

Are Your Constituents

How College Staff Can Enhance Constituent Relations

The college can build support by offering faculty members' expertise for seminars and religious events.

By Helen Ward Thompson

ADVENTIST COLLEGE FACULTY OFTEN FEEL that their primary responsibility is to administration and students, particularly students. It is up to the administration to deal with the school's other constituencies. This is a mistake.

Faculty and staff can and ought to be prime movers in establishing positive relationships with a number of constituencies. These include parents, academy and high school teachers, local conference officers and ministers, the union, the non-SDA community, the local SDA community, and the broader church constituency.

Most of these entities are buying a pig in a poke. That is, they have extremely limited knowledge about the local college. Yet we expect their support.

At an August 18, 1991, retreat faculty and staff from Co-

lumbia Union College in Takoma Park, Maryland, tried to walk in the shoes of these entities and determine what could be done to strengthen the relationships. Their suggestions, plus others from various sources, may be helpful.

Parents

For example, many parents have limited education and little idea of what is going on at the college. Some are well educated, but things have changed since they were in college. The work world is vastly different. Traditional jobs have changed and are changing. Majors once cherished (home economics, industrial education) are struggling to stay alive. New questions arise almost every day: What is biomedical technology? What jobs does computer science prepare one for?

Some parents want to understand what the college is all about, but their only source of information is their children and their children's friends—a limited view. Some parents are deeply concerned that "things are not the way they used to be"

Buying a Pig in a Poke?

and believe that the changes are not for the better.

What can be done?

1. The parents need to get to know the faculty. Put a section for parents in the periodical or newsletter the college distributes. In each issue, spotlight a teacher and a successful student.

2. The faculty adviser of every incoming freshman should write a letter to the student's parents shortly after school opens, introducing himself or herself, assuring the parents of the advisor's concern, and telling them to call a specific number if they have questions.

3. Begin a "parents' day" when families are invited to visit and learn more about the college. Discuss with them the fact that their daughter or son is not going into the world they entered,

but a different one and needs to be prepared accordingly.

4. Find every possible way to communicate with parents about student success in classes and extracurricular activities. If every faculty member spent just five minutes a day writing a note to a parent, what a difference this would make in college-parent relationships.

Secondary Teachers

Some of the most important people to the welfare of a college are the teachers in the academies and high schools from which the college draws its students. Yet those teachers often have no idea who their colleagues are at the college. Even more tragic, the college teachers do not know

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their colleagues in the secondary schools and are, therefore, viewed as uninterested and uninformed about the problems and needs of the feeder schools.

What to do?

1. Initiate contact with colleagues in the constituent academies and high schools.

2. Volunteer to teach a class or two at the academy.

3. Offer some service, such as testing, teaching, or career counseling for academy students.

4. Provide a speakers' bureau for academy and high school classes, banquets, and chapels.

5. During college days, schedule time when the academy teachers and the college teachers can get together.

6. Have a "hot line" that academy teachers can call if they have a question or a problem.

7. Use academy teachers' recommendations to recruit student workers.

8. Track former academy students, so that their teachers know how both their students and they are doing.

9. Be sure secondary teachers know and share with their students the advantages of attending a small liberal-arts college.

10. Whenever it is advantageous to secondary students, encourage dual enrollment in academy and college.

Conference Officers and Ministers

Colleges are quick to ask the conference officers and ministers for support. Yet some of these people have never attended an SDA institution or even visited their union college. Many of them believe they could better use college subsidies in their own churches—especially their evangelistic efforts.

How can pastors and conference administrators be more favorably impressed with Adventist college education?

1. Visit constituent churches, preferably with students who are members in the locations you visit.

2. Solicit and accept specific appointments in church or conference-sponsored events, such as services and camp meetings.

3. Become actively involved in evangelism: establish churches in dark areas (set a goal—one new church each year).

4. Develop outreach activities: run soup kitchens for the needy, volunteer to teach adults to read, et cetera, coordinating activities with the conference.

5. Invite the pastors to share in the college's preaching and outreach activities.

6. Communicate with the local pastor when a student experiences success—academically, socially, or spiritually.

7. Encourage the home pastors to help mentor the students.

8. Encourage students who are planning to be baptized to ask their home pastor to perform the service.

9. Share facts about workload (to dispel the common idea that when teachers have a 12-to-14 credit-hour load, that's the number of hours they work each week).

Union Executives

The college's relationship with the union is especially crucial, since most colleges are owned by the union and the union president is the chairman of the college board. The chairman may come from another area and initially know very little about the college. But it is up to him to

persuade the conference presidents to give vital support to the college.

What to do?

1. Court the union president. Educate him about the college and its program. Invite him to lectures and special events.

2. Offer faculty members' expertise as resources for the union—seminars, survey documents, statistical analysis, music, etc.

3. Court invitations to attend union events and to make presentations, especially about areas of Christian theology that everyone feels comfortable about. Be sure to treat respectfully those with opposing views.

4. Invite the union executives to classes and faculty meetings to share concerns and to dialogue.

Local Community

The non-Adventist community often sees that small sectarian college over there as an entity set apart and designed to stay that way. A few of its programs may be advertised, but relatively little personal communication or socializing occurs between the faculty of an SDA college and the faculty or leaders in public arenas.

Suggestions for increasing that association include the following:

1. Invite civic leaders to the campus for class appointments, chapels, and other special occasions.

2. Work together with the community on common interests, e.g., earth day, health-science clinics, homeless issues, adult reading programs, etc.

3. Encourage faculty members to join local service clubs.

4. Seek ways for the college to become a resource for various community projects.

5. Recognize faculty community work.

6. Use the campus radio station to foster good will.

7. Publicize services the faculty provide to the community.

The Adventist Community

The Adventist community and the college often have a town/gown tension. The college people tend to associate together. The community, even though they share common religious beliefs with college personnel, feel left out. They don't know what's going on, except for the advertising of some programs. This results in alienation and an active gossip mill.

How can you solve this problem?

1. Since bad news travels faster than good news, make special efforts to keep the community abreast of all the good things happening at the college.

2. Seek opportunities to work with non-college-educated Adventists on projects of mutual concern.

3. Realize that even when you attend an off-campus church and participate in the services, you are still "Professor" and represent the college. Use those occasions to better the image of the college.

4. Promote the positive. Draw in the Adventist community, sharing drug seminars, parenting skills, student out-

reach activities with them. Encourage them to use campus recreational facilities.

The Broader Membership— Constituents

The church constituency often raises questions such as these: Couldn't we close our colleges, retaining perhaps only one university, and then provide counseling or social centers at universities with a large number of Adventist students? Some suggested replies include the following:

1. Recent statistics compiled by Epperson, Rice, and Minder* indicate that the longer students attend Adventist institutions, the more likely they are to remain in the church.

2. Adventist colleges and universities provide nearly all the leaders of the organized work in North America.

3. Students can still work a major part of their way through college. The bills are higher than they used to be, but so are the wages.

4. During their college years, most students find a teacher mentor. This relationship thrives not only during college but also in the years thereafter. The mentor often plays a major role in the young person's decision making. For the mentor to be an SDA is helpful in many ways.

5. As college-age young people make career and marriage choices, they "think again" about their relationship to the church and about the tenets of their faith. What better environment to do this choosing and thinking than in an SDA college?

Each college can enlarge these lists to fit its own situation. But the bottom line is this: The college's constituencies must be courted, informed, and listened to if SDA higher education is to be healthy and viable. And the faculty and staff can play a vital role. ☞

* Kenneth James Epperson, "The Relationship of Seventh-day Adventist School Attendance to Seventh-day Adventist Church Membership in the Southern Union Conference," Ed.D. dissertation, Loma Linda University Riverside, 1990; Robert W. Rice, "A

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Survey of the Relationship Between Attending Seventh-day Adventist Academies 9-12 and Subsequent Commitment to the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Denver; and Warren Earl Minder, "A Study of the Relationship Between Church-sponsored K-12 Education and Church Membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," Ed.D. dissertation, Western Michigan University, 1985.

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