

KEYWORDS: Adventist education, demographic shifts, downward enrollment, changing the trajectory, new business models

# Adventist Education

## IN NORTH AMERICA

BY RICHARD HART

There are few things more prized by this church than our health and educational systems. While our theology is a unique blessing that we value internally, it is our health professionals, hospitals, and schools that interface with the world and make us known, both in this country and globally. They are both steeped in more than a century of culture and practice, giving rise to generations of committed Adventists.

With so many decades of success, it is difficult to accept the need for change; yet internationally many of our hospitals are now struggling, while here in the US, many of our schools are closing. The comparison is ironic, Adventist hospitals are flourishing in the US, but struggling abroad; while most schools are flourishing abroad, they are struggling in this country. Our global educational system now has 8,000 schools, 118 colleges and universities, and 1.8 million students attending each day. We now have seven

schools of medicine, five dental schools and nearly 100 schools of nursing in the world, with more coming. But our experience here in the US is quite the opposite.

Changing the trajectory of our educational system in the US will be tough, particularly with our decentralized system of governance in the church. Our elementary and secondary schools are dying, church by church, conference by conference, and there seems to be little the collective body can do. And even our prized colleges and universities in this country, now down to thirteen, are fraying at the

edges and competing for students while they deal with shrinking budgets each year.

Times like these require some tough questions. Are schools critical to our church's growth, or even its survival? Is there a biblical mandate for an educational system, or is this primarily a recognition of the value of separateness and protecting our youth? Is the current tendency of

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| Total Enrollment |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |              |               |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
|                  | 2012         | 2013         | 2014         | 2015         | 2016         | 2017         | 2018         | 2019         | 2020         | 8 yr % Δ      |
| AHU              | 2671         | 2293         | 2090         | 1984         | 1912         | 1809         | 1705         | 1688         | 1802         | -32.5%        |
| AU               | 3551         | 3516         | 3418         | 3366         | 3349         | 3348         | 3407         | 3412         | 3171         | -10.7%        |
| BU               | 576          | 543          | 479          | 479          | 456          | 453          | 454          | 466          | 408          | -29.2%        |
| KC               | 981          | 880          | 761          | 732          | 759          | 825          | 839          | 814          | 763          | -22.2%        |
| LLU              | 4652         | 4729         | 4629         | 4512         | 4444         | 4451         | 4482         | 4462         | 4514         | -3.0%         |
| LSU              | 2393         | 2478         | 2510         | 2476         | 2372         | 2418         | 2356         | 2200         | 1976         | -17.4%        |
| OU               | 2019         | 1903         | 1924         | 1749         | 1797         | 1711         | 1636         | 1533         | 1414         | -30.0%        |
| PUC              | 1616         | 1678         | 1674         | 1587         | 1455         | 1235         | 1063         | 925          | 966          | -40.2%        |
| SAU              | 3319         | 3255         | 3335         | 3289         | 3146         | 3184         | 3102         | 3029         | 2730         | -17.7%        |
| SWAU             | 807          | 807          | 800          | 790          | 802          | 819          | 741          | 687          | 772          | -4.3%         |
| UC               | 881          | 911          | 886          | 903          | 893          | 868          | 832          | 813          | 764          | -13.3%        |
| WAU              | 1402         | 1185         | 1057         | 1044         | 1090         | 1069         | 1131         | 1078         | 968          | -31.0%        |
| WWU              | 1940         | 1920         | 1887         | 1840         | 1894         | 1825         | 1856         | 1864         | 1737         | -10.5%        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>     | <b>26808</b> | <b>26098</b> | <b>25450</b> | <b>24751</b> | <b>24369</b> | <b>24015</b> | <b>23604</b> | <b>22971</b> | <b>21985</b> | <b>-18.0%</b> |
| <b>YOY % Δ</b>   | <b>NA</b>    | <b>-2.6%</b> | <b>-2.5%</b> | <b>-2.7%</b> | <b>-1.5%</b> | <b>-1.5%</b> | <b>-1.7%</b> | <b>-2.7%</b> | <b>-4.3%</b> |               |

transitioning our schools and their student recruitment to be “Christian” schools, rather than specifically Adventist, the best path to survival? Through this method, are we sharing our message with a broader audience, or is it abandoning basic principles that God cannot bless? If the choice is closing vs. adapting, what is the best option? How would our church’s mission best be accomplished?

For those of us who watch these trends, the last decade has been ominous. While some of this is the result of the demographic bubble this country is experiencing, there are additional factors in our church beyond that. Despite valiant efforts to find Adventist students from everywhere possible, including public high schools, the downward enrollment in our colleges continues, with few exceptions. Some institutions have moved more aggressively into the Christian market and adult education, but most follow this slide, year after year.

The chart above shows these changes over the past eight years. The second chart graphs these changes even more clearly. Over the past decade we have dropped collectively in our colleges and universities from over 27,000 students in North America to around 22,000 this year. This is not sustainable. If broken out by undergraduate and graduate degrees, the biggest loss has

been in the undergraduate programs, with a 10.9% drop in the freshman class this past year alone. Not shown on this chart are the over 250 primary and secondary schools in North America that have permanently closed in the Adventist church over the past ten years. They were a critical pipeline for our colleges and are certainly part of this resulting decline.

Most of you will recognize the time-honored abbreviations. A few new ones: AHU is now AdventHealth University in Orlando, and BU is Burman University in Canada, or what used to be Canadian Union College. WAU is Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park.

If it is any consolation, these numbers are similar to many higher education institutions across the country, both public and private. There are dire national predictions about how many colleges will close in the next ten years. For many of these, closing is a business calculation, but for most churches, these changes strike at the heart of who we are and what we do. That is certainly true in the Adventist church.

Our college and university presidents formed the Association of Adventist Colleges and Universities some fifteen years ago, and we struggle with these numbers

regularly. Gordon Bietz, in retirement, assisted by the North American Division education leaders Larry Blackmer, and now Arne Nielsen, coordinate our brainstorming and initiatives. We have spent money on marketing, used consultants, prayed a lot, and considered various options. These efforts continue, as each institution seeks its own path to survival while also looking for collaborative techniques that are acceptable and offer the promise of success.

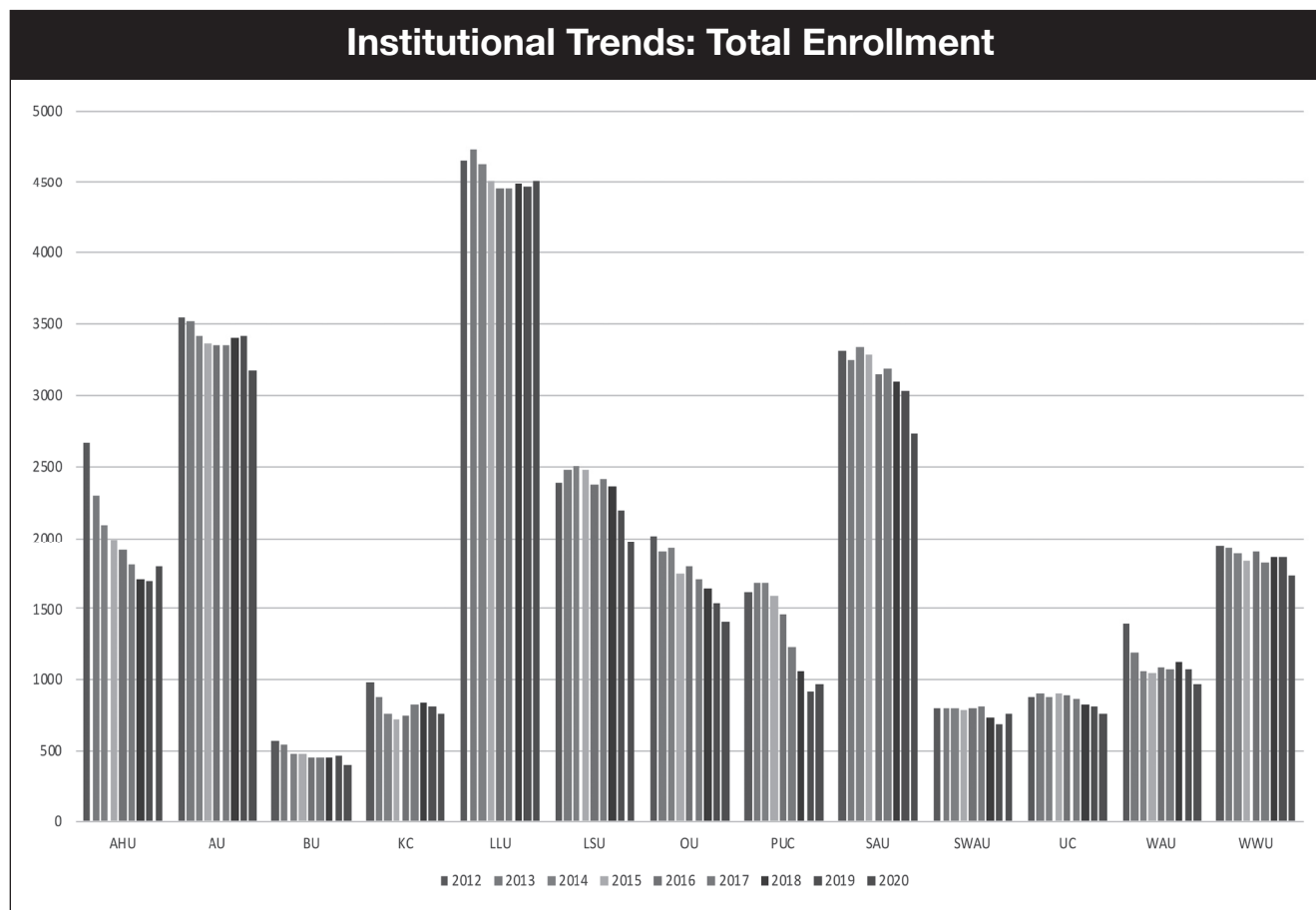
### Understanding the Trends

While the causes of the declines certainly vary by place and time, there are a few constants that have been identified. Cost is usually the primary reason given why more Adventist families do not avail themselves of our educational system, at all levels. That is certainly important, though this church has a long legacy of sacrifice for the common good, finding options for all students to make it through. Some of that is clearly lost in today's world. Cutting costs is not really an option, as our teachers at elementary, secondary, and even college

levels are already some of the lowest paid employees in the denomination. I find it a great travesty that we pay the least to those to whom we entrust our most valued assets—our own children. Something is wrong with that equation!

There are other variables that are equally important. Our church is one of the most diverse in the country. That is a good thing. We have grown most rapidly among new immigrants to this country, but it usually takes several generations for a newly arrived family to establish themselves enough financially to consider private education. Despite our educational emphasis, and proportionally large numbers of health professionals, a recent Pew report now shows Adventist members in this country are in the lower third of educational attainment when compared to other churches.

Another issue cited seems to be the lack of emphasis on Adventist education by our pastors. The majority of those entering the pastorate today are first generation Adventists, meaning they did not grow up through our educational system themselves. They became Adventists



as adults, so may have less proclivity to understand and promote Adventist education. While efforts are being made to change this, it is tough to create a deep commitment to something you are inheriting but have not experienced yourself. An additional burden they have is raising the expected subsidy from their church members to support their local school. It is also true that many times their own personal income does not allow them to send their own children to the local Adventist school.

A final consideration is the growing cultural acceptance by Adventist families to be comfortable sending their children to any quality institution, public or private, religious or not. Some can afford high-end institutions, while others utilize public options. The old fear of our young people “losing their way,” or finding the “wrong” marriage partner, seems to be of less concern today.

### **Possible Options For Change**

So are there solutions, or at least hope? Can we reverse these major trends that continue to close more schools every year? Let me suggest a few options I see emerging across the country.

#### **The “Christian” Option**

One trend gaining momentum is the increasing proportion of students of other faith traditions in our schools. This varies widely by institution, but the average among our colleges and universities in North America is now 40% of our students who are not Adventists. Some schools are higher and some lower, but all our schools are accepting more and more students from other faiths, including non-Christians, to meet their enrollment goals. The traditional view of this trend is one of unfortunate slippage away from an Adventist “haven” for our students.

But in other parts of the world, we have welcomed students from all backgrounds to our schools for years. We call them “mission” schools and are quite pleased with the results. Many national leaders had their beginning education in one of our schools and remain friendly throughout life to the church. Is it time to make our colleges in this country into “mission” schools and what does that mean?

If we buy into that reasoning, then we need to make sure our campus programming is prepared for this level of religious diversity. At Loma Linda, we have consciously said we need to recognize this, and plan spiritual activities that are winsome for all, including non-Christians. We require chapel attendance and advanced religion courses for all students, including in our doctoral programs. While a few will be baptized into our faith, we trust that all will have an opportunity to understand our values and beliefs and recommit to a higher level of spiritual life within their own cultures and traditions.

#### **Operating and Scholarship Endowments**

Another option that is being pursued by a few schools is to establish major endowment funds to support student scholarships and operations. My own *alma mater*, Upper Columbia Academy, near Spokane, Washington, is one of these. A group of loyal alumni established FoundationOne a decade ago and have succeeded in raising sufficient funds to now provide major scholarship support to needy students. They are now working closely with the school and conference to further this goal. It is probably too late for many of our secondary schools to do this, but I am reminded that the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, while the second-best time is today! I wish more of our alumni groups, at both the secondary and college level, would consider this long-term option for permanent

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protection of our schools' financial integrity and a way to keep our doors open for all desiring families.

### **Adventist Education “Systemness”**

Another question that comes up is the “slippage” that occurs after graduations—from primary school to academy, from academy to entering college, and even after college to graduate programs. Can we have a better awareness and encouragement to continue within the Adventist system? It seems some parents calculate their limited resources and are forced to answer the agonizing question of whether to send their child to an Adventist elementary school or academy or college, when they know they can't afford to do it all.

At Loma Linda we have sought to address this “linkage” a bit with our EXSEED program, initially funded by Tom and Vi Zapara. We have been bringing Adventist primary and secondary science teachers to our campus for a week during the summer to upgrade their teaching and science knowledge and skills. Over the past decade, this has benefited over 1,000 teachers, and we are now shifting it to a virtual platform to share even more broadly, including our international schools. We consider it both a way to strengthen our science education at all levels, as well as demonstrate the institutional options available as students progress.

Would it help to encourage young Adventist families at the beginning of their educational journey to see this whole educational pathway? This raises the question of how much should we market our Adventist educational system *collectively*, demonstrating our “pipeline” of quality education at all levels. Some of our other colleges have also developed programs for academy teachers to help maintain this pipeline. Should we all do more to market our collective system?

### **Work/Study Programs Once Again?**

Another strategy that I personally wish we could recreate is the work/study programs of the past. Many of us learned the value and responsibility of working while in schools that offered real labor, even at bargain wages, for each student. Most of our schools have drifted away from industries on campus, and have less opportunity to employ students. Can this be reversed? It seems that many times the school administration was not adept at running the business side of various enterprises, and they failed financially until they had to be closed. Is there a better way to manage these opportunities so they can be financially stable while also providing student labor?

### **Adventist Health System Linkages**

A final idea that has been explored is to develop more linkages with our Adventist health systems. Most of our hospitals in this country are thriving, so is there value in connecting the two systems—health care and education—in a way that can strengthen both. After all, our hospitals are always looking for quality Adventist employees, and our colleges continue to produce them. Some of our larger hospitals have developed management residency programs that recruit and train new graduates in health care, and this has been very successful. There has also been some support for schools within the sphere of influence of larger hospitals, but no grand plan has emerged. So far, these linkages have not been enough to save many of our schools who need more direct investment into operations.

### **Is It Worth It?**

Let me, then, circle back to the beginning. Is there a real reason for offering an Adventist “brand” of education? What are the value-adds that we believe we bring to the table? What is necessary to maintain these

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unique perspectives and character-building opportunities for our young people. I would like to suggest there are several incredibly valuable aspects of Adventist education that are hard to duplicate in other settings.

One of these is certainly the “protection” from secular influences that are hard to control otherwise. A few years of maturity usually equips a young mind with more perspective and balance to handle these exposures. While we certainly don’t need to “batten the hatches” quite like we did in the past, we can provide understanding and balance to protect during the most vulnerable years. There is no fence high enough that can keep out the internet and other influences, but we can certainly program counterbalances that can help. Surrounding our students with peers of like faith and mentors who model these behaviors can give our children stability in a world that otherwise immerses them in secular values.

Another is the work ethic and emphasis on practical skills that are so necessary today. As we move into suburban life and “call-in” services, a practical set of skills is still invaluable. Some of these must come from genes, and home, but some can be taught and experienced while in school.

A third value is an exposure to the lessons of nature. We have excelled in this in the past and I have found it invaluable in providing personal peace and tranquility throughout life. It is increasingly difficult to even find exposure to nature, to the point where scientists now talk about Nature Deficit Disorder, a lack of connectedness with the smells, tastes, sounds, and sights of natural things. These can be a regular part of our educational system.

And finally, I would like to put in a plug for multi-grade classrooms. While this is a necessity in smaller schools, it can also be a huge advantage. I am forever grateful for my own education at a little church school in Troy, Idaho, with never more than twenty-five students

in two rooms, learning to help each other read, do math, and generally work together. Elissa Kido in her pioneering work at La Sierra has shown that these small multi-grade schools, often with limited budgets and materials, do as great a job of preparing students for the future as large single classrooms with all the goodies!

Our colleges, through AACU, are also considering new business models of collaboration. Are there back-office functions that can be shared digitally among multiple campuses, such as managing finances and investments, or academic records, to make all of us more cost effective? Or can we provide specialized courses that only a few have but could be shared digitally with students from other campuses. Online or digital education is everywhere now, and we should be able to share our best teachers from one campus with students from all our campuses. But old boundaries and pride die hard, and these discussions move forward slowly. Consolidating course work usually means some teachers lose their jobs, and are we ready for that?

As we all come out of this pandemic year, college applications appear to be trending back up. This will give hope to some, though we have been here before. I believe it is time for some major changes—for our institutional leaders, under their individual unions and with their respective alumni groups, to recognize that we need to find a better way. And we can do this better together!



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