

# Growing Adventist Higher Education Without Leaving Our Roots Behind

By Stephen Payne

**O**ne occupational hazard of being an Adventist college recruiter is that you go to a lot of graduations. During most school years, I attend two, three, or sometimes four high school and college commencements. It's often an incredibly emotional experience, watching the tears, joy, and exuberance that accompany those events.

However, the most remarkable graduation event I ever experienced was a Class Night at Canadian University College in Alberta. During this program, a couple decided to surprise their parents and friends by getting baptized. The speaker that evening, a former CUC administrator and dean named Ron Wombold, began his talk by pointing to the baptismal tank and saying:

"That's what Adventist education is all about."

**Those of us who work in Adventist higher education are heirs to a remarkable history in a system that set out with ambitious goals.**

As I think about Seventh-day Adventist higher education and how it is growing and changing, about the constant challenge of remaining loyal to our Seventh-day Adventist values and roots, I keep coming back to that baptism at Canadian University College.

I think that a Class Night baptism can suggest some ideas as we seek to grow the enrollment at each of our institutions.

#### **From Local Markets to the World**

Those of us who work in Adventist higher education are heirs to a remarkable history in a system that set out with ambitious goals.

Ellen White wrote of Pacific Union College, founded in 1882: "Our college . . . has for its one great object the education and training of young men and women for usefulness in this life and the service of God."<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, she wrote of Battle Creek College: "Our College was designed of God to accomplish the great work of saving souls."<sup>2</sup>

To achieve these goals, local unions and conferences around the world established regionally focused schools in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These institutions, many of which weren't even colleges (let alone universities), often focused on training medical personnel, teachers, and preachers. People who enrolled in these schools usually came from the geographical area of the conference or union that established the school.

Because of this early regional approach, higher education marketing (including recruiting and public relations) often wasn't needed, and is a fairly recent addition for many of our schools.

However, over the past 20 years or so, the professional marketing of Adventist higher education has begun. Most of our colleges, worldwide, now employ full-time recruiters. Many have elevated this position to the vice-presidential level.

Today, the enrollment or marketing departments of our institutions have begun to include not only full-time recruiters, but also marketing communication professionals, telecounselors, admissions personnel (now often separated from academic records), and occasionally even student-aid officers, all focusing on the enrollment needs of the prospective student.

With this sharpened focus on recruiting, combined with ease of transportation, the great Advent movement of Adventist students began in earnest. Students increasingly are seeking out and attending Adventist colleges or universities outside their local union conference, or even outside their home country.

As a result, our schools can no longer count on regional devotion. At best, an Adventist college or university can expect to capture 40 to 50 percent of the academy graduates in its union conference. In some cases, the school may capture only 15 to 25 percent of these students.

In this environment, the failures and successes of our institutions sometimes shift rapidly from year to year and institution to institution. In North America, schools like Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee; and La Sierra University in Riverside, California, had significant numerical increases during the 2000-2001 school year. Smaller schools like Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska; and Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas, have also had significant percentage and numerical enrollment increases in recent years. Other NAD schools, both large and small, have had stable or declining enrollments.

Regardless of their size or growth, many of our schools are facing challenges. These include finances and the reality of operating in a country where the Adventist student population cannot support an institution of higher learning. As a result, they are having to expand their traditional assumptions about markets and potential students in order to survive and thrive.

### **Stepping Outside the Home Territory**

Several significant trends have emerged in the new world of en-

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rollment and recruitment.

In North America and beyond, Adventist colleges and university recruiters now often target high-school-age students both within and outside their local union conference. However, this has increased competition for the traditional core enrollment in North American colleges: the Seventh-day Adventist student who attends a church elementary or secondary school.

To reach this group, Adventist college and university recruiters have adopted a cooperative approach to recruiting throughout North America. This includes a series of fairs hosted at academies in the United States and Canada. These fairs may also include institutions from around the world, with Adventist colleges in England, Australia, and the Caribbean taking part in or focusing on North American students, just as North American colleges and universities have often worked to attract students from around the world to their institutions.

However, a significant market of Adventist young people remains largely untouched by this approach—those attending public high schools, community colleges, and state universities. This is a tough, but important, group to target, as the number of Adventist students attending public schools often exceeds the number in church institutions.

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ventist young people, as well as on international students from a wide variety of cultures and religious backgrounds.

A number of our institutions have also begun to participate in NACCAP (National Association of Christian College Admissions Personnel), which allows us to promote our schools in their publications and at college fairs that target the larger evangelical Christian community.

This represents a significant departure for Adventist higher education, especially in North America.

Whether we're just beginning to recruit these students or have always had a number of students on our campus from outside of our faith community, we are inviting them to an educational experience that is often noticeably different from many others they might choose. At our schools, these students from outside of the Adventist tradition discover significant chapel, worship, and church attendance requirements, fake hot dogs in the cafeteria, and seemingly inexplicable restrictions against dancing and jewelry. They discover that we use an "Adventist language" that's foreign to them.

As we expand our markets to specifically focus on students from non-Adventist backgrounds, we need to ask some pertinent questions: Do they change us? More importantly, do we change them?

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Or, as some ask: Should we even seek to change these students as they join our school families?

### **Can the Mission Remain the Same?**

One common concern that's often raised as we talk about this market is whether the increasing influx of non-Adventist students represents a threat to our church's higher education system, if not Adventism itself. Keeping this in mind, many of our colleges and universities have consciously limited the percentage of non-Adventist students they will admit.

In addition to setting limits, all of us struggle with how to apply the historic values of Adventist education in today's environment. A review of Ellen White's writings

shows the importance she placed on Adventist colleges and universities offering something measurably different from the typical public institution. She writes that "the Lord never designed that our college should imitate other institutions of learning. The religious element should be the controlling power."<sup>3</sup>

She also noted that Adventist higher education is not designed solely for Adventists: "If unbelievers choose this influence, it is well; if those who are in darkness choose to the light, it is as God would have it."<sup>4</sup>

## **C.O.M.P.**

### **Welcoming students from outside of our faith community to our Seventh-Day Adventist campuses**

**COMMUNICATE.** It's critical to help these new students understand the Adventist context of higher education. It's not sufficient to simply declare that we are a Seventh-day Adventist institution that celebrates and honors the faith traditions of our church. We must make it clear what that means—in a more comprehensive and meaningful way than merely distributing a list of rules.

We must re-emphasize our heritage of a wholistic perspective for education and explain why we intentionally seek a balance of mind, body, and spirit. We need to make it clear why we offer education that is both academic and spiritual, and how everything—from our worship policies to lifestyle guidelines—is integral to the study experience and outcomes of Adventist education.

**ORIENT.** Even as we communicate these concepts, we must find ways to orient non-Adventist students to life on our campuses. For some students, the concept of a lifestyle-oriented faith community may be familiar. But for many who join us from outside the circle of Adventism, it will seem strange. It's crucial that we successfully educate these new students (ideally during New Student Orientation at the beginning of each term) about what it means to study on an Adventist campus. The orientation should probably include everything from a description of what's in our vegetarian meats to an explanation of our doctrines. It should also make clear how our lifestyle guidelines, as well as our worship and chapel experiences, contribute to and enrich our concept of wholistic education.

**MENTOR.** Even after going through an orientation, these students need to be mentored. Whether it's through an active chaplaincy program (Sahmyook University in Korea, the world's largest Adventist university, has more than a dozen chaplains) or peer-to-peer mentoring, these students should—in the best way possible—not be left alone once they join us. Caring adults and peers should interact with them frequently—both formally and informally—to ensure that their experience becomes one of integration rather than disconnection.

**PRAY.** Prayer should infuse each of these steps of the process, from the point when we first meet a potential student who's not an Adventist through his or her entire experience on our campuses. As such students study and involve themselves in the life of our schools, we gain an incredible opportunity for powerful, life-changing evangelism. We need to pray that these students will experience the powerful influence of Christian friendship and of the Holy Spirit.

Interestingly, outside of North America, enrolling non-Adventist students is often viewed as an opportunity, rather than a problem. I've had the privilege of visiting several of our universities and colleges in Asia where enrollment is often significantly, or nearly exclusively, non-Adventist. The administrators at these schools see these students in evangelistic, as well as educational, terms. A few years ago, I talked with Dr. Peter Cho, who was then president of Taiwan Adventist College. He told me that his school baptized approximately half of their non-Seventh-day Adventist students by the time they finished studying there. At that institution and others, religion classes and Bible studies are not only designed to affirm faith and create (or re-create) commitment for Adventist students, they are also designed to introduce non-members to Adventism and invite them to become a part of our community.

In North America and elsewhere, the percentages of non-Adventist students studying on our campuses are often quite small. Fortunately, in many countries, the students we attract from beyond our Adventist circle are positive additions to our campus. A number are interested in and excited about studying and living in an explicitly Christian environment. These students can and should be positively affected by their time on our campuses—transformed by the influence of teachers, staff, and students and, most importantly, the Holy Spirit.

In other settings, and especially in countries where Christianity may not be a dominant influence in society, we enroll students who are entering a Christian environment for the very first time. Their experiences will be more challenging to us, but no less important. The classes we offer these students new to our faith (and/or culture or subculture) along with the support services we provide, can and should recognize the spiritual journey of these students as they seek meaning for their lives.

In *Christian Education*, Ellen White describes the end result we should seek for our students, regardless of their faith or cultural background:

"If the influence of our College is what it should be, the youth who are educated there will be enabled to discern God, and glorify Him in all His works. And while engaged in cultivating the faculties which God has given them, they will be preparing to render to him more efficient service. The intellect, sanctified, will unlock the treasures of God's word, and gather its precious gems to present to other minds, and lead them also to search for the deep things of God."

These goals are just as essential today for every one of our stu-

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for the world that awaits them—and, more significantly, as they prepare for the world yet to come. ☞

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dents, regardless of background, as they were 120 years ago.

### Conclusion

As we seek to survive, grow, and thrive as Adventist institutions of higher education, we must expand beyond our traditional target markets of Adventist students educated in local church schools and academies to invite others from outside of our faith community to join us.

As a result, our students, on the surface, will often look and act different from the ones enrolled in Adventist higher education when it first began in North America. But on the inside, each one of these students, regardless of his or her background, church affiliation, or ethnicity, joins us on a journey during which we have an opportunity—indeed, an obligation—to transform them in significant and life-changing ways.

This journey may not always end with a baptism on Class Night, but our students can and should leave our schools noticeably changed—thinking and believing differently than when they first passed through our doors. In that context, it is essential that while some of our colleges and universities change and grow, our mission should remain the same as it's always been. It should be seek to influence every part of our students' lives as they prepare

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### REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 1, p. 319.
2. \_\_\_\_\_, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, Mich.: International Tract Society, 1893), p. 32.
3. \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 5, p. 14.
4. Ibid.
5. *Christian Education*, p. 27.