

Should Adventist Colleges and Universities Differ From One Another?

The Seventh-day Adventist higher education system enters the 21st century amidst several questions about its role.*

Each of the church's colleges and universities serves a specific set of people who live in its administrative and geographic area. The church prides itself on being distinct, singular, and cooperative in its functions, with one broad mission of preparing students for service in this world and the world to come. To accomplish this, the church invokes the biblical injunction to "go. . .and teach all nations" and "[baptize] them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19, KJV).

Each of the church's institutions has developed in a different set of demographic, social, political, economic, historical, legal, and cultural contexts, producing a rich and diverse array of roles and functions. Although their overall mission and basic roles are similar, the manner in which these play out differs. Attempts to standardize these roles and functions may well be difficult in a dynamic and changing world.

Our global system and its sub-systems struggle with defining the roles of specific higher-education institutions. How should our colleges respond to constituency expectations while keeping the mission of the church constant and alive?

A Conceptual Framework

Adventist higher education is impacted by a larger macro system of political, legal, social, demographic, and cultural factors. Prospective college populations, stakeholders, and constituencies have varying expectations about the role and behavior of their college. At the same time, the

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By Sylvan Lashley

* The system is comprised of 12 sub-systems spread across geographical administrative units called "divisions." These sub-systems contain colleges and universities, as well as secondary and elementary schools. Divisions are made up of administrative-geographical units called "unions," which in turn contain other sub-units called "conferences." Conferences consist of collections of churches that help sponsor the elementary and secondary schools. Traditionally, secondary and elementary schools are operated by conferences, colleges and universities by unions or divisions.

Schools within an education system are unlikely to adopt similar roles and functions because of different expectations and needs.

colleges and universities are continually competing for scarce resources (students and teachers).

Constituencies express specific expectations about the college's expected role, which in turn affect what colleges do. The national and regional environment influences those constituencies. The interplay between macro and micro factors keeps the system in constant flux.

Competition for resources and students also drives the behavior of higher educational organizations. Competitive strategy theory suggests that lowest costs, differentiation of product or program, and focus allow for firms to strategically position themselves. No organization can do everything well. Systems that can deliver basic products at the lowest costs to their customers are more likely to be successful than are others, especially if they fulfill their customers' expectations.

Applying these concepts to higher education suggests some reasons why the roles and functions of our schools in divisions outside of North America might well be different from those in North America, and why there may even be variations within the North American Division.

These systems compete with the others for scarce resources, leadership, students, attention, and even for faculty members.



Haskell Hall and Machlan Auditorium, Atlantic Union College (AUC).

This competition is affected by the national, church, and political needs of each region and country and leads to differences in role and function despite the similarity of mission. Whereas the church tried earlier to centralize its educational efforts because of political, currency, monetary, and geographical issues, the current tendency is to decentralize. Thus, we have three medical schools and a number of theological seminaries and graduate centers.



AUC's Nathaniel Thayer Estate (Performing Arts and Music Department).

Discussion—A Specific Case

Let's make this discussion of a conceptual framework more specific by applying it to Atlantic Union College (AUC), located in the northeast United States, relatively near the large urban areas of New York and Boston. The recent immigration and migration in this part of the country are having a demographic, cultural, ethnic, economic, and social impact on the role of the school.

Whereas up until the mid-1900s, the bulk of immigrants into the northeast U.S. came from Eastern Europe, more of the recent arrivals originate from the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. Both the Atlantic Union Conference and the college have become ethnically, economically, socially, and religiously diverse. These macro factors in the larger environment also affect the constituency, its economic base and economic supply systems, and college attendance patterns. Approximately 53 percent of AUC's students are first-generation immigrants and low-income. More than 90 percent of the students receive some type of financial support. Thus, Atlantic Union College's constituency base is urban blue-collar, working class, and suburban-rural groups. Such groups have strong opinions about what the college should teach, how members should worship, communicate, and live together, and how the school should conform to society and to Adventism. These expectations in turn influence the college's agenda. AUC's constituencies are very concerned about jobs. This makes the role of Atlantic Union College different from other schools and even from its role at an earlier time in the school's history. AUC is performing an educational, socializing factor by educating a new generation of church members who will be critical to the growth and survival of Adventism in the northeast United States and Bermuda.

Each Adventist educational sub-system, though similar in some ways, is continuously developing under different circumstances—demographic, political, cultural, educational, and geographical. Even within divisions, the forces of change, fomented by nationalism, ethnicity, and geography, act as powerful influences. As a result, each sub-system has developed its own expectations of the role and function of college boards and division officers. Despite the dissimilarities, the systems are expected to have some degree of convergence.

Schools within an education system are unlikely to adopt similar roles and functions because of different expectations and needs. It may well be easier to unify divisions through shared mission and purpose rather than overall role and function.

For example, one division area needs higher education for the francophone populations. The two Asian divisions have large geographical territories that must be served by a major graduate school; while in the North American Division, there is one dominant language group, one country-wide accreditation system, well-established evaluation systems, many low-cost community colleges, and abundant professorial talent, compared to other world divisions. The Inter-American Division has three major language groups and more than 25 currencies all pegged to the U.S. dollar. Each division has a country and territory “brain drain” away to North America despite attempts to curtail this. The South American Division has two main languages but many currencies. All these factors affect the mission of the church, as well as perceptions of that mission in terms of needs, nationalism, expectations, and role function.

Conclusions

Our schools in each division vary from one another and from those in other parts of the world. While they will continue to have a shared mission, their roles and functions may diverge even more widely than at present. The role of leadership should be to unify these systems around mission rather than around role, function, or regulations. Allowing a free-market economy of ideas, practices, and national and cultural differences will produce less tendency toward conformity and a greater desire to accomplish mission. Unity of action cannot be attained through prescription, but rather from attempts to achieve a shared mission. Constituent expectations will continue to determine the role behavior of organizations. Each college has a special role to play in its division. Colleges can have complementary roles and a shared mission. However, each institution’s role will differ from the others’.



AUC's White House (English Department).



Founders Hall, AUC.



Students from varied cultures and nations attend AUC.

Recommendations

Here are some starting recommendations:

1. Administrators should hold periodic meetings of representatives from colleges around the world so they can get acquainted and study ways to communicate and work together.
2. Higher-education institutions should listen carefully to their constituents, examine micro and external macro influences on their institutions, and modify their roles to meet constituent expectations and needs.
3. Leaders and constituents must recognize that differences between schools are inevitable; thus, the common bond of unity should be agreement on mission rather than on methodologies of how that mission is accomplished.
4. Schools should collaborate and cooperate to share strengths of divisions and institutions. ✍



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