

What Alumni Can Do For Their School

It almost goes without saying that private colleges and universities are on the defensive today. The shrinking pool of traditional students (slated to drop 26 percent by 1992), diminishing levels of state and federal student aid and costs that continue to increase faster than inflation are only a few of the worries that haunt private school administrators. Adventist institutions are not immune to any of these concerns. David Brenneman, of the prestigious Brookings Institution, has suggested that as many as 300 private colleges may close before it's all over. Will Adventist institutions be among that number? Is there anything that alumni can do to increase the viability of their alma mater?

I would like to suggest nine ways alumni can make a crucial difference in the health of their school.

1. By Interpreting the Institution to the Church. Needless to say, church institutions stand or fall based on the support of their sponsoring church. This is doubly so of Adventist schools which structure their campus ambiance around some of the peculiar features of Adventist belief (e.g. the Sabbath and vegetarianism). This uniqueness effectively eliminates the possibility of attracting general students or other Christian students. That means that the school's relationship to the church must be strong, consistent and predictable. Alumni can help foster such bonds by understanding and persuasively representing the institution in the three areas of typical contention.

The first area relates to theological development and controversy within the church. The church by its very nature strives for sureness and certainty, placing a high value on "knowing." On the other hand, the university tolerates and nurtures ambiguity, or "not knowing," since without such an attitude there can be no growth, innovation or discovery. Alumni must constantly remind church administrators and laymen that educational institutions must be given the freedom necessary to fulfill their historic role as discoverers and disseminators of truth.

Social adaptation is a second area of fre-

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quent misunderstanding. Young people are more sensitive to changing styles and social patterns than their elders. Gently urging patience while cautioning against vesting an earlier generation's tastes with doctrinal status is a function alumni can perform.

Finally, there is constant suspicion in certain quarters that the church's educational institutions are squandering resources. My experience with, and knowledge of, scores of other schools has reinforced in my mind the fact that Adventist schools are well quality institutions. In general, managed, faculty and particularly administrators make substantial sacrifices to work within the system. Costs, while high, are average for private, church related schools with similar missions. Alumni can spread that word.

2. By Interpreting the Institution to the Community. Adventist colleges are often viewed both benignly and resentfully by their neighbors as cloistered, self-sufficient and indifferent to the needs of the community.

Here local alumni can perform a dual role: (1) identify opportunities and urge college personnel to get involved in the community; (2) discreetly represent the institution in such roles through personal involvement and by finding opportunities to inform others of one's educational roots. Also, an eager willingness to assume leadership roles in community fund drives on behalf of the institution can make a substantial difference in these efforts.

3. By Providing a Valuable Link to the World of Work. Alumni can introduce students to potential employers, arrange internships, participate in on-campus career days and keep the institution posted regarding changes in one's profession. This alumni function is becoming increasingly important for viable institutions.

4. By Recruiting Students for the Institution. Alumni are living testimonies to the value of an institution's programs. They should aggressively seek out potential students, acquaint them with the institution and follow up to see to it that their questions and concerns are dealt with. The effectiveness of inviting potential students into one's home to meet with a representative from the school has been demonstrated time and again.

5. By Participating in the Governance of the Institution. Adventists have been slow to give laymen a substantive role in the gover-

nance of the church and its institutions. Experience at Union College dramatically demonstrated to me the value of having lay alumni on our board—people who were inspiringly aggressive in their unqualified support of the school. Alumni, through their alumni association and in other appropriate forums, should persistently insist on a governance stake in *their* school.

6. By Providing Volunteer Support. Annual fund phonathons, alumni weekends, local chapter meetings, career days, student recruiting rallies and musical group tours are only a few of the activities that depend upon large amounts of volunteer effort. Alumni can step in to help with these programs.

7. By Providing "Loving Criticism" to the Institution. Because of their jealous loyalty for their alma mater, coupled with their sensitivity to the concerns of constituents, alumni are in a unique position to serve as an "early alert" system for their school. Those of us in administration realize that we need supporters who love us enough to constructively criticize us.

8. By Actively Perpetuating the Traditions of the Institution. Institutions have a personality and identity that transcends any particular group of administrators, faculty or students that happen to inhabit the place at any one time. The significance of places on campus, certain events and, yes, even the school song, requires continuing emphasis. It has been my observation that alumni are the most zealous in performing this nurturing role. It is not a trivial task.

9. By Consistently Supporting the Institution Financially. Prior to the BECA program it was generally accepted among church and college officials that alumni gave all that could reasonably be expected through their regular giving to the church. While other church colleges were building hefty endowments, Adventist schools were consoling themselves with the notion that the church's regular subsidies functioned like an endowment. While that was true in one sense, such subsidies in no way substitute for an endowment. Now Adventist schools must play catch up during a time of financial exigency. If they survive the 10 to 15 years required to build substantial endowments, it will be because their alumni rallied to their support. □

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