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# The Future of SDA Higher Education

A North American  
College President's  
Perspective

By D. Malcolm Maxwell

**S**eventh-day Adventist higher education is only a little more than 100 years old, but it has grown tremendously since its humble beginnings in Battle Creek, Michigan. In the North American Division alone we now have two universities, nine senior colleges, and one junior college with an enrollment of approximately 17,500 students, a faculty of more than 2,000, and a total annual dollar volume exceeding \$200 million.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, certain troublesome indicators suggest



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uncertainty about the future and have even caused some to inquire whether higher education in the North American Division has much of a future at all.

## Things Are Different Now

Today we see a very different situation from the one that existed just ten years ago. In 1975 enrollments were rising, budgets expanding, and college master plans generally called for more of the same. Now enrollments are in decline. In fact, there are 2,000 fewer students in our North American colleges than five years ago.<sup>2</sup> This decrease in enrollment trans-

lates into a loss in operating revenue of approximately \$10 million each fiscal year.

In addition, church subsidies on the whole have not kept up with increasing costs and represent an ever-smaller percentage of the operating budgets on a number of campuses. As might be expected, external indebtedness, often undertaken during more favorable circumstances, is an increasingly difficult burden. Unfortunately, few of our institutions have endowment monies to serve as a cushion for these difficult times. Indeed, until recently there has been opposition to even the con-

cept of endowments.

Proposed Federal legislation could make the situation much worse. For one thing, if proposed changes are implemented, the total aid available to all colleges and universities in the United States would be reduced, and the guidelines would be changed so that many middle-income families now receiving assistance would no longer be eligible. Also, the total aid an individual student could receive per year would be limited to \$8,000.

Furthermore, philanthropic giving would be affected as new policies decrease or eliminate tax incentives. It has been estimated that this item alone could reduce such contributions to colleges and universities in the United States by approximately 27 percent.<sup>3</sup>

#### Why Such a Change?

Various reasons can be given to explain why the picture is so different today than just a few years ago. For one thing, statisticians estimate that by 1990 there will be nearly 25 percent fewer 19-year-olds in the U.S. than in 1980.<sup>4</sup> This age group represents the primary market for most colleges and universities. Not only are fewer students available, but many college-age young people are now choosing state schools instead of private institutions.

This nationwide trend is mirrored in the Adventist system. The overall percentage of Seventh-day Adventist young people graduating from academies who choose to attend an Adventist college has steadily declined. This is true for most of our colleges, and in some cases the figure has dropped to less than 20 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Finances are the most common explanation that parents and students give for not choosing an Adventist college, and many fam-

ilies *have* been affected by economic recession, as well as the reductions in government aid for education that have already occurred. In these circumstances alternative education appears very attractive. According to a study conducted by Bruce Allen, approximately 70 percent of the "no shows" from Adventist academies choose to attend a two- or four-year public college.<sup>6</sup> Typically, total costs at a private college are twice those at a public institution.

While it definitely costs less to attend a state-sponsored college than a private college, there is a marked difference in cost between perception and reality. Nationally,

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tuition charges have been increasing, but generally at a rate three to five percent less than the rising costs of operation. Also, for the past few years Adventist colleges throughout the country have increased their charges at a slower rate than the average increase of other private colleges.<sup>7</sup>

Tuition at an Adventist college is typically on the low side of average when compared with other private colleges in its area. This means that the students attending an Adventist college really get a very good deal. Also, because there is generally more aid available and plenty of work opportunities, the effect on the budget of a family supporting a student in an Adventist col-

lege is often considerably less than feared.

However, herein lies another problem. Many parents and students seem to have different expectations than a few years ago. Most of our colleges have more work available than students who wish to take advantage of it. For many, a cheap or even free education is thought to be almost a right. The state provides this; why not the church?

More than 65 percent of today's Adventist college students receive some form of aid, with the average package being worth several thousand dollars annually.<sup>8</sup> Yet too many are unable or unwilling to contribute even the relatively modest balance remaining. It seems that there has been a shift of values among many Adventist families that places a somewhat lower value on an Adventist college education than a few years ago.

#### Other Concerns

Along with uncertainty about the value of a Seventh-day Adventist college education, we see a change in the makeup of the constituency the colleges must serve. For one thing, there is a greater variety in ethnic and cultural backgrounds, in standards of dress, diet, entertainment, worship attendance, and even theology than was characteristic in the past. As a result, schools find it more difficult to satisfy their constituencies, which creates uncertainty and criticism.

This all comes at a time when colleges also find it increasingly difficult to attract and retain appropriately prepared faculty. Not only is there a small pool of qualified people from which to choose, but already-modest salaries continue to shrink through

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embodiment of the ideals and principles of your college and as Exhibit A of what the educated Christian ought to be.

The faculty expects from you an understanding of the academic process, leadership toward attainment of institutional goals, intellectual respectability, spiritual inspiration, executive competence, sensitivity to their moods, tolerance of their idiosyncracies, provision for their perceived needs, support for their desired curriculum changes, filling of their most unpopular courses with eager students, and perhaps occasionally

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*Whenever the level of financial support from the church becomes insignificant compared with that from nonchurch sources, the relationship between the church and the college changes, and the college—not the church—determines what that relationship will be!*

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the ability to heal the sick and raise the dead!

The trustees have entrusted you to speak for them to the institution and its various constituencies. They also expect you to represent the college to them—its faculty and students, its financial status and physical plant, its academic standing and spiritual health—with frankness and integrity. They expect that during your tenure the college will make greater strides toward achievement of its goals than ever before.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church demands that under your

leadership the college will provide higher education of excellent quality with strict adherence to the loftiest standards within a spiritual environment.

The larger society—beginning with your local community and extending around the world—has a right to expect graduates who bring to their tasks not only skills but also breadth of understanding, integrity, dedication, and an orientation toward service rather than self-aggrandizement.

Leaders at all levels need to comprehend the interdependence of the church and its educational institutions. If both are mutually supportive and together follow the guidance of God to accomplish their world mission, the challenges of change will be met with confidence and success. However, we must be aware that potentially irreversible forces are present within both the church and our colleges that must be resolutely countered. If we fail to pursue our challenges in mutual dependence, neither church nor college can hope to succeed in achieving those lofty goals. □

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inflation and in comparison with pay scales for comparable work elsewhere.

In a number of disciplines, such as business, computer science, engineering, and some sciences, the Adventist college teacher's pay falls in the *bottom one percentile* of all those in that profession throughout the United States. This situation is aggravated by the fact that Adventist Health Systems typically pay substantially more than our colleges and universities for personnel with the same qual-

ifications, which gives them a strong competitive edge in recruitment and retention.

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

With all the problems and uncertainties today, is a Seventh-day Adventist college education really worth it? Let us not forget that despite the sharp enrollment decline and financial difficulties of the past few years, 17,500 students are currently enrolled in NAD colleges. In other words, our colleges still produce hundreds of persons each year to serve the church.

In spite of the difficulties

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described above, the colleges and universities of the North American Division graduated nearly 18,000 students with bachelor's degrees and well over 6,000 with associate degrees between 1977 and 1984. These include approximately 1,800 in business administration, 250 in office administration, about 100 in journalism, 1,500 in elementary education, 275 in industrial education, 2,500 in nursing, and almost 2,000 in religion and theology. In addition, approximately 800 completed a master of divinity degree at the Seminary, and Loma Linda University graduated more than 600 dentists and nearly 1,200 physicians.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, where would the church be today without the approximately 90,000 students who have graduated from the North Ameri-

can Division colleges and universities since they were founded, or the approximately one-third of a million who have attended at one time or another?<sup>10</sup> These students have served either as laypersons or church employees all over the world.

On a personal basis, the advantages of an Adventist college really depend on the value one places on Seventh-day Adventism. If the church is important, then an Adventist college is the school to attend.

Where else can one find a group of teachers so committed to the mission and teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, where each one is entrusted with missionary credentials and constantly reminded of his or her pastoral responsibilities? What other campuses govern questions of dress, diet, and recreation within a Seventh-day Adventist philosophy? Where do the young people of the church have a better chance of finding a mate and establishing a Seventh-day Adventist home? Where could they better gain respect for the traditions of the church, its leadership, and its mission to the world? Where can they better develop their own philosophy of life and religion? Where else are Seventh-day Adventist Bible classes required, as well as attendance at weeks of prayer, chapel, and worship services? Where else is the beautiful Seventh-day Adventist picture of God central to all activity, and the good sense of His ways so clearly presented?

### There Is Room for Improvement

While the importance of a Seventh-day Adventist education may be clear, there is certainly room for improvement in many areas. Colleges need to better communicate with their constituencies, not only

to recruit students, but also to listen to people's concerns.

New ways need to be found to finance Adventist education, as money should not be the primary reason a qualified student cannot attend. Our schools need to find ways of operating more efficiently, which may mean offering fewer programs on a given campus while making sure that those remaining are of high quality. Colleges may need to specialize in particular areas.

Colleges must also find ways to more effectively train their students for the service of the church. It is not enough for students to merely accept the church's teach-

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ings and traditions. They must also commit themselves to the mission of the church and receive the skills needed to carry out this mission.

### What About the Future?

The future of SDA colleges and universities depends to quite an extent on decisions yet to be made. If pastors, leaders, and church members value Adventist education, if they come to grips with the problems facing our schools and make decisions that support them, the future will be bright. I have confidence that this will happen. Of course, our colleges must continue to provide a solid and uniquely Seventh-day Adventist education. It is this uniqueness that justifies their existence and

on which their future prosperity depends.

Many do recognize, I believe, that the church needs our colleges and that there is really no substitute for them. Even now there seems to be a reversal of some of the troublesome indicators mentioned earlier. For example, the percentage of students from Adventist academies coming to our colleges has not only leveled off, but is now perhaps nudging upward once again. Financial support through philanthropic giving has increased markedly in the past few years, thanks in no small part to the incentive provided by the Business Executives' Challenge to Alumni (BECA) program.

The problems our colleges face are enormous and must be taken seriously, but we must not forget that these are the Lord's schools. He led in their establishment and has sustained them ever since. If our confidence remains firm and we allow Him to lead, we will have little to fear. He has promised, "Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10, New KJV).<sup>11</sup> □

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Information supplied by the General Conference NAD Board of Higher Education.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Stacy E. Palmer, "Charities Predict 27-Pct. Drop in Donations to Academe Under Treasury's Tax Proposal," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 9, 1985), p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> David W. Breneman, *The Coming Enrollment Crisis: What Every Trustee Should Know* (Washington, D.C.: The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 1982), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Information supplied by the General Conference NAD Board of Higher Education.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce H. Allen, et al., *A Strategic Analysis of Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education in North America* (Research Study), September 20, 1983, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Based on figures published annually by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

<sup>8</sup> Based on a partial survey of NAD colleges and universities.

<sup>9</sup> Information from the General Conference NAD Board of Higher Education.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> From The New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers.