

A New Game!

Can We Play as a Team?

A Systems Approach to Web-Based Learning in Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education

Institutions vie for students and a limited supply of gifted professors, thus creating a competitive environment that can at times become adversarial.

Imagine, if you will, a basketball team comprised of players who each want the ball, all the time. These players refuse to pass, are unhappy unless they are the high scorer, refuse to play team offense or defense, and—in short—seem unaware of the fact that they are part of a team and have shared responsibilities.

With this analogy in mind, let's look at Seventh-day Adventist higher education. There are 15 Adventist colleges and universities in the North American

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Division (NAD) and more than 100 around the world. Many of them are struggling to meet the economic demands of doing business while maintaining a distinctive Adventist blend of faith and learning. Like our dysfunctional basketball team, most Adventist colleges and universities seem unaware of the power of collaboration and teamwork. Institutions vie for students and a limited supply of gifted professors, thus creating a competitive environment that can at times become adversarial. Is the answer, as one of my colleagues put it, to "Let each college put forth its programs and let the strong survive"? The problem with this kind of Darwinian behavior is its impact on students, the people to whom we minister. Students who desire to attend one of our NAD institutions of higher education are faced with the daunting task of raising close to \$20,000 per year. In addition to the economic challenge, if the student transfers from one Adventist college or university to another, he or she may also face problems with credit portability and majors whose requirements differ from institution to institution.

This brings us back to our original analogy, the dysfunctional basketball team. Our schools are

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playing a new game. Traditional campus boundaries no longer exist. This game uses computers and the Internet to reach students with Christ-centered, faith-based education. The current generation of college students grew up with computers. Twenty percent of them were using one by the age of 5, and 100 percent by the time they were 18. They are heavy users of the Internet, with 86 percent having gone online, compared to 56 percent of the general population. In fact, a staggering 46 percent of students claim that they feel more comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions via E-mail rather than in the face-to-face classroom!¹

The time is right. This generation of students, with their well-developed computer skills, is ready for a systems approach to Seventh-day Adventist higher education. Imagine the educational value we could offer as a collaborative system utilizing the talents of Adventist professors the world over. To achieve this potential, we must use systems thinking, as put forth by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*: “Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots.”²

Strategies for Working Together

In order to play successfully as a team, Adventist colleges and universities need to work together in several basic areas:

1. *A systems approach to enrollment and tuition.* Under this type of approach, students attending an NAD college or university would be able to include an online course or two from another NAD institution as part of their class load just as easily as they enroll in an on-campus class. Any additional charges would be nominal, and tuition would be shared with the institution offering the online class. Establishing this type of arrangement between institutions will require a spirit of collaboration and understanding. Currently, students can enroll in online classes from non-Adventist institutions for as little as \$7.00 per credit hour, but have to pay as much as \$500.00 per credit hour to take one from

an Adventist institution. If we hope to make the online delivery system attractive to students, we will have to set policies on fees collaboratively. This type of arrangement will enhance flexibility in class scheduling and increase the number of faith-based courses students will be able to include in their programs.

2. *A consortium-style approach to purchasing, teacher training, and technical support.* In 1996, the Association of Seventh-day Adventist Librarians formed the Adventist Libraries Information Cooperative (ALICE) to maximize their collective purchase power in accessing research databases they would otherwise not be able to afford. Similar collaborations

could produce a considerable savings in the areas of software, hardware, technical support, and teacher training. It might also include conducting Web-based education from a single server, using a centralized support staff. The use of a centralized server would make it easy for students to locate classes and become familiar with courseware, thus improving our level of service.

Teacher training is critical for preparing instructors to work in this new medium. By collaborating in this area, Adventist colleges and universities could use world-class instructors as part of a training program to develop their teachers' online pedagogical skills.

3. *An early-enrollment program for high school students.* One



of the many advantages of Web-based education is its portability. Allowing high school students to take a college class or two online before they graduate would make participation in Seventh-day Adventist higher education attractive, affordable, and flexible—and could serve as a strong recruitment tool. Many of our institutions currently use a campus-based form of early enrollment to expose local high school students to college classes and to their campus. Offering these courses on the Web would widen the audience and increase the number of courses offered.

4. *A systems approach to sponsoring online courses and teachers.* The current system of course development and teacher selection can be described as occurring more by chance than through a logical process of supply and demand. If the current haphazard approach continues, we are likely to see multiple institutions offering the same online class at a high tuition cost with only on-campus students enrolled. This may help students in residence to graduate on time, but is expensive and has many drawbacks. A better plan may be to create a central body empowered to (1) identify classes that need to be included in the online catalog, (2) recruit and train teachers with strong pedagogical skills in the Web-based environment, (3) allocate online classes to institutions, thus reducing or eliminating duplication, and (4) adopt consistent policies relating to course ownership and class size. Creating such an organization will require a quantum paradigm shift from our current mode of operation and a level of institutional trust heretofore not seen.

Much like the dysfunctional basketball team, we have been unwilling to drop the barriers and work together to achieve our shared goal of spreading Christ through Seventh-day Adventist higher education. Adventist Distance Education Consortium (ADEC) represents a significant step toward a true team spirit of collaboration. (See the ADEC article on page 49 for an update on recently voted actions.) The Association of Adventist Academic Administrators and the Association of Adventist College and University Presidents

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(AACUP) created ADEC in order to explore possible areas of collaboration in distance education among the NAD colleges and universities. The collaborative spirit also exists at the faculty level, as demonstrated by Adventist Virtual Learning Network (AVLN) during the 2002 conference at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. A brainstorming session moderated by Richard Osborn, Pacific Union College president, generated an impressive list of collaborative recommendations³ for consideration by ADEC and AACUP.

Collaboration is not an impossible dream if we are willing to work together as a team for the greater good of our students. If we pray for His guidance, I'm confident that God will link our hearts, hands, and minds as we search for new ways to enhance the educational environment we offer our young people. Let us pray that our arms are long enough to reach around our shrinking planet, hold hands in cyberspace, and work together as a team for our young people and for the finishing of God's work. ☞

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This article has been peer-reviewed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. S. Jones, *The Internet Goes to College: How Students Are Living in the Future With Today's Technology*, in PEW Internet and American Life Project, 2002.

2. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline. The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1990), pp. 68, 69.

3. See <http://www.avln.org/jae/>.