



Accreditation Blues | BY BONNIE DWYER

It was a WOW letter. That is how both church officials and faculty described the July 5, 2011, letter from the president of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) to La Sierra University President Randal Wisbey. WOW.

With its notice of special concern—an expression meaning, *your accreditation is in jeopardy unless specific actions are taken immediately*—it set expectations for major change at the bylaws level in creating an independent governing board. And then it closed with a request for a meeting between WASC leadership and representatives of the institution, including the president, provost, and full governing board within ninety days.

Just three months before, LSU had experienced what can only be called a WOW motion. At the April 4, 2011, meeting of the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) Board, the site team report with its recommendation for a full 5-year term of accreditation for La Sierra University was set to be voted. But there was a group of four who doubted that it would pass, so they drafted an alternative motion. “Although La Sierra University has deviated from the philosophy and objectives of Seventh-day Adventist education, it is moved that the university be granted an extension of accreditation to December 31, 2012, in order for the university to act upon its commitments and implement changes and enhancements related to the recommendations set forth in the AAA Team report.” The alternate motion passed and shocked the university with its phrase “deviated from the philosophy and objectives of Seventh-day Adventist education.”

Now the question is whether or not the university can respond to and win the confidence of both accrediting agencies. Can the board changes proposed by WASC help to heal the relationship with the AAA? Can the curriculum recommendations of AAA meet the standards of WASC?

The WASC letter also called for steps to be taken “to ensure the autonomy of La Sierra as an educational institution separate from and supported by the church.”

Separate from and supported by the church may sound impossible, but there is precedent in the relationships that the church has with its hospitals and also with “independent” ministries like Adventist-laymen’s Services & Industries (ASI) or Amazing Facts. It is not only feasible but maybe even desirable. Perhaps this is an opportunity to clarify the relationship between the denomination and the university in a positive way.

La Sierra, like all Adventist institutions of higher education, needs the approval of both the regional and the Adventist accreditors. Students cannot get loans for unaccredited colleges. Graduate and professional schools—such as Loma Linda University—cannot accept students with degrees from unaccredited colleges. To lose WASC accreditation would be the end of LSU. The trials and tribulations of Atlantic Union College bear adequate testimony to that. But neither can LSU afford to lose its connection with the church. The philosophy of Adventist education is the core of its identity. As North American Division President Dan Jackson put it, “La Sierra is God’s school.”

There is historical precedence for optimism. The 1930s-era decision to seek accreditation made possible the development of Adventist medical education and health care. The changes that WASC is requiring will strengthen the university’s structure, just as the changes that AAA is suggesting will strengthen the university’s mission.

With deadlines approaching, it will not take long for this to play out. I, for one, look forward to seeing how God will turn this into something grand. He can take this moment and turn it into a WOW moment, not only for La Sierra, but for Adventist higher education. The accreditation blues will rock the house. ■