

The Future of Adventist Higher Education

A Look at the Options

BY FRITZ GUY

Looking toward the 21st century, Adventist higher education in the United States faces major challenges as a result of three converging realities:

- The first reality is the continually rising cost of Adventist higher education. Tuition charges are increasing more than twice as fast as the cost of living. During the quarter-century between 1967 and 1992, for example, the U.S. consumer price index (CPI) went from 33.4 to 140.3¹—an increase of 320 percent, which has affected every person, family, and institution in the country. At the same time, tuition and required fees for undergraduate students at Andrews University, for example, rose from \$1,101 in 1967-1968 to \$9,645 in 1992-1993—an increase of 776 percent.² This increase is typical of Adventist colleges and universities in the U.S.;³ although it is somewhat greater than the average of other U.S. private colleges (679 percent) and private universities

(750 percent).⁴

The increase has been propelled by many factors: expanded student services such as counseling, learning support, health, and placement; mushrooming demands for student aid; increasing cost of health care for faculty and staff; addi-

tional facilities (it seems that old buildings are seldom demolished when new ones are constructed); and a proliferation of curriculums to compete with other institutions both inside and outside of Adventist higher education.

Even with the help of federal and state grants and loans, there may be a limit to what Adventist students and their families are able—and willing—to pay for higher education. Seven years ago, the Seltzer Daley survey indicated that parents were less concerned about the cost of Adventist education than about its quality.⁵ While that may be correct, it is likely that in the minds of most people, quality and cost are closely related. What the parents may have been saying was that the quality of Ad-

ventist education does not justify its cost. In any case, the cost of Adventist higher education is going up faster than the ability of students and their families to pay for it.

- The second reality is the attractive and accessible educational alternatives for

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Adventist students. Across the United States, there are more than 3,500 colleges and universities,⁶ both public and independent, including two-year community colleges, four-year liberal-arts colleges, comprehensive universities, research universities, and a wide variety of technical and professional schools. Many of these institutions offer good (sometimes excellent) education that is conveniently located and relatively inexpensive. Some are genuinely religious in commitment and environment (which means that Adventists do not have a monopoly on Christian higher education).

- The third reality is the limits of church resources.

There is a practical ceiling on the amount the church (meaning, in this case, the union conferences and the General Conference) can afford and is willing to spend on its eight liberal-arts colleges⁷ and three universities in the United States. In 1992, for example, the tithe income from the eight union conferences in the United States totaled \$421.7 million,⁸ and their direct appropriations to higher education totaled nearly \$19.4 million. Counting the additional \$16.9 million of General Conference appropriations to Andrews University, Loma Linda University, and Oakwood College, the total church appropriations for colleges and universities in the U.S. came to \$36.3 million,⁹ or the equivalent of 8.6 percent of the tithe. This was an average subsidy of \$2,431 for each of the 14,897 students enrolled in the 11 institutions in the fall of 1992.¹⁰ Excluding the special General Conference support for graduate and ministerial education (at Andrews) and the health sciences (at Loma Linda), the average subsidy per undergraduate student was approximately \$1,750.

So the church needs to do some hard thinking as it approaches the turn of the century. We need to ask in what ways the church wants Adventist higher education to change, for it surely *will*

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Bell Hall (School of Education), Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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change—for better or for worse (and probably some of both). If the changes are allowed simply to happen, more of them will be worse than if they result from careful strategic planning. But for changes to be planned effectively, decisions need to be made not only by the trustees, administrators, and faculty of each institution, but also by the church leadership and membership. These decisions should take into account some

major issues and consider diverse options.

The fundamental question to be addressed is whether Adventist higher education should continue. As scandalous as it may sound to a reader of this journal, the question is not merely rhetorical, nor is the answer self-evidently affirmative. The future of Adventist higher education requires that three conditions be met:

- First, Adventist higher education must be thoroughly, authentically *Adventist*. This requires more than having an Adventist faculty and a largely Adventist student body on a drug-free, smoke-free, alcohol-free campus—and more than having courses that teach Adventist beliefs, chapel ser-

VICES that encourage Adventist piety, and campus activities that reflect Adventist values. It requires that *every curriculum* reflect an Adventist perspective of service, and that *every subject* be taught with an Adventist sense of human wholeness and dignity and examined with Adventist eyes of faith and hope. Adventist higher education should continue only if it is thoroughly, authentically, and intelligently *Adventist*.

- Second, Adventist higher education must be of sufficiently *high quality* to enable and encourage every student to learn as much and to think as clearly as possible. High-quality education puts students in touch with the contemporary world of knowledge, ideas, and culture and leads them to think carefully, comprehensively, and creatively. It doesn't require students to know everything; but it does require them to recognize, interpret, and evaluate evidence, to identify and analyze issues, and to reason soundly. It gets students involved in scholarly conversation at the cutting edges of their disciplines and prepares them for graduate studies in the most demanding programs of the best universities in the world. Quality education also includes awareness and appropriation of various kinds of values— aesthetic, moral, and spiritual. It en-

courages appreciation of human diversity and responsiveness to human need.

Regarding educational quality, the Seltzer Daley study is unequivocal:

The most significant dissatisfaction with Adventist education is in the area broadly termed "academics." . . . Adventist schools and colleges need major educational improvements. . . . [I]n every case, academics outstrips religious considerations by a statistically significant margin. . . . Academic issues are driving people's perceptions of the schools, and dominate their thinking.¹¹

High-quality education is not only a marketing requirement; it is also the logical outcome of our Adventist heritage, the academic consequence of our sense of stewardship and mission. Education can be distinctively Adventist without being narrowly sectarian, culturally isolated, or intellectually weak.

Occasionally someone complains that an Adventist college or university is putting too much emphasis on academic quality, but this is like complaining that an Adventist medical center is putting too much emphasis on health care. A college or university is by definition an academic institution. Adventist higher education should continue only if it *high-quality* education.

- Third, Adventist higher education must be *adequately supported*—not only by students and their families, but also by the church. Higher education is expensive, and there are no "free lunches." Money cannot be spent twice: what is used to support higher education is not available for elementary and secondary schools, for pastoral or evangelistic ministry, or for overseas missions.

In 1992 the tithe for the union conferences in the United States showed a healthy overall increase of 4.95 percent over 1991, evidently as the result of a modest membership increase of 2.14

percent (to 751,511) and a national CPI increase of 3.01 percent (to 140.3). The situation, however, varies widely across the country, due in part to differing economic conditions: While the Southern Union Conference had a member-

everything, and Adventist higher education should continue only if the church decides *how much* and *what kind* of higher education it is willing to pay for. Neither the deciding nor the paying will be easy.

In shaping the future of Adventist higher education, the church has a variety of options—some disturbing, some difficult, but all deserving of thoughtful, creative attention.

Option I—Liquidation

The most radical, and almost unthinkable option is for the Adventist Church in the United States to get out of the business of operating colleges and universities, and settle for a seminary (or two?) to educate pastors and chaplains. This option would save the church something like \$34 million a year in operating

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New Chan Shun Centennial Library at Southwestern Adventist College, Keene, Texas.

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Blake Administration Building, Oakwood College, Huntsville, Alabama.

ship increase of 3.84 percent and a tithe increase of 9.38 percent, the Pacific Union Conference had a membership increase of 1.19 percent and a tithe increase of 0.54 percent. Yet wages, utilities, student aid, and other costs continue to rise rapidly everywhere.

The church obviously cannot do

subsidies—money that could be put into scholarships for Adventist students attending public and private colleges and universities.

Further, some of the present campus land and buildings might be sold to other institutions or profitably developed for residential, commercial, or in-

dustrial use. In any event, the present college and university property could provide a massive permanent endowment of perhaps a half-billion dollars or more. From this endowment an income of \$25-\$30 million a year could be used to establish and support Adventist residential and study centers adjacent to secular or church-related colleges and universities. These centers could provide an Adventist social environment, spiritual nurture, and courses in religion and ethics. The coordinators might even hold academic appointments in the institutions with which the centers were associated. Some of the income produced by the endowment might be used to provide tuition assistance for students in Adventist elementary and secondary schools across the United States.

This option would, however, require a drastic change of thinking in a church that has been involved in higher education since the founding of Battle Creek College in 1874. Could Adventism in the United States survive without its colleges and universities? Perhaps, but not as we know it. Besides preparing men and women for professional employment in the church, Adventist campuses provide an important context during four critical years of intellectual, moral, and spiritual maturation—a time when values are formed and life-styles are adopted.¹² For many students, this is a time when they embrace religion as their own and learn to think for themselves about Christianity; and for some, it is the church's last chance to make a positive impact on their minds and hearts. Furthermore, college campuses are places where the church can think critically, creatively, and constructively about itself, its beliefs, and its mission as it moves into a new century.

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Atrium of Don Love Building, Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska.

The fundamental question to be addressed is whether Adventist higher education should continue.

Liquidation is not an attractive option, but it is not unthinkable, either. It needs to be taken seriously, if for no other reason than to clarify the reasons why the benefits of Adventist higher education are worth the costs.

Option II—Consolidation

Certainly less radical than liquidation—but still a drastic choice—would be to reduce the number of institutions the church supports in order to fund the remaining ones more adequately. This

option assumes that fewer large institutions would be more efficient and viable economically and educationally than many small ones (noting the examples of Calvin College, operated by the Christian Reformed Church in Michigan, and Brigham Young University, operated by the Latter-day Saints in Utah). This might lower the costs in relation to the benefits; and there would again be the possibility (as in Option I, but on a smaller scale) of significant endowments generated by the development of land assets.

But the church should be very clear about the potential advantages and *disadvantages* of this option. There would be a smaller number of col-

leges and universities, which could therefore receive more financial support per institution; but there is no evidence that they would have correspondingly larger enrollments. If some of the smaller Adventist institutions were phased out, it is highly unlikely that most of the Adventist students in those areas would travel to distant Adventist institutions; they would probably attend public colleges and universities nearer home. So at best the church would be increasing its subsidy per student; it would not be significantly increasing efficiency. On the other hand, instead of increasing its subsidy to the remaining institutions, the church might want (again as in Option I) to establish residential and study centers at other campuses.

Option III—Simplification

Just as radical as consolidation, but in a quite different way, would be the two-fold option of focusing *either* on undergraduate education *or* on graduate and professional education, and phasing out the other level.

Focusing on undergraduate education would mean giving up the idea of Adventist universities in the United States, as well as medical and dental education. However, it would make a large amount of money available for other purposes. More than 40 percent (\$15.3 million out of \$36.7 million) of the church's total subsidies for higher education in 1992 went to graduate and professional programs at Andrews and Loma Linda universities.¹³

Phasing out these operations would enable the church to put substantially more money into comprehensive undergraduate education. Or the money could be used for other purposes—such as overseas mission projects, worldwide evangelism, or elementary and secondary education. These possibilities do not, of course, imply that the church *should* actually choose this option, only that it ought to consider the relative costs and benefits of graduate and professional education.

On the other hand, focusing on graduate and professional education for pastors, teachers, managers, and health-care providers (physicians, dentists, and others) would mean giving up the idea of the traditional Adventist college and comprehensive undergraduate education. This could lead to a series of free-standing institutions: a seminary, schools of education and psychology, and schools of medicine, dentistry, and nursing; or perhaps all of these enterprises could be combined at a single location to form an Adventist professional university. In any case, the result would be a true successor of the first Adventist institutions of higher education, which were established to prepare their students for employment by the church.¹⁴

Option IV—Privatization

The church could choose to turn some or all of its existing colleges and universities (with the exception of the

theological seminary) into private institutions, so that they would no longer be a financial drain on the denomination. This would result in a number of independent institutions. If it can be done at Weimar, the reasoning goes, why not in Lincoln, South Lancaster, and Collegedale? Privatization does carry the

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La Sierra Hall, La Sierra University, Riverside, California.

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danger that the religious character of a college or university could be diluted or lost—the examples, beginning with Harvard and Yale, are legion. However, there may be ways of counteracting this danger, as suggested at the University of Notre Dame, which is actually private but intentionally and unmistakably Catholic, identifying itself as a place “where the Catholic Church does its thinking.” For some Adventists, both inside and outside higher education, this option is very attractive; for others it is unthinkable.

Privatization is possible in principle;

whether it is economically and politically feasible is another question. Would the union conferences and the General Conference, which now operate the various colleges and universities, be willing to turn over the control of these institutions to independent boards of trustees? Could groups of Adventists be found to take on

the formidable responsibility of operating college and universities and raising the necessary funding for their support? In the U.S. economy today, replacing a \$2 million annual subsidy with endowment income would require a fund of approximately \$40 million.

Option V—Specialization

A much less radical option—but still a change from the present—would be to encourage each existing college or university to chart its own course,

emphasizing what it can do best and not trying to do a little of everything. This option would emphasize a school's geographic, cultural, or curricular distinctiveness. If adopted, it would mean the elimination of both the “franchise” mentality, which expects Adventist education to be as standardized as fast food and limits on the “student recruitment turf” for each institution. Under this option, education on the various Adventist campuses could develop quite differently in curricular content and style. An institution might emphasize the humanities, for example, or the natural sciences; the human sciences or business—whatever it could do best or most efficiently—and not pretend to be the “right” place for every Adventist college student within several hundred miles.

By offering majors in a few disciplines, and providing only service courses in the others, an institution might be able to reduce the number of very small—and expensive—classes. At the same time, with each institution specializing in what it does best, the

overall quality of Adventist education might be improved.

This option would encourage a “free enterprise” approach to Adventist higher education, with both the advantages and disadvantages of free enterprise in general. While it would, on the one hand, stimulate institutional initiative, it would also encourage what is economically profitable—which might not always be the best for students or for the church, in the long run. What, for example, would happen to underprepared students, who are more expensive to educate?

Option VI—Centralization

Moving in the opposite direction from specialization would be merging all Adventist higher education in the United States into a single organizational structure, perhaps like the State University of New York or the University of California. This idea has gone out of fashion in some quarters (where it is regarded as akin to bureaucratic socialism) but still has some attractive features. What is sometimes called “the Adventist system of higher education,” is in fact not a “system” at all, but a coalition of separate institutions with a shared religious heritage and similar educational objectives. The North American Division has, to be sure, a Board of Higher Education. However, it is not a “board” in the common functional sense of the term but an advisory council with no actual authority, which makes recommendations rather than functional decisions.

A case could be made for developing a true “system” of Adventist higher education in the United States that would allow limited autonomy to the individual campuses—an Adventist University of America, with campuses in Massachusetts, Maryland, Alabama, Tennessee, Michigan, Nebraska, Texas, California, and Washington. The obvious questions here are, as usual, both political and economic: Would the union conferences agree to cede control of their colleges to the North American Division, and if so, would they continue to fund them? Would students travel thousands of miles to attend?

Option VII—Continuation

This option carries the least obvious risk. Adventist higher education can reject all of the other options and keep on doing what it is now doing, in approximately the same way, but (it is hoped) more effectively and efficiently. This is attractive to many because it seems the safest option. But it carries the possibility of leading to the worst of all possible worlds for Adventist higher education, with decreasing quality at increasing cost. And it might encourage the best and brightest of both faculty and students to go elsewhere—a development from which Adventist higher education might never recover.

Letting the future shape itself is the easiest way, as it requires neither creativity nor courage. People in general (especially large groups) dislike making difficult decisions; even if the present situation is unsatisfactory, they are more likely to favor the familiar than to risk the new. So while the advocates of change are arguing among themselves about what kind of change would be best, the advocates of continuation are usually busy solidifying a working consensus in favor of the status quo.

Perhaps the future of Adventist higher education *should* look more like the present than like any of the available alternatives. And perhaps it can retain much of its present shape while taking advantage of some of the features that characterize other options.

Simply complaining about the cost of Adventist higher education will not suffice. If someone wants the benefits of a new BMW, he or she has to pay what it costs. If one doesn’t want (or cannot afford) to pay that much, there is no point in berating the BMW dealer because of the price; the right thing to do is to find a dealer who sells used Fords and Hondas—or perhaps decide to get along without a car at all.

The basic facts about Adventist

higher education in the United States are clear: the increasing costs both to students and to the church, the availability of attractive alternatives, and the limitation of the church’s financial resources. The essential conditions of viability are equally clear: Adventist higher education must be authentically Adventist, of high quality, and adequately supported by the church. And at least seven options are clear enough to deserve consideration: liquidation, consolidation, simplification, privatiza-

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Wilkinson Hall, Columbia Union College, Takoma Park, Maryland.

tion, specialization, centralization, and continuation.

In one way or another, intentionally or by default, the church *will* decide how much and what kind of higher education it believes in enough to pay for. But the future will be better if it is shaped by deliberate, informed decision making after considering the various options. The costs of Adventist higher education demand this kind of attention; the benefits deserve it. ☞

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REFERENCES

1. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*: 1992, 112th ed. (Washington,

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Lobby, Chan Shun Hall, Andrews University School of Business, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California.

D.C., 1992), Table 738; and Council of *Economic Advisors*, *Economic Indicators* (August 1993), p. 23.

2. See undergraduate bulletin of Andrews University for 1967-1968 and general information bulletin for 1992-1993.

3. According to the respective bulletins, corresponding figures (undergraduate tuition and required fees in 1967-1968 and 1992-1993) for Atlantic Union College were \$1,062 and \$10,625, an increase of 900 percent; for La Sierra University, \$1,206 and \$10,155, an increase of 742 percent; for Southern College, \$1,020 and \$7,735, an increase of 658 percent; for Walla Walla College, \$1,200 and \$9,666, an increase of 706 percent.

4. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 1993* (Washington, D.C.), Table 306, for private colleges the corresponding figures are \$1,237 and \$9,636, and for private universities \$1,534 and \$13,043.

5. Mitchell Seltzer and Eliot Daley, *Seventh-day Adventist Planning Research: A Survey of Church Members and Special Constituencies* (Princeton: Seltzer Daley Companies, 1987). For a summary, see Myron Widmer, "Members' Perceptions of Adventist Education," *Adventist Review* (January 28, 1988), pp. 16-18.

6. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1992*, 112th ed. (Washington, D.C., 1992), Table 264, which gives the number of colleges and universities in the United States and its possessions as 3,559.

7. Not included here are Kettering College of Medical Arts and Florida Hospital College of Health Sciences, both of which are funded by the medical centers with which they are affiliated rather than by church appropriations. Canadian Union College also was not included, because of the differences between the regulations that govern its operation and funding and those of U.S. colleges and universities.

8. Denominational membership and tithe data in this article are from the Office of Archives and Statistics, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *129th Annual Statistical Report: 1991* (Silver Spring, Md., 1992), p. 18; and *130th Annual Statistical Report: 1992* (Silver Spring, Md., 1993), p. 18.

9. Based on data from the NAD Board of Higher Education.

10. Based on operating enrollment in terms of full-time equivalent (FTE) students. See "North American College Enrollment Rises," *Adventist Review* (January 21, 1993), p. 7.

11. Seltzer and Daley, iii.

12. See Alexander W. Astin, *Four Critical Years: Effects of College on Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978).

13. It should be noted that the \$11 million subsidy to Loma Linda University in 1992 indirectly supported a number of undergraduate professional programs—including nursing, dental hygiene, medical technology, and speech pathology—as well as the better-known graduate professional programs in medicine and dentistry.

14. The vocational orientation of early Adventist education was reflected in some of the institutional names, such as Keene Industrial School (1894), American Medical Missionary College (1895), Avondale School for Christian Workers (1896), Emmanuel Missionary College (1901), and Southern Training School (1901).