

# Assessing Adventist Higher Education

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**S**ome 115 delegates, representing Adventist college presidents, board chairmen, division presidents, and world church leadership, met in Loma Linda, California, for the first-ever summit on Seventh-day Adventist higher education. The three-day (March 19-21, 1997) deliberations had a tight agenda, including individual presentations, group discussions, and a serious search to discover the soul of Adventist higher education.

Two items dominated the presentations and the discussions: Why are we operating colleges and universities? Are we accomplishing those objectives? The first question inevitably led to a study of mission statements, and the second to assessment, particularly in spiritual values.

The need for a review of these issues at such a high level as the summit seemed obvious. Christian higher education is under siege today from many fronts, raising numerous questions. Can an institution committed to excellence in higher education also be truly Christian? Can academic pursuit and a devotional quest coexist in the same individual? In the hierarchy of values that a college or a university includes in its mission statement, is it fair or responsible to list spiritual maturity as a factor to be assessed? To whom is the college or university accountable?

That the church leaders were deeply concerned about these issues was clear. Robert Folkenberg, the president of the General Conference, was present at all meetings, listening and participating with probing questions. His keynote address was frank and forthright: If an Adventist college or university cannot make its students academically excellent and spiritually mature Adventists, he asked, what is the rationale for running such an institution?

Spiritual development must not be equated with teaching a few Bible classes. Those classes may constitute a significant part of the curriculum, may be taught by committed Christians, and may play an important role in the life of a student. But spiritual maturity goes beyond this: It is the total impact of all the campus activities on all areas of student life. The classroom, the cafeteria, the dormitory, the library, and the personnel who exercise leadership and supervision in all these areas play a role in the spiritual maturity of a student.

From the time a student enters the college as a freshman to the time he or she graduates, a metamorphosis does take place. That cannot be denied. But what *kind* of change is the question. And how can we measure change? The responsibility for defining it and working toward its achievement lies with the leadership and faculty of the college. Before the beginning of the school year, during the year, and at its close, the college needs to put itself under the scrutiny of self-assessment. Here are some areas for such a test:

**1. Identity.** Why do we operate this institution? In what ways are we different from other institutions of higher learning? If we closed our institution, would anybody—constituency, the church, students, parents, faculty—miss it?

**2. Accountability.** At each level of operation, do we have a clearly defined system of accountability? Does everyone on the campus know what is expected of him or her? If a person fails the test of accountability, does he or she know how to assume responsibility? Do we have an instrument to compare performance to institutional expectations?

**3. Spirituality.** Spirituality is an individual matter, but the institution cannot escape responsibility. A Christian institution must intentionally promote and foster the spiritual life of its students. Much of this takes place through personal interaction on campus—student to student, teacher to student—by planting the seed of spiritual growth in all college activities. Spirituality is not one more department of the institution, added to English, mathematics, science, history, etc. Nothing destroys spirituality as much as departmentalizing it. It should indeed be the integrating core around which all other college activities are built.

**4. Excellence.** Christian higher education has been accused of mediocrity from within and without, but this need not be. Upholding Christian values is not antithetical to maintaining academic excellence. If anything, the Christian element, integrating the entire curricular and cocurricular activities, should foster and challenge the highest possible standards. We are reminded: "Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children. Godliness—godlikeness—is the goal to be reached. Before the student there is opened a path of continual progress" (Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 18).—**John M. Fowler.**