

Student Life

And the Future of Adventist Higher Education

BY GARY CHARTIER

The future of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities—and of the church—depends to a significant extent on college student-life programs. The quality of student life plays a part in attracting and retaining students. While students are on campus, Adventist colleges have an opportunity—and a responsibility—to shape the quality of their spiritual, moral, social, emotional, and intellectual lives, as well as their attitudes toward the church. Therefore, colleges must give careful, reflective attention to their student-life programs, based on a serious consideration of the mission of Adventist higher education.

Shaping Adults and Christians

Education at an Adventist college or university should foster the formation of the self. It should also result in the *acculturation* of the student. Thus, these schools cannot adopt the view that what occurs outside the classroom

Through the "Speaking Out" column the JOURNAL seeks to address a variety of issues relevant to Seventh-day Adventist education, and to air the views of responsible persons concerned about these issues. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors or the Department of Education. Responses or submissions are welcome either as brief articles or letters to the editor.

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is of no concern to anyone but the individual student. At the same time, Adventist institutions must consider *what kind of acculturation* they wish to encourage. The *student-life program at an Adventist college or university has the dual role of fostering the formation of adults and Christians*: persons who have learned to think and feel and experience in appropriately Christian ways, as well as persons who possess independent judgment and the skills required for creative growth. Students "learn responsibility when they bear the consequences of their actions and inactions in an environment marked by caring and support."¹ Consequently, the mandate of the

Christian college is not to insulate and

*protect students, but to educate them as responsible Christians. . . . The question about college regulations and their applications is, . . . Do they contribute to a climate . . . that supports careful reflection, reinforces appropriate values, and encourages responsible action, and do they do so in a manner appropriate to the age and experience of our students?*²

This question is germane to the challenges faced by Adventist colleges and universities. The accreditation team that assessed Loma Linda University in 1979 inquired explicitly whether the student-life regulations then in effect at the university actually contributed to the goal of fostering responsibility:

*Are some of the more restrictive rules effective as a means of providing young people with sufficient self-knowledge and tested personal strength to cope with a world of conflicting values and lifestyles? Might not some increased opportunities for testing, making choices, and, most importantly, experiencing the results of ill-made choices be very useful in helping students to "develop self-reliant, responsible behavior"—specifically, to become less oriented to the external control of rules and more oriented toward internal controls established by personal judgment, experience, and chosen commitment to values the rules seek to instill?*³

Obviously, most if not all college and university students are immature,

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morally and spiritually. They may not always use freedom wisely. But allowing them to make mistakes may aid their personal growth more effectively than protecting them by minimizing their opportunities to make poor choices.

Joining the Curriculum and Student Life

Ernest Boyer's authoritative study, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, concludes that "the college of quality remains a place where the curricular and cocurricular are viewed as having a relationship to each other." Coordinating this relationship is crucial to the student-life program at an Adventist college or university. The academic components of Adventist higher education programs encourage creativity, critical judgment, and appreciation for dialogue. If a coherent vision is to underlie all aspects of an Adventist college or university's life, a similar openness should inform student-life policy-making. "A Christian liberal arts education cannot be impounded in classrooms and libraries, but must extend itself into the extra-curricular."⁴

Tradition and Community

The Adventist college or university is a product of the Christian tradition.

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The Adventist college or university cannot neglect its role as a transmitter of this *tradition*. It must take seriously the need to induct students into the comprehensive way of life that is Seventh-day Adventist Christianity. The question is not whether it should participate in the task of forming Christian adults, but whether the means it employs will cause its students to flourish.

An Adventist college or university is

a community of students, faculty, and staff members. If this community is to thrive, it must set appropriate standards of behavior for its members. But the Adventist institution of higher education is a special kind of community. It is an agency of the church. As such, it should exhibit a commitment to the distinctive kind of community experience that ought to characterize the life of the church. Just as equality and empowerment are worthy goals to be sought within the church, they are also worthy goals for the church's institutions. As psychologist Sheridan McCabe observes, if one is forced to conform to seemingly unjustifiable behavioral standards "in the name of a religious tradition and obligation, should he accept that tradition as meaningful and follow that authority?" McCabe goes on to note the paradox that

in order to be effective in its very mission . . . [the church-related colleges or university] must abandon its restrictive . . . approach. It is not until the student has the freedom to . . . question the very bases of his religion that he can truly and honestly accept it. Not until he takes the risk of losing his faith will he finally find and totally embrace it. Not until he is given responsibility for his own Christian life can he accept and exercise it.⁵

The Adventist college or university

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student represents the church's future. And, even in the present, he or she can help determine the church's priorities and shape its agenda. Thus, the church's expectations cannot simply be forced upon students. Our youth are part of the community of faith, and of the campus community, with its traditional self-governance prerogatives. Therefore, these students should participate in the definition of those expectations.

Training Leaders

An important goal of Adventist higher education is training the church's future leaders. To train for leadership, students need opportunities to develop appropriate skills—and this means opportunities to make decisions *and* to make mistakes.

Policies that too closely proscribe student actions may do more than retard the development of capable leaders for the church. They may encourage the development of personalities that thrive in—and thus sustain—rigid organizational climates. Such policies foster hostility toward the church and its educational system, and hamper students' faith development. And, in fact, according to the recent Valuegenesis study, excessive regulation of their behavior probably contributes little to students' progress toward Christian maturity. "Strictness of enforcement [by educational institutions] of stan-

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dards concerning popular culture (caffeinated drinks, rock music, dancing, movies, and competitive sports) is not related to either faith maturity or denominational loyalty." And "enforcement of standards important to the Adventist way of life (Sabbath observance, diet, exercise, modest dress, and sexual behavior)" promotes "denominational loyalty but not faith maturity."⁶

Students are not the only ones who suffer ill effects when the student-life environment is too highly structured. Student-life personnel and other administrators are also affected by their resultant relationships with students. People who entered their profession expecting to nurture students may find that disciplinary responsibilities build

walls between them and the very people they want to serve. This can exact a considerable emotional toll. Student-life officers who doubt the efficacy of certain college and university standards may feel their integrity is compromised when they must require compliance with these rules.

Rethinking Contract Theory

Adventist educational institutions have often relied on a "contract theory" to justify their expectations about student behavior. Students accept institutional jurisdiction when they enroll, it is argued, and therefore have no standing to question student-life policies. But this stance is less than compelling. Even if an Adventist institution has the right to behave in this way, the question remains whether it ought to. Does such a stance adequately reflect the concern for Christian community that should undergird the Adventist college or university's mission? Further, the contract theory is a

legal fiction which does not recognize the reality . . . of the student-institutional relationship. . . . Also such a contract is a contract of adhesion . . . or one that is neither a product of equal bargaining between two parties or voluntarily entered into. Students really have no choice in the matter because they have no power position from which to disagree with the institution. Because the courts are increasingly likely to regard such contracts as ones of adhesion . . . colleges will probably continue to move away from this theory of control over students. . . .?

No Adventist institution can afford to wait for a legal confrontation before it chooses an approach to discipline based on respect for student autonomy.

Student Life Policies and Retention

Finally, Adventist colleges and universities must take into account the recruitment/retention impact of student-life policies. An Adventist institution cannot make concessions when key elements of its identity are at stake, but it must be flexible about less central matters. "Many SDA youth are troubled by the difference between standards for behavior in their homes and the more stringent ones in their schools. . . ." observes a recent report by a team of educational marketing consultants. "Does

that difference in regulations negatively affect Adventist college and university students? Probably.”⁸ Students who find the cost of Adventist education daunting will hardly feel *more* enthusiastic if they conclude that they are paying for the privilege of being treated like preteens.

Ideas for Implementation

Each Adventist institution of higher learning can take a variety of steps to create a community of Christian adults. For example, it could eliminate from its student handbook regulations that mandate closing times for residence halls, requiring only that students provide the institution with emergency contacts if they expect to be away at unusual hours. It could end restrictions on the consumption of coffee, tea, and meat, and the operation of television sets and video cassette players in residence halls. It could cease to discipline students for dress-code infractions no longer viewed as cause for concern by the church at large (such as ones involving hair length, skirt length, jewelry, and makeup), replacing the relevant rules where appropriate with voluntary guidelines. It could cease to suspend or expel students for dancing or consensual nonmarital but non-adulterous sexual behavior—instead, offering them counseling services where appropriate. And it could seek alternatives to suspension or expulsion for such self-destructive behavior as substance abuse, using other forms of discipline⁹ and counseling. (Expelling students who promote the purchase and/or use of tobacco, alcohol, and other harmful drugs may continue to be appropriate.)

This does not suggest that the consumption of alcohol is not injurious to the body; that students would not be better off if they refrained from eating meat or drinking coffee; or that the Adventist college or university should not clearly convey to its students its understanding of what responsible, flourishing human life is like. But positive behavior changes rarely come about as the result of punishment. Punishment can be a source of resentment rather than repentance. Modeling appropriate behavior for students and inviting them into a caring community in which they will not need to engage in

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self- and other-destructive behavior will be far more effective in the long run.

Punishment must logically relate to the consequences of a student’s action. Otherwise, the student may ask whether the action is really as harmful to others or to herself as she has been told. Also, when the mores of the church change, the Adventist college or university is placed in an untenable position if it seeks to enforce rules whose importance is not underscored at home or in church. Adventist colleges and universities should be willing to make

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some adjustments in their expectations of students’ behavior as the church alters its expectations (though it cannot allow clearly harmful behavior, whether or not it is tolerated by the church).¹⁰ And finally, suspension (not to mention expulsion) in the middle of a term can be highly injurious to a student’s academic success. Institutional objectives might be better served if ways were found to retain most students with behavior problems.

Further, giving students greater responsibility for non-academic discipline would help to foster student maturity. Non-academic student disciplinary violations should normally be dealt with by panels consisting mainly of students. In addition, each student involved in disciplinary processes should be provided with substantive

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and procedural guarantees, including protection against self-incrimination, the right to be present at any official disciplinary hearing, the right to be assisted by an advisor or attorney for consultation purposes during any hearing, the right to challenge the objectivity of the hearing officer or panel, and full opportunity to present her or his case—together with supporting evidence, including written and oral statements and physical exhibits—and to hear all information presented and to question those who present it.¹¹

Purposes of Discipline

The nature and objectives of discipline, as well as the procedures for its administration, should promote the formation of a community of Christian adults on the campus of the college or university. Disciplinary sanctions should serve a twofold purpose: “to protect the campus community from behaviors that are detrimental to the educational process of the community and to assist students in identifying acceptable parameters of their activities and consequences of future behaviors.” Therefore, the character of the sanc-

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tions should vary with “the severity or frequency of the violation[s]” and take into account the attitudes of offenders. Summary suspension should occur only when “available facts indicate that the student is an imminent threat to the safety of himself or herself, other members of the campus community, or institutional property.”¹² And no decision about disciplinary sanction should be reached without a review of the “student’s past disciplinary record, the character of the student and prospects for proper future behavior, the impact of the violation on the victim . . . , and the impact of the violation on the cam-

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pus community.”¹³ Mediation should be considered as an alternative to traditional campus judicial procedures.¹⁴ Generally speaking, student-life officers’ roles should be defined in a way that downplays their connection with institutional judicial processes.

A Vision of Community

A vision of the Adventist college or university as a community of Christian adults might affect residence-hall life in a number of ways. Students at least 21, and all other students with parental approval, should be able to choose their places of residence.

On the other hand, Adventist colleges or universities can foster personal growth and a sense of community most effectively if they are residential institutions. Providing residence-hall students with a significant degree of personal freedom will encourage greater numbers of students to live on campus. (Campus housing is often competitively priced when compared with other local housing options.) Adventist institutions could also encourage students to live on campus by offering tuition benefits to those who choose to do so.

The Adventist college or university should allow greater opportunity for residence-hall management by students.¹⁵ And it should consider replacing dormitory worships with small-group worships organized and scheduled by students (perhaps reporting on a regular but informal basis to the campus chaplain’s office). It might provide regular opportunities for inter-dormitory interaction by members of the opposite sex.¹⁶ These opportunities could form part of a broader program that affords each dormitory student with a sense of ownership over a particular space within a residence hall. Allowing students the privacy to entertain guests is an important component of this sense of ownership.¹⁷ (Thus, the right of entry by institutional officers into student rooms in residence halls should be carefully defined and limited.¹⁸)

Finally, the Adventist college or university that is serious about these kinds of changes should empower students and unify campus governance by creating a senate, one-sixth to one-third of whose members are students, which is authorized to address all issues

relating to campus governance. And it should appoint a university or college ombudsperson with authority to investigate student complaints about student-life personnel, faculty, and other campus officers and entities; report to the president; and inform students about the president's action.¹⁹

In Conclusion

Are such changes marketable? Some parents and administrators may not be enthusiastic about them. But they should make the campus attractive to many potential students. The losses Adventist higher education may experience as a result of exploring alternatives in student-life policy could be more than offset by the gains.

Though rules are grounded in the understandable desire to dissuade students from harmful behavior, some current student-life policies may frustrate the formation of Christian community on campus and impede students' progress toward maturity.

The student-life program at an Adventist college or university should seek to foster a sense of institutional ownership, promote identity confirmation, and encourage a positive view of the mature Christian life. In order for student-life arrangements to make the most effective contribution to the success of Adventist higher education, every Adventist college and university should make them a high priority. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, *A Perspective on Student Affairs*

(Washington, D.C.: NASPA, 1987), p. 13.

2. Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 85. See also pp. 77-85.

3. Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Committee for Senior Colleges and Universities, site visitation team report, Loma Linda University (Nov. 26-29, 1979), p. 26.

4. Ernest L. Boyer, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (New York: Harper, 1987), p. 195; Holmes, p. 84. See also Ian Macneil, "Non-Academic Decisionmaking," in Robert S. Morison, *Students and Decision Making* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs 1970), pp. 109-111.

5. Sheridan McCabe, "Religious Commitment and Student Freedom on the Church-Related Campus," *Student Freedom in American Higher Education*, Louis Vaccaro and James Covert, eds. (New York: Teachers College, 1969), pp. 119, 120.

6. Peter Benson and Michael Donahue et al., *Valuegenesis: Report 1* (Silver Spring, Md.: North American Division of SDAs, 1990), p. 23. See also page 41 and Project Affirmation Taskforces, *Risk and Promise* (NAD of SDAs, 1990), pp. 18, 19.

7. M. Dannels, "Discipline," *College Student Personnel Services*, William Packwood, ed., (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1977), p. 243. On the invalidity of the contract theory, Dannels cites W. Van Alstyne, "The Prerogatives of Students, the Powers of Universities, and the Due Process of Law," *Journal of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors* 30 (1966): 11-16; W. Beane, "Students, Higher Education, and the Law," *Denver Law Journal* 45 (1968): 511-524; R. Callis, "Educational Aspects of *In Loco Parentis*," *Journal of College Student Personnel* 8 (1967): 231-233; R. Callis, "The Courts and the Colleges: 1968," *Journal of College Student Personnel* 10 (1969): 75-86; and New York University School of Law, *Student Conduct and Disciplinary Proceedings in a University Setting* (New York: New York University Press, 1968).

8. Communicorp, "Review and Reflection Paper for La Sierra University" (April 19, 1991), p. 12. See also page 13. Communicorp encourages "La Sierra's leaders to inquire about and observe for themselves what could be overly rigid rules that may, indeed, enervate and disempower students" (p. 14).

9. One tentative proposal: a student who engaged in substance abuse could be asked to prepare, during the week following the initial administrative conference after the incident, an eight- to ten-page essay detailing (a) five to seven beliefs that figured in his or her decision to engage in substance abuse; (b) the personal (psychological and physiological) and social (relational, economic, etc.) consequences of the kind of activity in which he or she has engaged, documented with evidence from current scientific sources; and (c) what he or she has learned from the experience and from her research—and intends to do as a result.

10. An encouraging response to such concerns is modeled in J. Kerbs, comp., "Principal's Letter Regarding Dress Standards With Responses, Replies, and Policies" (Loma Linda, Calif.: Loma Linda Academy, 1985).

11. Some proposed guarantees are excerpted and adapted from F. Ardiolo and S. Walker, "Models of Practice," *Enhancing Campus Judicial Systems*, Robert Caruso and Will Travelstead, eds. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), pp. 50-53.

12. Ardiolo and Walker, pp. 52-53.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

14. See Roger Serr and Ralph Taber, "Mediation," Caruso and Travelstead, pp. 73-84.

15. See Burns Crookston, "A Design for an Intentional Democratic Community," *Student Development and Education in College Residence Halls*, David DeCoster and Phyllis Mable, eds. (Washington, D.C.: American College Personnel Association, 1974), pp. 55-67.

16. See K. Kime, "A Modest Proposal for Intervisitation Rights," *La Sierra Criterion* (April 22, 1983): 11.

17. See W. Harold Grant, "Humanizing the Residence Hall Environment," in DeCoster and Mable, pp. 71-76. I owe the point about ownership to Wendy Wareham.

18. Cp. New York U School of Law, *Conduct* 18-20.

19. For details, see W. Packwood, "Ombudsman," pp. 219-231; and Stella Ramirez Greig, "The Ombudsperson's Role in Higher Education," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 54:2 (December 1991-January 1992): 28.

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