

# Forming Partnerships Within Adventist Higher Education



Peterson Memorial Library, Walla Walla College (WWC).

**O**vercoming barriers on the way to mutually beneficial partnerships is one of many challenges the church's higher education community will face in coming years.

In regard to competition and institutional cooperation, we can identify three distinct historical periods in Adventist higher education: the first 50 years—neither cooperation nor competition; the second 50 years—regional protectionism; and the third 50 years—mutually beneficial support and cooperation.

Nearly all of our North American four-year colleges/universities were established between 1880 and 1920. The only exceptions are two specialized medical-sciences institutions, which were founded more recently. A quick glance at North American geography reveals a nearly uniform dispersal pattern, with each school more or less equidistant from its neighbors.

This seems to indicate that the founders sought to locate each school so as to maximize service areas and facilitate student access. However, a search of existing documents produces no such master plan. Historical records suggest two major factors in founding and locating new institutions. The first and apparently primary determinant—church membership growth; the second—ease of access and communication.

Early transportation was limited to basic modes such as horses, trains, and, in a few areas, boats. Hence, college location largely depended on accessibility and economics. As the church grew and launched significant new institutions such as hospitals, food processing plants, publishing houses, and overseas work, the demand for specialized and skilled personnel grew.

Although the depression of the 1930s had an impact, North American colleges largely continued on a steady, predictable course until the end of World War II. Transportation still depended largely on the

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**By N. C. Sorensen**

train. No national road system had been developed, and few college students could afford cars. Institutional competition within the system therefore remained inconsequential.

Following World War II, three factors altered the landscape in major ways: (1) Thousands of young adults returning from the war now wanted and needed advanced education; (2) More money was available for schooling; and (3) The GI Bill produced immense and largely unforeseen changes. Immediately, our colleges were taxed to the limit. Enrollment mushroomed, along with demands for new offerings and updated curricula. This obviously required new and larger facilities, as well as a greatly enhanced faculty, both in terms of numbers and preparation. The 1950s and 1960s were years of unprecedented growth.

Despite all this good news in terms of campus development and annual enrollment increases, new and nearly imperceptible pressures were building. Larger school operations required a continuous and growing supply of academically prepared high school graduates capable of serious college-level pursuits. It now became imperative to guard colleges' recruitment bound-

and—more importantly—our students.

### Examples of Partnerships

In his recent review of our “system,” Fred Baus, executive director of the Colleges of Worcester Consortium, Inc., identified a number of credible partnerships. Among the more notable accomplishments are a common retirement program, joint insurance efforts, coordinated health polices, Adventist Colleges Abroad, engineering affiliation arrangements, visiting chairpersons, faculty exchange opportunities, summer life-sciences offerings in a variety of locations, etc. In addition, selected academic disciplines such as librarians, records personnel, historians, theologians, and modern languages personnel convene regularly for professional growth and dialogue. All of these initiatives have largely resulted from the inspiration of a visionary educator whose unflagging effort inspired others to join the cause. Institutional strategies for promoting such partnerships have been virtually nonexistent.

We can surely praise what occurred serendipitously during the last half of the 20th century with respect to joint endeavors. However, today's environment requires a more comprehensive and coordinated approach. Institutional leadership must be both unequivocal in its commitment and imaginative in its implementation if meaningful change is to occur. There are major hurdles to surmount if we are to become more efficient and effective. Here are five major challenges:

#### 1. Distance

Think of it: from Florida to Washington State, from south-



**Eric Ayars, assistant professor of physics at WWC, helps students to better understand the use of lasers.**

aries, which largely matched church administrative districts. This resulted in protectionism, accompanied by a vigilant guarding of the “home turf.”

During this period, as schools expanded rapidly and matured into credible academic centers, the colleges began acquiring unique and distinctive traits or characteristics. Each had its own strengths and distinguishing heritage. Fortunately, in recent years, some of the protectionism and turf struggles have diminished.

In light of this history, it is somewhat misleading to refer to the Adventist “educational system” in North America. In truth, our schools are a group of interrelated components of a somewhat disjointed whole. But despite these and other factors such as distance, national and natural borders, and regional sensitivities, a rather impressive range of cooperative efforts has produced meaningful benefits for both our educational institutions



**Monty Buell, assistant professor of history at WWC, takes a personal interest in each student and uses interactive teaching techniques to help every individual to succeed.**



Students, faculty members, and people from the community enjoy the quiet, sacred setting of the Huebach Chapel at WWC.

ern California to Massachusetts, from central Alberta to Texas—an enormous challenge! Especially when one reads that the ideal distance for collaborative efforts is within a 20-mile radius. We can take courage in the fact that there are a few productive and effective models at the national and even international level. However, success requires special vigilance and oversight. Clearly, technology will be a dominant and critical factor as we look to the future.

### 2. Resistance to change

Change is always threatening. Academic personnel may feel that their philosophical approach or/and course content is superior. The prospect of altering what seems to work in order to accommodate off-campus entities is not attractive. The major challenges center around issues of autonomy and independence. Ensuring good processes and participation, as well as beneficial outcomes, will be crucial to getting people to buy in and claim ownership.

### 3. It sounds like more work

Administrators and faculty members who already feel overworked will be inclined to see the possibility for a lot of disruption with very little benefit. The effect on individuals will be considerable and must be counterbalanced by offsetting and obvious benefits.

### 4. Policy coordination

Schools will need to coordinate and perhaps realign poli-



Walla Walla College provides a social environment where students can interact with a variety of people through activities both on campus and off.



The original Administration Building at Walla Walla College is now quiet, as other buildings house the college's expanding programs. However, a new Administration Building will soon stand proudly in the likeness of the old.

cies relating to registration and transfers, tuition charges and credits, and compatibility of course requirements. There will also be student-life issues and coordination of residency mandates and/or restrictions.

### 5. Competition versus cooperation

Given our long history of vigorous and competitive individuality, successful cooperation will require both a carefully crafted strategy and the identification of mutual benefits within partnership agreements. We must define outcomes and expectations and commit the necessary human and monetary resources to this process, which cannot be viewed as a short-term or one-time quick-fix operation.

In summary, many factors will impede or stall consortium efforts. Most if not all can be overcome by dedicated and unrelenting effort. However, participants must see the benefits as compelling and mutually attractive, and these new partnership endeavors must create student and faculty enrichment options not otherwise available or attainable. Efficiency and productivity will improve with concerted effort. Although better programs and offerings still may not always produce large dollar savings, the results should be well worth the effort. ✍



At the time of the Higher Education Symposium (February 2002), **N. C. Sorensen** was Acting President of Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington.