



WHAT ADVENTIST COLLEGES
ARE LOOKING FOR IN

ACADEMY GRADUATES

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A higher education administrator recently appeared before a meeting of Adventist principals and conference superintendents with a message from her faculty members. She stated emphatically that K-12 educators needed to do a better job of preparing their students for college. Although the administrator hoped for a helpful conversation, the educators felt they were being accused of doing a poor job. There was a high level of anger and misunderstanding within and outside of the meeting.

That reminds us of a story told of grandparents who overhear a conversation between their son and daughter-in-law, who are frustrated because the college teachers say the high school preparation was terrible for their child entering college, and that's why he's flunking out. Several years earlier, the parents had heard the high school teachers blaming the junior high teachers, and before that it was

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the junior high teachers blaming the elementary school teachers. At this point, the grandparents say to the parents, “We told you that you should never have children!”

We need to get beyond this “finger pointing” to begin a collaborative conversation, K-16, in the Seventh-day Adventist Church about the expectations and standards for each level of education.

To help open that conversation, during summer 2006, in preparation for a breakout session at the North American Division K-12 teachers’ convention, the authors of this article, all college/university presidents, polled all faculty members at Pacific Union College (Angwin, California) and Southern Adventist University (Collegedale, Tennessee), as well as key academic leaders at La Sierra University (Riverside, California), to determine the top 10 traits they were looking for in academy graduates. We then identified commonalities in the results for each campus and prepared the following list, which is not presented in order of priority. These traits presume that academy graduates have taken a strong college preparatory curriculum and meet the admissions requirements of the church’s tertiary institutions in North America. The short descriptions following each trait offer a few ideas about how each trait might be defined, and could easily be expanded into a more comprehensive list.

Ten Essential Traits for College Students

1. Three Essential Academic Abilities

If students are well prepared in the following three areas, they have the fundamental tools central to all disciplines. This will dramatically increase their ability to complete college coursework successfully.

a. Writing

The ability to write well, using standard English grammar and style (i.e., good punctuation and spelling, clear presentation of ideas). Students should be able to write both a basic research paper and a standard five-paragraph essay based on their training in secondary-level classes.

b. Reading

The ability to read, comprehend, and follow a written



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argument is fundamental for success in all college classes. A background in literature including American, English, and world literature is essential. A love of reading gained in part by reading many books before coming to college will prepare students for the rigorous requirements of higher education.

c. Mathematics

Proficiency in mathematics through Algebra II and Geometry (and better yet, Trigonometry) will qualify students to enter college-level math classes without having to take remedial work. A strong background in mathematics helps students to think logically and abstractly. Some research indicates that one of the

best predictors of success in college and employment in high-growth, high-performance jobs is enrollment in higher-level mathematics courses in high school.¹

2. Spirituality

Academy students who show a commitment to a lifelong spiritual journey by having a faith relationship with Jesus Christ are important for a Christian college campus, as this indicates their desire to begin a long-term conversation between faith and learning. In academy, they have begun to develop the ability to know, read, and interpret the Bible’s teachings and stories, as well as the writings of Ellen White in their historical context, and are learning to apply them to the modern world. They have chosen an intentionally Christian educational environment. However, they need to have confronted enough diversity of thought to not be thrown off balance when they hear diverse perspectives expressed in their college classes.

3. Intellectual Curiosity

Incoming students should demonstrate a willingness to seek knowledge beyond the surface level through intense study. They must be willing to think critically about everything, including religion. They should be willing to listen to new ideas and to challenge assumptions. They must be able to think for themselves regarding conflicting ideas in order to become “thinkers and not mere reflectors.” They should have developed the ability to think, not just memorize, and

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should exhibit a passionate curiosity.

4. Self-Motivated Learners

In addition to being intellectually curious, college freshmen need to have the discipline to be self-motivated learners who can fulfill class requirements without relying on external motivators such as grades. They should also have a willingness to seek knowledge beyond the surface level through

intense study. They should actively participate in classes, thereby exhibiting the courage to become engaged. They should take responsibility for their own learning and possess a teachable spirit. They should be regular in class attendance. They should be able to work without supervision, but also understand the importance of collaborating with a team and seeking help when necessary.

5. Service

Adventist colleges want students who value work and service for God and their fellow human beings and who show empathy and compassion through involvement in service projects and individual efforts. Such students embrace a global perspective by seeking to learn about their communities and how they can serve. They are eager to discover what it means to be part of a global church and world community and to find solutions to alleviate the suffering of the less fortunate. Learning at least one other

language is connected to this, as it demonstrates a commitment to integrating oneself into the global world of service.

6. Moral Integrity

Success in college has more to do with attitudes and personal habits than with the acquiring of academic information. Students need to take the long view, seeking the ultimate good rather than shortcuts to success. They must understand that it never pays to cheat, and commit to honesty in all they do. They should have a strong sense of self-responsibility, self-management, self-efficacy, and altruism. They also need to know how to learn from their mistakes. They should be willing to seek advice and support from others in their academic, psychological, and spiritual challenges.

7. Study Skills

To be successful, students must have the ability to find and evaluate information from print and electronic



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sources. They need to be able to analyze facts and synthesize ideas. They should be able to understand instructions and assigned material, take notes, outline material, and manage long- and short-term assignments. They should have begun to develop research skills.

8. Respect for Others

Desirable students appreciate ethnic, gender, income, and religious diversity and are willing and able to understand people who seem different from them, even those who don't fit their stereotypes of "the good Adventist," "the good Christian," or "the good American." They show empathy and care for others.

9. Participation in School Activities

Colleges want students who have shown an interest in a wide variety of academy activities as participants and leaders, including music, sports, service, witness opportunities, clubs, student government, and local church activities.

10. Time Management Skills

The rapid pace of life in the higher education setting can be overwhelming for students who lack time-management skills. Incoming students need know how to lead a balanced life, which means finding time for academics, co-curricular activities, and spiritual, physical, and social development.

This will help to prepare them for busy and fulfilling lives after graduation. They should have acquired and practiced these skills in high school.

After reading the descriptions of these 10 traits, we can hear some of you saying, "Not even the Angel Gabriel could meet these qualifications!" We must recognize that at each stage of life, human beings are a work in progress, with some traits stronger than others. By setting goals that can be developed and strengthened, we set a high standard that will help all of us grow as lifelong learners, even after we get to heaven.

Why Is This Important?

Experts assert that many of the traits needed for success in the freshman year of college are the same as those required for success in the workplace. It is estimated that poor preparation by students in high school results in \$17 billion being spent each year in the United States on remedial classes by higher education, businesses, students, and families. According to the same report, professors and employers agree that "four out of 10 graduates are not prepared for college or good jobs."² Since remedial classes do not count toward a degree, they take extra effort and money. Students unprepared for college work can pull down the standards of an entire class if professors are not vigilant. This is not a problem only for Adventist colleges. Even very elite universities with long waiting lists have as many as 50 percent of their entering students enrolled in some kind of remedial education. Students who don't succeed in college or the workplace don't feel good about themselves and do not fulfill their potential, which is a drain on our society and church.

At the same time, it's unrealistic and unfair to expect K-12 schools to fully ameliorate the problems created by inadequate home environments and the broader culture. Teachers can do only so much to overcome the handicaps students bring to the classroom. Some of their challenges include working with first-generation immigrant



Some of the qualities colleges seek in academy graduates: (top) the ability to analyze facts and synthesize ideas; (bottom left) an interest in a wide variety of activities, including sports, music, student government, and outreach; and (bottom right) a respect for the value of work.

children who have limited English skills, and helping children from economically disadvantaged homes who have not experienced the enrichment of travel, books, music lessons, and conversation that most middle-class children enjoy. Often, these children see little of their parents, who are working two or three jobs just to eke out a living. Despite these challenges, teachers must not give up because there are so many examples of successful individuals who have risen above their circumstances because of the dreams educators and families have instilled in their hearts. On the other hand, educators also see examples of

privileged children who fail to live up to their potential.

As we seek to establish meaningful collaborations between K-12 and higher education, both must be seen as equal partners. The efforts need to be coordinated, division-wide, rather than each teacher trying to determine the expectations for himself or herself.

The North American Division Office of Education already has a “Course of Study” with major objectives for each grade and subject, which is a good beginning.³ Since the creation of these standards, the North American Division “Journey to Excellence” program, formerly known as AE21, has established 10 major goals and key learnings for each subject.⁴

Unfortunately, tertiary academic specialists were not involved in the preparation of these goals for specific academic areas, except for some college education department personnel who provided their expertise in the area of methodology. A concerted effort to include the input of college professors in specific disciplines and education professors along with K-12 teachers and curriculum specialists will provide the necessary expertise to produce even more excellent standards in the future.

Several national and regional commissions have already focused on the alignments between secondary and

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Broad Implications for Academies and Colleges

The alignment of K-12 and post-secondary expectations, whether for college or the workplace, must become a priority in our church’s educational program. We must reinforce each other’s efforts to become more effec-

A College Enrollment Director’s Dream for Academy Graduates

- I am looking for students who have done as much as possible, not the least amount to get by.
- I am looking for students who have been involved in extracurricular activities and leadership. I would rather have a student with a 3.5 GPA who is involved in many things than a 4.0 who has been buried in books for four years.
- I am looking for students with a strong concept of self-responsibility, and who are willing to stand for something.
- I am looking for students who can give a meaningful response to the question “Why are you going to college?”
- I am looking for students who will have a positive influence through academics, spirituality, and/or social leadership on my campus.
- I am looking for students who can question things and make decisions for themselves.
- I am looking for students who are genuinely interested in the positive differences that a spiritual campus community provides and who want to help create such a community.
- I am looking for students who recognize what a privilege Seventh-day Adventist education is.
- I am looking for students who either have goals beyond college, or who are actively seeking them.
- I am looking for students I will be proud to recommend to graduate schools and employers.
- I am looking for students (and parents) who not only have their own beliefs and views, but are tolerant of others’ beliefs and views.
- I am looking for students who prefer activism over consumerism.
- I am looking for students who are eager to take advantage of international learning opportunities to broaden their perspective of the world community.
- I am looking for students who seek the advice of faculty and staff as friends and mentors, instead of viewing them as trying to control their lives.
- I am looking for students who want to change the world, not conform to it, and realize they have the ability to do that.
- I am looking for students who view graduation as just the beginning of lifelong education (lifelong learners vs. hoop-jumpers).

higher education.⁵ Some of these are professional associations for various disciplines. At the state level, the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Com-

munity Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California have outlined “habits of mind” essential for success, which include the following:



Colleges want students who are willing to listen to new ideas and challenge assumptions.

- academic literacy and critical thinking
- making the reading/writing connection
- reading competencies
- comprehension and retention
- depth of understanding
- depth of analysis and interaction with the text
- writing competencies
- invention
- arrangement
- style/expression
- listening and speaking competencies in academic settings
- additional listening and speaking competencies expected of students whose home language is not English, and
- technology competencies.⁶

These various commission studies should be combined with the church’s already outstanding work done on K-12 standards to develop college-readiness standards in order to raise Adventist education to an even higher level of performance. Since so much work has already been done, this may not take as long as beginning without anything in place. In the meantime, teachers can use these studies to give focus to their teaching.

Specific Suggestion for Colleges

College departments and schools should take the initiative to meet with their cohorts at the academy level to discuss the issue of appropriate student preparation for their particular discipline.

Specific Implications for Academies

Academies can take some specific steps to better prepare students for college. Currently, a big gap exists between what happens in high school and what students experience when they arrive at college. It’s not enough to tell teenagers that “it’s going to be a lot tougher in college, so be prepared.” Many students over the years have deliberately planned an easy load in their senior year in order to have a fun year, but does this really help them get ready for college?

A Veteran Science Faculty Member’s Dream

I want students who are learning how to think for themselves.
 I do not want students who have only memorized information.
 I want students who have received an education, rather than students who have been “trained.”
 I want students who are motivated to learn and succeed.
 I do not want extremely bright students, if they are not motivated.
 I want students who can speak for themselves.
 I do not want students who, when they come to my office with their parents, the parents do all the talking.
 I want students who know and use the “Golden Rule.”
 I do not want students who are self-centered and self-serving.
 I want students with an inquiring mind, willing to consider concepts that are foreign to them.
 I do not want students who have memorized the 28 fundamental beliefs, but do not understand basic Christianity.
 I want students with a broad variety of interests, or a desire to pursue this in college.
 I do not want “one-dimensional” nerds who are only interested in one thing.
 Of course all of the above is part of a maturing process, and very few students will have it all when they enter college. Some of them come from very sheltered and “closed” backgrounds. Some have never had to make a really significant decision because decisions were made for them by someone else. Some have never been encouraged to ask “why” of an authority figure or organization. I believe the best question anyone can ask is “why.”

We know some high school seniors may be receptive to greater rigor.

A bipartisan group called Achieve found that more than half of college students said that high school left them unprepared for the work and study habits expected of them in college. They ranked oral communication, science, and math as the top areas of need. Sixty-five percent of college students and 77 percent of those who are not in college but in the workplace say they would have applied themselves more in high school if they had known what college would be like. Sixty-two percent say they would have taken a harder course of study. About 80 percent of both groups say they would have worked harder if their high schools had been more demanding.⁷

Based on an analysis of statistics from the High School Survey of Student Engagement, Martha McCarthy and George Kuh make the following recommendations to better prepare students for college:⁸

1. Increase study time. (Forty-seven percent of all high school seniors report spending three or fewer hours per week studying outside of school.)

2. Read more books. (Only two percent of seniors reported spending 11 or more hours per week on assigned readings.)

3. Write more papers. (“Only 4 percent of [surveyed seniors] wrote more than 10 papers longer than five pages during the academic year, and just 8 percent wrote more than 10 papers that were three to five pages long.”)

4. Take mathematics classes beyond Algebra II. (“Even though almost four-fifths of the career and vocational students said they intend to enroll in college, less than half of them [49%] took a math course in their senior year.”)

5. Engage in community service. (Fewer than 10 percent of seniors did so.)

6. Identify academic deficiencies before the high school senior year, and have seniors work on those deficiencies.

Some academy teachers place part

of the blame on Adventist colleges for the problem of unprepared college freshmen. They suggest that since Adventist colleges will accept almost any student, it doesn't seem to matter if students lack a College Preparatory diploma, have low ACT or SAT scores, or poor grades. Therefore, students know they really don't have to apply themselves in academy in order to get into college. Some academy teachers also feel pressure from the principal or parents to graduate students who have not really met the academic standards that should be required for a high school diploma. They ask when Adventist colleges are going to toughen up their standards to help them motivate students.

Adventist colleges face some of the same pressures. In a sense, our schools combine the role of a two-year community college and a four-year university. Adventist constituents expect our colleges to allow all students at least a chance at higher education. Given this philosophy, Adventist colleges can slightly tighten requirements but will face the same pressures being experienced by academies. Therefore, we need to make sure that we have strong transition programs at the college level, with staff trained to provide remedial classes, tutors to help struggling students, and counselors available to help students handle stress. With a better alignment of K-12 and postsecondary standards, we can give students with a wide variety of learning needs specific standards to focus upon and provide teachers with tools to assess those standards. As one of our college faculty members wrote, “We just have to realize that the cookie does not arrive fully baked upon entry. But the dough should have certain characteristics.”

Conclusion

We need to find positive solutions without playing the “blame game.” Divisions and unions should make the identification of specific standards with appropriate assessment tools a high priority in order to help improve the transition from academy to college or

to the world of work. This will also help improve the learning climate on academy campuses and bring into focus to the learning goals of each student.

May our conversations help bring about a better alignment of standards so that Adventist education can become more seamless in its program and better serve its constituents. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. See <http://www.nadeducation.org/dynamic.html?wspID=259>.
4. See <http://www.nadeducation.org/category.html?wscID=137> and <http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/product/keys.phtml>.
5. Special appreciation to Gilbert Abella, reference and instruction librarian at Pacific Union College, for conducting the research to find these resources.
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