measures, that is, by looking for evidence of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in our personal being.

Although some may place more emphasis on the behavioral aspects of self-control and question the development of our youth in that regard, it might be more helpful to evaluate spirituality on our campuses on the basis of the presence of the full array of the fruits of the Spirit evidenced in the relationships on our campuses.

Perhaps it is time to recognize the spiritual renewal that is currently taking place on our campuses and work to support and encourage our young people as they seek to live the life of the Spirit in their relationships and social engagement.

More than One Blueprint?

The commission's preliminary report indicated that the "analyses and the rating of institutions done by the schools and by the division consultations" indicate that "the increasing ratio of non-Seventh-day Adventists students is impacting some schools unfavorably" (3). It is worth noting that the New Testament reports that the established church appears to have reached quite the same conclusion regarding Jesus' ministry. Perhaps it is important to review our mission and identify the absolutely core components of a Seventh-day Adventist educational system.

An examination of the history of higher education within the Adventist Church reveals both an evolution and resultant diversity in the types of education offered. The evolution has included a move beyond offering majors only in careers needed primarily for denominational employment toward a wider slate of options that allows graduates not only to serve the Lord by working in the Church, but also to promote the gospel of grace by infiltrating many career paths and job options in their communities.

This trend has come in response not only to the

market forces that we encounter as we recruit students, but also to our call to be leaven, salt, or light, depending on which simile one might choose to apply.

The diversity of educational frameworks now includes the mission school concept. A number of educational institutions outside the North American Division open their doors (and are able to keep them open) to a wide variety of students, including some who do not come from an Adventist or even Christian background. Fewer than 5 percent of the students come from Adventist homes.

In many countries, the Adventist educational program may be the most effective evangelistic tool available to the Church. One simply needs to visit Ekamai in Thailand or the Adventist school system in New Guinea to realize the importance of nontraditional Adventist education.

Within the North American Division, Florida Hospital College also illustrates how the gospel can be successfully promoted by a Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher education with a non-Adventist student enrollment, which comprises 65 percent of the total student body.

A large number of non-Adventist students may not provide the same environment as a school where the ratio is reversed. However, which of those students would the Church not want exposed to the Bible classes and Christian environment that this type of education offers? When Ellen White proposed that Adventist education be evangelistic, was her proposal only to be applied to the salvation of our own children, who might not be in as great a need of a physician?

More importantly, is there not room in the Adventist educational system for more than one blueprint or more than one evaluation of institutional effectiveness? Should not the Church offer both the traditional campus milieu and the mission school concept? There may as well be other models yet to be devised, so that students and parents can have choices and so that the work of educational evangelism can benefit the greatest number and variety of people.

Just as Peter was called to witness to the Jews and Paul was called to the Gentiles—although both seemed at least somewhat effective in evangelizing both groups—might there not be significant benefit in encouraging Adventist institutions of higher education to exercise a significant amount of free-

dom in selecting their students and deciding how they encourage faith development?

It may be worth empirically investigating the following issues in this regard:

- How does the ratio of Adventist and non-Adventist students enrolled in our institutions of higher education affect our mission when the faculty members are clearly committed Christians and Seventh-day Adventists?
- How does the ratio of Adventist and non-Adventist full-time faculty members employed by our colleges and universities affect our mission when the curriculum is clearly and intentionally Christian and Seventh-day Adventist?
- Might there be a variety of supporting missions for Adventist institutions that take different approaches to meeting the primary mission of proclaiming the gospel and introducing students to Jesus Christ so that his Spirit can effectively do his work among a diversity of communities and people?
- What are the absolutely necessary observable identifiers of a curriculum that is both Christian and Seventh-day Adventist?

Conclusion

The ideas proposed in this article do not overlook the concerns expressed in the commission's report. The Church should be concerned if a particular educational institution has lost its mission and/or vision and steps should be taken to assist that institution based on core Adventist values and the needs of the community in which the institution is located.

However, it would be distressing to fail to recognize the positive impact of our institutions of higher education and to overlook—or fail to recognize and support—the wonderful work of the Spirit in our student's lives in Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities in the United States and around the globe, just because their experiences do not fit a particular construct or follow the trajectory of our own experience or expectations.

The institutions represented by the two authors of this article represent two successful and legitimate—yet quite different—paradigms in Adventist education. Our experience with our students leads us to concur with Trans-European Division president Bertil

Wiklander, who, according to the online *Review* report of the 2004 *Preliminary Report*, “pleaded for recognition of ‘varieties of experience’ around the world.”

Certainly, a broader interchange of ideas among church administrators and the faculty and staff of institutions of higher education will enrich and expand the directions that we might ultimately choose. This, in turn, will enable us to serve more effectively *all* seekers of truth.

Notes and References

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Steve Pawluk is senior vice president for academic administration at Southern Adventist University, near Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Don Williams is senior vice president for academics at Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences, in Orlando, Florida.

