

Academic Excellence: An Adventist Priority



Administration Building, La Sierra University (LSU).

Academic excellence is an expression of our divine calling to be co-creators.

The mission statement adopted by the North American Division Board of Higher Education in 1993 says that one of the methods for carrying out our mission is “the pursuit of truth with rigor and excellence.”¹

The above statement indicates that academic excellence—by which I mean the commitment to understand God and creation and to share the results of our inquiries with others—can and must be a priority for Seventh-day Adventist higher education. This is true for several reasons: Academic excellence:

- Is a response to the goodness of God’s world;
- Is a reflection of our status as creatures made in the image of God;
- Is an expression of our divine calling to be co-creators with God;
- Is one way to serve God’s world; and
- Is a response to God’s call to tell the truth.

Briefly taking these points in order:

Responding to the Goodness of God’s World

1. *Academic excellence is a response to the goodness of God’s world.* Because all of reality is rooted in God, it is fundamentally good. Trying to understand it, then, is also a worthwhile activity. And contributing to its flourishing is also good. Because God’s creation is good, our best efforts on its behalf are entirely appropriate.

Early heretics urged Christians to see God’s world as anything but good. The world was something to escape from, not to enjoy, appreciate, or celebrate. More recently, Christian pietist groups—including some Adventist strains—have shunned contact with most of God’s world, looking forward to their deliverance from it through death or the end of history.

But Christian faith affirms that the world is God’s. We see God in the story of Jesus of Nazareth, a flesh-and-blood human being rooted in the world. To reject the world as undeserving of understanding or engagement is to reject the God of creation and incarnation.

A Reflection of Our Status

2. *Academic excellence is a reflection of our status as creatures made in the image of God* (see Genesis 1). The psalmist notes that we were made “a little lower than God.” This does not mean that we either can

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A group of La Sierra University students meets for an informal discussion on the Founders' Green.



Library, La Sierra University.

or should seek to *be* God. But it is a reminder that we possess the capacity for greatness.

Since we are made in God's image, but a little lower than deity, we can strive to do good work. We can refuse to accept mediocrity. We can accept the challenge to be excellent scholars and to live out the meaning of our identities as God's image-bearers.

Co-Creators—A Divine Calling

3. *Academic excellence is an expression of our divine calling to be co-creators.* Many Christians have seen, in the Genesis narrative of humanity's call to cultivate the first garden, a symbol of God's charge for us to participate in the ongoing activity of divine creation. God acts and thus creates—the orthodox Christian tradition has consistently said—through secondary causes. God creates through rivers and winds, through the force of gravity and the invigorating touch of sunlight, through badgers and bacteria, and through human beings.

As one recent writer put it: “Does not God make cities as well as stars? Is God's self-gift, the Spirit's presence, less intimately and immediately constitutive of promises and symphonies than of plutonium and silt?”²

To do good work as scholars, therefore, is to join God in the task of creating a world worth calling good. A scientific discovery that leads to a technological breakthrough, an artistic innovation that transforms the human imagination, a legal argument that revolutionizes the lives of an oppressed group, a philosophical synthesis that gives us a new sense of who we are—all help enact God's creative intentions for the world. To embrace academic excellence is to see the possibilities for

co-creation inherent in the dramatic and not-so-dramatic tasks we undertake as scholars.

Helping the Church

4. *Academic excellence enriches the life of the church.* Academic excellence enables the church to more effectively fulfill its vocation. The church cannot touch the cultures it serves unless it understands them. Its teachings cannot mediate God's grace to its members and the rest of God's creation unless its message undergoes the most careful scrutiny. It cannot properly discern its place in God's world unless it understands itself, God, and the world God has made.

Shoddy or timid scholarship is easy. They require neither discipline nor courage. The stories of those who have suffered for speaking their convictions throughout Christian history—think of Galileo or Luther—make it clear why it's easier to keep silent or simply to repeat whatever passes for conventional wisdom. But it is equally clear that we must seek the grace to be both disciplined and courageous if we wish to contribute to our community of faith.

Serving God's World

5. *Academic excellence is a way to serve God's world.* We do not serve the world in order to more effectively accomplish our mission. Serving the world *is* our mission. And scholarly excellence is an effective means of service. Increased knowledge, deepened scholarly insights, artistic creations, and heightened technological expertise all have the potential to make human life richer, fuller, and deeper.

However, although scholarly advances can certainly lead to greater physical, emotional, or social well-being, scholarly activity does not serve the world simply by conferring utilitarian benefits. Insights into the literature of a bygone age, the physical origins of the universe, or the behavior of an extinct species of primate can provide both understanding and joy. Whether

or not it focuses on the alleviation of suffering, excellent scholarship can be a means of touching the world with God's love.

A Call to Truth-Telling

6. *Academic excellence is a response to God's call to tell the truth.* Christians are called to be responsive to a reality they did not make—to something that is Other. Loving our neighbors as ourselves means showing respect by refusing to manipulate or deceive them. Academic excellence is an outgrowth of the Christian commitment to telling the truth. It means refusing to allow the sloth that so easily besets us to keep us from taking seriously the reality of what we study. It means honoring those with whom we communicate by being clear, responsible, and honest. Christian scholars worship a God of truth, so they cannot indulge in any kind



La Sierra University's Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) group won the 2002 World Cup, after having been awarded four previous national/international championships and the 2002 U.S. championship. Projects have included teaching high school students about how the global market works, teaching welfare-dependent individuals to become child-care providers and run their own businesses; and summer day camps that teach about the media and free enterprise. Pictured above is the SIFE presentation team on stage in Amsterdam with the World Cup trophy.



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of scholarly mediocrity that sacrifices truth to expediency.

Those who seek to practice Christian faith in academia must ever seek to hear God's clear call to excellence. This doesn't mean obsessively pursuing professional recognition, an idolatrous abandoning of friends and family members in the quest to do ever-better work, or rejecting the goodness of God's world toward which Sabbath rest points us. It *does* mean recognizing that the goodness of God's creation, our identities as God's image-bearers and our role as participants in God's creative activity, the needs of the church and the whole created order, and the call to tell the truth to and about God's world all challenge us to be not merely good people but also good scholars.

As Fritz Guy has said, academic excellence in "Adventist higher education is not a task for the timid, the apathetic, the perfunctory, the unfocused, or the impatient. Nor is it something that can be done in bits and pieces. Adventist higher education becomes a reality only when and where there is a critical mass of competent, energetic, and courageous scholars-teachers, along with a complementary critical mass of able, pre-



John Jones, dean of the School of Religion at LSU, challenges students' critical thinking skills.

pared, and serious students. At best, Adventist higher education is a difficult task. Hardly ever is it serene. Occasionally, it is frustrating. But for those of us who have dedicated our lives to it, it is worth all the effort and more—because of the good it can do for our students, for our community of faith, and for the world around us."³



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REFERENCES

1. North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists (Silver Spring, Md., 1993).
2. Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp. 51-53.
3. Fritz Guy, "Can Education Be Both 'Higher' and 'Adventist'?" *Journal of Adventist Education* 64:4 (April/May 2002), p. 8.