

## Editorial

# A Renewed College Commitment

**A** recent study compared the number of Seventh-day Adventist students attending denominational schools to the general membership of the church. It encompassed 10 world divisions (excluding the U.S.S.R. and the attached fields) and reviewed the student enrollment and membership data for the past 15 years. Some rather interesting statistics resulted from the analysis of tertiary-level data for North America.

In 1975, for every 1,000 church members, there were 30 SDA students attending our colleges and universities in North America. By 1990, there were only 20 SDA college students per 1,000 members. Taken in isolation, this fact could easily be cause for concern, as it represents a 33 percent decline in the past 15 years. One must, however, look more closely. In 1984 the number of SDA college students had dropped to 18 per 1,000 members. Since 1984 this ratio has increased by two SDA students per 1,000 members, or 11.11 percent. Add to this the effect of increased church membership (11.04 percent), and we see a net gain of 3,242 Adventist students enrolled in our colleges in 1990, compared to 1984.<sup>1</sup>

As one considers these two sub-trends, it is easy to confirm that the years from 1975 to 1984 were indeed a time of enrollment decline for our colleges and universities. The reasons are many and range far beyond the scope of this editorial. It is of more interest to contemplate why a higher percentage of Seventh-day Adventist college-aged students were enrolled in our colleges and universities in 1990 than in 1984.

The economic recession, which existed during this period, certainly served as an obstacle to potential students' attempts to earn disposable cash for education, although it may also have created in students a greater sense of the importance of higher education in order to position themselves favorably in the job market. One might also argue that increased student aid has been a major contributing factor. Although economic factors are important, I would suggest that there is a much more important reason.

One reason for increased enrollments often overlooked in Adventist circles is clearly evident in the results of the Valuegenesis study—if one dares to project its results into the postsecondary levels. Student respondents rated the academies as follows: Teachers are competent (81 percent), discipline is fair (68 percent), school spirit is high (66 percent), teachers do not put down students (63 percent), and teachers are caring and supportive (57 percent).<sup>2</sup> Is this also true in our colleges and universities?

I would like to suggest that the upswing in enrollment since 1984 is a direct result of the renewed commitment at our colleges to a more competent teaching staff, fairer student-management programs, a renewed respect for student rights, a caring and supportive staff, and a search for fresh approaches to better fulfill the Lord's mission for our schools: That is "Godliness—godlikeness—is the goal to be reached."<sup>3</sup> As I visit the many campuses of higher education in North America and around the world, there is a feeling of a renewed presence of the Holy Spirit. I sense an urgency to put God first in the lives of the administrators, teachers, and staff, and in the activities of the students. Students, guided by their faculty sponsors, are eager to accept the responsibility of youth mission projects and student missionary assignments. This renewed commitment is also evident in the involvement of students in local outreach activities and in the Christian dedication of our teachers.

As higher education looks into this new decade, we need to reaffirm the ideal that

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## Editorial

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God has set for us as Adventist teachers, administrators, and students.—R.E.G.

### REFERENCES

1. "Enrollment Trends in SDA Education," Report to the Annual Council, Department of Education, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1991, Silver Spring, Maryland.
2. North American Division, SDA Church, "Valuegenesis Report 1" (October 1, 1990), Project Affirmation, North American Division, General Conference of SDA, Silver Spring, Md., p. 30.
3. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assoc., 1903), p. 18.

## THE OMBUDSPERSON'S ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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again and decided not to do anything. Finally, on Sunday, Portia phoned to happily inform me that she had telephoned the person. He seemed genuinely surprised at her reaction to his behavior, and she felt the situation had been resolved. When I checked with her several weeks later, she told me that the offensive behavior had not recurred.

While Portia's case might be considered as misinterpretation of behavior, difficulties often arise because of a difference in focus or emphasis. An example of this was Igor's problem with the student finance office. When Igor came to see me, he confided that the office personnel did not seem to appreciate what a good, dedicated student he was. Even though he spent all his time studying or in class and had good grades, they were refusing to let him complete registration. When I interviewed individuals at the student finance

office, they complained that Igor was an undependable student. He missed payment deadlines and failed to keep his financial commitments or promises.

Each party had focused on the aspect of student life he or she considered most important. To bring this problem to resolution, it was necessary to check with the student financial-aid office, Igor's dean for aid and scholarship money, and to bring the two sides together for dialogue. After acknowledging the importance of different aspects of a student's responsibilities, each side agreed to a course of action that led to the completion of Igor's registration.

Occasionally, problems result from a hasty decision made by a harried, tired staff member or administrator. In cases like this it is important for the ombudsman to help the individual recognize the mistake and find a way to achieve resolution without loss of face.

### The University's Conscience

In some instances personnel, while acting within the letter of university policy and procedures, have failed to be true to the spirit of university goals and purposes. The ombudsman has a good vantage point from which to identify excesses in policy and causes for student concern. Thus, one role of the ombudsman is to act as the conscience of the university. He or she can recommend ways to eliminate the causes of student concerns as well as suggest changes in policy.

In preparing this article, I surveyed Adventist colleges and universities in the United States and Canada and found that Andrews University is the only one with an ombudsman. This does not mean that other institutions do not have problems and situations for which the office of ombudsman would be useful. In fact, after visiting some of the campuses I would say that in many cases, even when there is no official ombudsman on campus, certain in-

dividuals are sought out by students and fellow faculty having problems. These persons do ombuds work in an unofficial way.

### A Visible Symbol

However, there are important differences between being an official ombudsman and an unofficial one. First, an official designation makes ombudswork someone's specific responsibility, not something that happens haphazardly. Second, an official ombudsman's title is a visible symbol of designated responsibility and institutional commitment to fairness and problem-solving. It lets students know where to go for help, and it lets faculty and staff know who has a right to investigate the problem. Third, by virtue of his or her office an official ombudsman has certain rights, especially the right of access to records and other material useful in resolving difficult cases. And finally, the appointment gives the ombudsman moral authority as he or she attempts to address complicated issues.

Every Adventist college experiences difficulties in which an ombudsman would serve a helpful role. However, the larger the institution and the more complex its bureaucracy, the more likely that the office of ombudsman is needed and will serve as a helpful go-between and arbiter of campus problems. <sup>3</sup>

Besides serving as university Ombudsman, Dr. Stella Ramirez Greig is an Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The noun in Swedish is *ombud*. In English, one often sees the term *ombudsman* used. For the purpose of inclusion, I use the term *ombudsman*.
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, vol. 8 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1989), p. 946.
3. To ensure privacy, names have been changed.

## Pontius' Puddle

