



The Task Force Deaning Program

A legacy of the late 1950s and 1960s in North America was a spirit of volunteerism and student activism. The student missionary program had its genesis in Adventist colleges and universities during this time. Many students were eager to exercise their independence, solidify career goals, experience self-discovery, and make a difference through service to others—all at the same time. The end of the military draft in the United States opened up even more opportunities for male students to “take a break” from college or a job. Female students were just as quick to volunteer.

Having a program for students to volunteer within the United States was a logical progression. By the 1980s, many students, male and female, were serving as task force workers in a variety of positions at schools and churches. One of the positions was that of assistant residence hall dean. Almost overnight, many boarding academies were hiring short-term para-professional “volunteers” to fill deaning positions. The long-standing mentoring relationship that had produced generations of deans was gone, and entry-level positions for recent college graduates became scarce. Over time, the task force deaning program became available in other parts of the world as well.

Many of these young men and women did well, grew from the experience, and were appreciated by the schools and the students. Others did not fare so well. Unfortunately, consistent pre-service training for this role was typically not provided. Anecdotal evidence indicates that few task force deans have become professional residence-hall deans. One result of hiring task force workers has been the increased difficulty of finding experienced head deans to fill academy-level positions. The hiring of task force workers has thus altered the hiring practices for academy-level deans.

Realistically, despite certain problems, the task force program is here to stay. Accordingly, in order to choose the best applicants and help them succeed, administrators need to consider these questions: What screening should be done by the colleges? Should the sponsoring college or university be expected to provide formal pre-service training? Should these positions be filled only by those who have completed the training? Would a uniform pre-service training and a specified list of hiring criteria benefit this academy?

In my opinion, some organization needs to determine criteria for hiring and create a specific structure for the training and regulatory supervision of task force deans. I suggest that the North American Division (NAD) Office of Education create a study group to make recommendations. The group should include education directors, academy principals, experienced academy residence-hall deans, and others as appropriate. Representatives from colleges or

universities and the NAD Risk Management Department should be included. The lives of students attending boarding academies are far too important to be left to chance.

The following are foundational in determining whether students are qualified for this experience. They must:

- Understand the church's unique philosophy of Christian education, as well as the boarding school culture.
- Understand the role of both structure and nurture in relationship to students, as well as the importance of enforcing organizational rules and policies.
- Know how to establish respect and elicit cooperation.
- Know how to be a spiritual leader, and how to share their faith privately as well as in a corporate worship setting.
- Understand the importance of supporting the governance structure of the school by both words and actions. This includes philosophical support for the organizational rules and moral principles of the school.
- Understand what it means to be part of a team, to support other deans, faculty and staff, and the students.
- Learn the specific protocols for responding to emergencies, parental concerns, and disciplinary issues.
- Develop and articulate specific goals in seeking the experience of task force dean.
- Know how to communicate respect and acceptance across cultural and ethnic differences.
- Possess a positive work ethic and a profound sense of personal responsibility.

Establishing realistic expectations and clear communication between the task force dean and his or her supervisors will help to ensure success. A college student coming to a boarding school campus deserves a full discussion of his or her role with the principal and supervising dean. A mentoring structure needs to be put in place for each task force dean. The mentor's role is to empower, encourage, equip, and hold the mentee accountable.

I believe that pre-service training and supervision are crucial. The study group should make recommendations regarding the location, the curriculum and schedule, the qualifications for trainers, and the length of training.

I trust these ideas will enhance the ministry environment for task force deans. In the next column, I will share what I believe to be the basic responsibilities for the academy that hires a task force dean. ✍

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