

Church Accreditation: Relevant or Unnecessary?

Seventh-day Adventist higher education has changed dramatically in recent years. The church's 98 accredited universities and colleges highlight the emphasis that the church continues to place on higher education.

Many of those universities and colleges also have government accreditation, and an increasing number have their own charters. Although these institutions face increased expectations and regulations from their local accrediting bodies, many are perceived as examples of excellence in their respective countries. Does Adventist accreditation have a valid place in this changing educational environment? I believe that the new face of Adventist education gives our church's accreditation process even more immediacy and relevance.

Church accreditation does not replace or duplicate secular accreditation. It has a very specific purpose: to ask a campus to answer these questions: "Is this a quality Seventh-day Adventist institution? Does it represent the best of what Adventist education has to offer?" In other words, has the institution found a way to pursue excellence within an unequivocal faith commitment? Is it engaged in an ongoing search for a unique and positive role within its community? No secular accrediting agency asks those questions, yet if our institutions have not worked out an answer to them, their rationale for existence is in doubt.

However, church accreditation does not just check on whether an institution is meeting denominational goals, it also provides a process to help the institution achieve those goals.

For example, the accreditation process drives Adventist uniqueness and mission to the top of each institution's agenda. In the fast-paced environment of higher education, faced with government requirements, day-to-day pressures, and the challenges of budgets and enrollment, it is easy for a college or university to take for granted the effectiveness of its Adventist ethos. An accreditation visit requires the institution to be more intentional and reflective about its success in achieving its mission. The visit provides an excellent opportunity for administration to focus the attention of faculty, staff, and students on the core operational values of the institution, as well as its direction in relation to the church.

Denominational accreditation also provides a discussion forum for the church and its educators. Throughout the church's history, there has always been a lively debate between educators and denominational administrators. While church leaders want to ensure that higher education is fully supportive of the church's mission, educators must deal with the realities of students pushing boundaries, as well as issues of academic freedom and research integrity. These concerns are not incompatible, but may appear so if we do not talk together. The Adventist accreditation process provides a forum for the institution and the church, and helps them listen better to each other.

The accreditation process also provides a framework for defining excellence in the special milieu of Adventist education. For example, the *Accreditation Handbook* of the Adventist Accrediting Association (AAA) identifies 11 criteria, ranging from administrative operation to finance to student life, each of which links academic expectations with the mission focus of the church. So while church accreditation focuses on the strength of an institution's finances, it also examines whether the budget process and the school's priorities are mission-driven. Indeed, every criterion of the AAA focuses on mission.

The Adventist accreditation process also has another unique quality: it brings the discussion about the nature and quality of Adventist education to institutions ranging in size from 12 to 6,000, from Cameroon to Papua New Guinea to Romania to Canada. Because the evaluation team includes educators and administrators from different locations and specialties, the discussions bridge geographical and cultural lines. What an amazing and enriching dialogue, but one that is essential in a world church.

Could Adventist institutions achieve these ends on their own? Perhaps. But external eyes can often see what even the best administrator cannot perceive from inside an institution. Even if accreditation only provides affirmation of the administrative direction, this strengthens the institution internally, while increasing constituency confidence.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church encourages its educational institutions to gain local recognition and accreditation, and their success in doing so should be applauded. Yet this should never be an end in itself. Church accreditation identifies who we are, where our focus is, and how we want to be identified within the wider higher education landscape. It helps the church and higher education present a unified front in their mutual commitment to serve as agents of redemption.



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