



Niels-Erik Andreasen

# Advancing in a

## Thoughts on Adventist Higher Education in Times of Crises

# Different Direction

**H**igher education is struggling for its future, if one is to believe the headlines. The most recent cause is the disruption to daily life and the economy by COVID-19.<sup>1</sup> Troubles began when college students were sent home last spring due to the pandemic. With them went reimbursements for unused room-and-board payments. Some, but not all, colleges cautiously reopened their campuses for students in the fall of 2020. Others will continue teaching online or with a blending of the two.

The safety measures accompanying the reopening of campuses look more like an obstacle course than the familiar warm, welcoming letter to new and returning students. Many faculty are concerned about their own safety and that of their students

and other school staff in face-to-face instruction, at least until a majority of the population has been vaccinated. Meanwhile, across the United States and worldwide, jobs have been lost, and for many, family resources for education have shrunk. To cope with the negative financial impact, many institutions have resorted to layoffs, furloughs, and hiring freezes in an attempt to bring revenue and expenses into line. Some schools have sought public assistance. Governments have appropriated some funds, and generous alumni have given gifts to replace lost revenue.<sup>2</sup> But it will not be easy for colleges and universities to recover, according to higher education pundits,<sup>3</sup> and many expect big financial losses in the months ahead, which will necessitate emergency borrowing for operations.

That current situation is aggravated

by the fact that some segments of U.S. higher education were already struggling before the virus, especially smaller private colleges and some regional public institutions. Adventist higher education is situated among the former. The summit organized by North American Division (NAD) education leaders in Chicago, Illinois, August 2018<sup>4</sup> had already warned of emerging challenges awaiting NAD Adventist colleges and universities—continuous and widespread enrollment declines and relentless cost increases. The general decline in enrollment is due in part to a drop in the college-age population that has continued into the current decade. It impacts both public and private institutions, especially in the central, northern, and eastern re-

gions of the U.S. For Adventist higher education, additional factors play a role, having to do with demographic changes in our NAD churches (e.g., smaller families and aging membership) in addition to the cost factors.

The Chicago summit proposed concrete action plans in response to these and future trends.<sup>5</sup> Among them are shared back-office services, a commitment to online teaching, consolidation and segmentation of institutions, and—most difficult of all—slowing the cost increases of higher education. All are promising action plans and would go some distance toward strengthening Adventist higher education, once implemented. The cost of college education, like the cost of housing, has increased more rapidly than family income for most people in recent decades, making it difficult for them to afford private college for their children without scholarships or steep tuition discounts. That has put downward pressure on net tuition revenue and the ability of many colleges to meet their budgets. All this had been known for quite some time, and then came the virus!

Below are some modest ideas in response to the ongoing threat facing our colleges and universities both generally and in light of the virus. They are not new. None of them is easy. But they, or something like them, may be necessary if NAD tertiary education is to survive the next difficult years. The question before us is this: How can we continue to provide the vaunted quality of Adventist higher education during this time of stress, while keeping our institutions financially viable? This essay is joining many others in asking for a recalibration of the way educational services are delivered. And, of course, it assumes aggressive recruitment, despite demographic challenges.

### **1. “We are not retreating—we are advancing in a different direction!”<sup>6</sup>**

How does one respond to setbacks and retreating (advancing in a different direction)? During one of my own

difficult periods dealing with a downturn, a colleague advised: (1) Thank God for crises and setbacks; (2) Do not waste them; and (3) Use them to make necessary decisions, and then implement them. While that sounds clever, it is also troubling. Should one wait for downturns to correct errors made during upturns? What are the potential implications of advancing in a different direction? Might this require an operational retreat in preparation for a tactical advance? Could that even work for education?

“Advancing backward” for a college facing stressful times may mean retrenchment (“right-sizing” is the politically correct term), consolidating, and refocusing the institution instead of merely expanding, extending, and enlarging it. Such steps taken in times of stress generally begin by reductions in faculty and staff because their remuneration represents the largest expense item and is therefore the greatest financial stress factor in the school’s operations. But this by itself may quickly lead to new challenges as the workload increases for those who remain behind, unless the school simultaneously makes different kinds of reductions. This brings up the matter of course offerings in relationship to students enrolled and the institution’s capacity to teach them. And that, in turn, will raise important questions about educational quality. But a major issue is that many smaller institutions (and maybe some large ones, too) simply offer too many courses, majors, and services, with less than a critical mass of students in each course and program. A way to visualize that compares the considerable size of our college or university catalogues, which list all the programs and subjects taught, with the catalogues of much larger institutions. The similarity in size may be instructive. How can smaller institutions afford to offer so many programs and courses, given their modest enrollment levels? And as

a corollary, does the proliferation of majors, programs, concentrations, electives, and course offerings really make for better education?

Of course, good reasons for expanding our educational offerings, as illustrated by our extensive college catalogues, are easy to find—among them, the wish to respond to the many and varied interests of all the prospective students. Add to that our desire to enlarge the campuses and their facilities, and to raise their profile in the community. These are good

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reasons. But they can cost dearly, with the result that some institutions operate with structural deficits.

A regular deficit happens in a year during which expenses outstrip revenue for some reason. A structural deficit is built into the budget as a normal part of operations. It is covered by expected enrollment and tuition increases. The institution hopes that these regular costs will be covered by growth, but there is no guarantee. If that growth ever stops, the deficit becomes permanent and difficult to erase. It may end up drowning an institution in red ink, eventually leading to its clo-

sure by its boards. Such institutions are particularly vulnerable during the current pandemic, which threatens both perennial tuition increases and needed enrollment upticks. Unhappily, this scenario appears to be the situation with some smaller private colleges and universities like ours in NAD, and it probably was the impetus behind the Chicago summit on Adventist higher education in 2018.

Can one right-size a small college without damaging the quality of its ed-

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ucation and sending it on a further downward spiral?

## **2. Aggressive pruning and its impact on quality education**

“You will never harvest any grapes from this vine,” my neighbor in St. Helena, California, said, upon seeing how incompetently and timidly I pruned our seedless Thompson grapevine last spring. In fact, only correct and aggressive pruning pro-

duces a good harvest. Can that be true also for small Christian colleges and universities in a time of stress? Clearly, this is not a pleasant thought. So how aggressively do we need to “prune,” and what will that do for the quality of Adventist higher education?

Some will say pruning a college should involve only cutting budgets in order to bring them into balance and to avoid deficits, especially structural ones, and leaving everything else intact. That generally involves reducing faculty and staff by right-sizing what is commonly referred to as the student/teacher ratio. Consider this thought experiment for a moment. How many students do we need to make our courses and programs viable, and how many teachers do we need to employ to teach them within a balanced budget?

Place the teachers, 50, 75, 100 or more, in social distance on campus, and distribute an equal number of students around each teacher. That will give a visual student/teacher ratio for the campus. Every college and university should figure out for itself what that number ought to be. It may be different for graduate, professional, and undergraduate students, and it should consider distance and part-time students. Now calculate the net tuition paid by each student (an average will do), multiply that by the number in each student circle, and compare that to the Human Resources budget for their teacher, including salary, benefits, office help, research, conference travel, etc. Multiply this by the number of circles, and that will produce the institution’s revenue and expense budget in the instruction function.

One can do the same for the auxiliaries (room and board). Additionally, the total institutional budget will in most cases include some non-tuition revenue on the plus side, and on the expense side, costs for the operation of the campus, management, financial services, and obligations, academic and student support, etc., all to

be funded by what is left after the instruction expense.

Common percentages of the total budget assigned to each of the functions noted above, including instruction, in a typical four-year private college are readily available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).<sup>7</sup> These percentages will vary somewhat with the local economy, remuneration levels, and tuition charges. All these numbers and ratios can be put on a single page for most small institutions and will quickly show if a school’s budget is in balance or facing a deficit.

The most important number/ratio and therefore the most crucial is the first, due to its size. How many students for each teacher? Conventional wisdom holds that in traditional residential, private undergraduate colleges with 12-unit teaching loads per term, a teacher-to-student ratio of 1 to 10/11 or below will likely lead to structural deficits and eventual closure; a ratio of 1 to 12/13 may be barely workable; and a ratio of 1 to 14/16 and above will likely work well. The right student-teacher ratio is an important indicator of stability and success. So far, these comments have assumed a typical Adventist residential college or university with a regular fulltime faculty.

During the pandemic, many institutions have taught all or some of their students online and off campus. That has caused a drop in auxiliary income, but little if any cost reduction in the instructional areas, except when colleges share some students, teachers, and tuition revenue, as proposed by the Chicago summit. Virtual colleges, teaching all their students online by mostly contracted faculty, will use a different financial model not considered here. Many of them are for-profit institutions.

The COVID-19 faculty layoffs, furloughs, and hiring freezes throughout higher education are intended to im-

prove the student/teacher ratios at a time of enrollment uncertainty. But what toll will that take on the quality of education, and how can that be mitigated?

### 3. Management by objectives

Management by objectives is a formula made popular by the late management guru, Peter Drucker. How could that help colleges and universities during COVID-19? Is it one of those things one implements during times of downturn because issues were neglected during times of upturn? Or does it represent what should be standard operating procedures? Educators frequently frown upon this management formula, thinking it is focused only upon money. But for the purposes of this discussion, it deals with the total educational objectives we seek for our students. These include personal development, spiritual, social, and ethical formation, preparation for a life-work, religious understanding, how to relate to the church's mission, acquisition of valuable skill sets, international orientation, multifaceted learning opportunities, even undergraduate research, all concluding with a diploma or degree certifying that quality learning took place. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the college administration, the chief purveyors of all these educational objectives will always be the faculty. They must be hired, supported, and funded, and they are the principal managers of the educational objectives.

Most college programs of study (majors)—and general education, too—begin with teachers determining what students ought to learn in their respective programs. The faculty build the curriculum under the watchful eye of deans and chairs, and keep in mind requirements of accreditation and certification organizations. Occasionally, a class is added to explore a new topic, or to benefit from the expertise of a new teacher. Rarely are classes dropped from the program. When the minds of students

“collide” in a friendly way with the minds of teachers in these courses, education takes place! But how many teachers and courses does it take for these “collisions” to happen with good learning outcomes?

During my lengthy tenure as a university administrator I met with thousands of alumni, many of whom wanted to ask about their old school: Is professor so and so still alive, and how about dean such and such—never did a question come up about the president, nor the size of the faculty, nor the growth of the campus, nor the extracurricular services and support, though they are all important topics! Clearly, individual teachers are the undisputed heroes of education. Further, I concluded that in most cases one, two, or three highly influential teachers attracted students into their classes, helped them select a major, and guided them to graduation and a life calling. That is the alumni testimony.

For this reason, I believe something can be gained for the long-term viability of the institution by redesigning teaching and learning (the curriculum) around a limited number of exceptionally well-taught courses (that is, “just enough”) to help students meet their graduation requirements, keep their credits and therefore costs down, and make it easier to complete their undergraduate degrees in four years. Breadth in learning will occur in the minds of students principally when they interact with their best teachers, not just when they shop around and select additional courses offered in the catalogue. The key here is “limited number,” “just enough” exceptionally well-taught courses enabling students to keep the number of their credits and costs down and graduate on time. Any meaningful adjustment in faculty begins with an adjustment in curriculum de-



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sign. This requires some hard choices when building the curriculum, along with quality and breath of learning when designing each course.

The result of redesigning the teaching and learning curriculum will be a rebalancing between quantity and quality in the students' educational experience. A critical mass of students in each class will also help promote student-to-student learning (a peer-tutoring approach) while keeping the student/teacher ratio at a workable level. In turn, the rest of the campus services and programs will take their cue from the economy and efficiency of the instructional sector. The academic community will set the example of educational efficiency and administrative modesty. In times of budget adjustments, faculty members often feel that the real cost problem is caused by bloated staff levels, while the staff feels that faculty positions are protected unfairly. It is always better for the one who sets the example (in this case the faculty) to call on the rest of the campus to follow.

If that approach is feasible in academic programs of study, can it also apply to the professional programs whose variety and number of courses are often mandated by external accrediting agencies? In this case, the college must determine the viability of each program by testing its ability to recruit enough students to maintain a workable student/faculty ratio throughout its mandated curriculum. Some programs may not be able to meet this expectation, even when adding general-education courses into the mix.

The objective of this sort of management is to create a student/teacher ratio that is sustainable, to rid the school of structural deficits, and to build breadth and quality of learning into the required number of courses without adding more courses than needed for graduation. Thus, the process of re-engineering does not begin with cutting faculty. It be-

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gins with the curriculum and the critical mass of students in each course of study. That is the objective by which colleges manage the instruction part of the budget, and by implication the budgets for instructional support, administration, the auxiliaries, et cetera.

But even if those practices could help higher education's budgets and stabilize college operations in a trying time, will they not in the end hurt the vaunted quality of our education? That question will not easily go away. It is a "structural question," like a "structural deficit" that returns again and again! In short, is it possible to maintain a financially viable institution of higher learning that is also educationally viable? Or, put the other way around, can an educational institution that is no longer educationally viable ever hope to become financially viable again? That lies at the heart of the structural question. To contemplate that question, consider the following illustration and final point.

**4. "Adam I achieves success by winning victories over others. But Adam II builds character by winning victories over the weaknesses in himself."<sup>8</sup>**

In this summary sentence of his book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks identifies two aspects of personal development or education, as we may call it. For convenience sake, he calls them Adam I and Adam II, where the word *Adam* means simply "man/human." "Adam I" represents the character traits that help a person

build up a great résumé during a life-long commitment to career development, promotion, achievement, and recognition; "Adam II" represents character traits that culminate in a wonderful eulogy at the conclusion of a life committed to values, service, humility, and graciousness. As we seek to apply these two aspects of personal development to Christian education facing challenges and changes, think of the first as that which students gain from a well-designed, well-taught curriculum of just enough courses to graduate on time and to qualify for their work or professional goals, and the second as the lived experiences that build and shape character as students grow and interact with others within the campus community.

Christian education is blessed by an innate understanding of both these life goals, in what Ellen G. White calls "true education."<sup>9</sup> We must never abandon either of them, no matter the severity of the crisis before us. How is that possible? Reading the book by Brooks, it becomes clear from his examples of Adam II achievers that they also develop strong résumés. They become accomplished people, but along the way, they add the most important trait—"character development," which qualifies them for the noble eulogy.

Most great résumés begin with education, generally a college degree, with its various courses, major,

grades, and graduation leading to a good job. Character development also occurs in college, but is not generally associated with the courses and majors, grades, and degrees a student may complete. No number of courses by themselves will lead to a noble character. Rather, this happens at moments of interaction between the minds of teacher and student, and often between students themselves; it happens during spiritual-life programs, extracurricular events, community outreach, and service experiences. Character is the part of education that lasts an eternity.<sup>10</sup> To achieve that ultimate goal in our education, it may not help much to fill our catalogues with ever more courses, required or elected, but it does depend upon some very good teachers, committed administrators, and trusted support staff; it takes the entire educational team working together to provide students with the best experience.

In conclusion, is it really possible by curriculum re-engineering to maintain a college education that is both financially and educationally viable? The answer is Yes, but it will be difficult, and each institution will have to find its own way through this. No one size fits all. At the end of the process, the curricula will be slimmer and where possible shorter, each program will be re-examined for viability and modification, the faculty- (and staff) to-student ratio will be pushed into a sustainable range. The faculty (and staff) will take greater responsibility for the personal development of their students. The campus will become more family-like and community oriented and learning more collegial with a renewed commitment to a life of the mind and of faith. ☞

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**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

1. Prior to COVID-19, challenges to higher education included declines in enrollment, adequate funding, governance, relevance given the changing job market, and more. See Emma Whitford, “Pandemic Worsened Public Higher Ed’s Biggest Challenges,” *Inside Higher Ed* (June 24, 2020): <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/06/24/coronavirus-pandemic-worsened-higher-eds-biggest-challenges-new-survey-shows>; and Scott Galloway, *Business Insider* (2020): <https://www.businessinsider.com/scott-galloway-colleges-must-cut-costs-to-survive-covid-2020-7?fbclid=IwAR2YTn3uecbNuWsT5a1ZQ8aokRu4tULN5i0q7GroCQtrzSVvoHriWKeMgo>.

2. In 2020, the United States government passed the CARES Act, which allocated US\$14 billion to the Office of Postsecondary Education as the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, or HEERF (see United States Department of Education, “CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund” [2020]: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/caresact.html>). Similarly, in Canada, a CA\$9 billion dollar package was allocated to assist postsecondary education (see Nathan Greenfield, “CA\$9 Billion Pandemic Support Package for Students Unveiled,” *University World News* [May 2020]: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200512155215600>); and a

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4. Debbie Michel, “Higher Ed Leaders Vote to Explore Collaboration,” *NAD News-Points* (August 13, 2018): <https://www.nadadventist.org/news/higher-ed-leaders-vote-explore-collaboration>. See also *Chicago Declaration: The Future of Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education* (August 12, 2018): <https://www.nadadventist.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/The%202018%20Chicago%20Declaration%20paper.pdf>. Additional presentations from the summit are available at <https://www.adventistthe.org/video-archive>.

5. One primary reason for the projected drop in school enrollment within the United States is that fewer babies were born during the great recession of 2007-2008. For more information on demographic trends affecting higher education, see Nathan D. Grawe, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018): <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/01/08/new-book-argues-most-colleges-are-about-face-significant-decline>.

6. Quotation attributed to Oliver P. Smith, Major General, USMC while faced with a retreat in the Pacific theater during World War II. See “Max Hastings on Oliver P. Smith’s ‘Advancing in Another Direction’” (April 2010): <http://entersection.com/posts/915-max-hastings-on-oliver-p-smiths-advancing-in-another-direction>, and also Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 159.

7. The National Center for Education Statistics is a Federal entity and the main source for data related to education at all levels in the United States: <https://nces.ed.gov/>. See also related information from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data/survey-components>.

8. David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 13.

9. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 13.

10. *Ibid.*, 17-19.