

Creating a Service-Oriented Campus

BY DAVID SMITH

A few years ago, I was riding in a car with a college student who had volunteered to help repair a community resident's home. When I asked why he was taking time on a Sunday to help this person instead of studying for his pre-med classes, he responded: "My parents raised me to help other people whenever I have the opportunity to do so. I will always help others when I can."

An Argument for Service

Students like this can be found on every college campus in America. According to longitudinal data from the Cooperative Education Research Program, interest in community service and community involvement among college students is on the rise. A 2006 survey reported that 26.8 percent of students said there was "a very good chance" they would participate in community-service activities in college, contrasted to 16.9 percent when the question was first asked in 1990.¹

Adventist colleges are in a unique position to reach and guide these service-oriented students. Christ's commitment to service represents a key philosophical priority of Adventist higher education, founded on Scripture and re-affirmed throughout church history. Jesus says He "came not to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28, RSV),² and Paul reminds us that "through love we are called to serve one another" (Galatians 5:13).

Ellen White suggests that evangelistically a "life of service will win men and women from a life of sin to righteousness."³ She strongly affirms service as a core Christian value: "Like our Savior, we are in this world to do service for God. We are here to become like God in character, and by a life of service to reveal Him to the world,"⁴ and says that "It is in a life of service only that true happiness is found."⁵

Our faith adds a layer of urgency and meaning to the moral and ethical imperatives felt by modern youth to help others. For this reason, Adventist schools must do more than merely offer service options. We must build service into each institution's mission and model it as a deeply felt passion. Ellen White warns, "In preparation for a life of service the youth are sent to school," but sometimes, "they become absorbed in study, and often lose sight of its purpose . . . Upon their graduation, thousands find themselves out of touch with life."⁶

Merely tacking service onto an Adventist education as an afterthought will not prevent this disconnect. Administrators, faculty, and staff must intentionally integrate service into every part of college life, and must model a life of service themselves. It cannot be something we *do*; it must be who we *are*.

Educators and schools take upon themselves a partnership with parents and church families in what Ellen White called a "sacred covenant with God to rear our children for His service. To surround them with such influences as shall lead them to choose a life of service, and to give them the training needed, is our first duty."⁷

All of the Adventist institutions of higher learning in the North American Division reflect a commitment to education through service in their missions, visions, or other guiding statements.⁸ During a two-year research project, Gina Creek

According to longitudinal data from the Cooperative Education Research Program, interest in community service and community involvement among college students is on the rise.



A Union College (UC) theology student paints a Habitat for Humanity house during Project Impact.



A UC senior nursing student helps out at a back-to-school clinic for children, during which 76 children received foot care, new socks, and a voucher for new shoes. Nursing and physician assistant majors provide this service to adults year-round.



A UC freshman communication and pre-med student cleans up an elementary school playground during Project Impact.

(nee Jacob) found that Adventist colleges and universities continually prove that commitment in their communities.

In *Crafting a Culture: A Guide to Successful Campus Ministries*,⁹ Creek describes the diversity of methodology and the commonality that exists on each Adventist campus regarding the importance and presence of integrated service. Creek summarizes a campus chaplain’s statement that, “The level of outreach and service an institution takes part in is a direct gauge of how authentic the spirituality of the campus is.”¹⁰

In 2007, two of our schools, La Sierra University and Union College, received an honorary distinction, the President’s Community Service Award. This is granted to only three percent of the institutions of higher learning in the United States. The fact that two Adventist schools were included in this select group illustrates that our campuses are not only highly active, but are also being recognized for something that is becoming part of our “brand identity.”

We have found that students take the habits they develop in college with them after graduation. A longitudinal study tracking graduates of Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska) for five years demonstrated that alumni maintain a level of church involvement equal to or greater than their level of involvement while in college. This means students who participate in a campus service culture will be more likely to seek opportunities to serve after leaving the institution.

“Give students evidence that their gifts are valued in college, and they will continue feeling valued as they launch into adulthood using those gifts to bless their local congregations,” says Rich Carlson, vice president for spiritual life at Union College and author of the research study.¹¹

Not long ago, Shelli Johnson, a 2007 Union College graduate, returned to campus and described how involved she had

been with service while in college. She recounted feeling lost after starting her career until she discovered ways to renew her involvement in community service. During a worship talk, she challenged the undergraduates to help others and transform that service into a lifestyle that extends far beyond the college experience.

Creating a Service-Centered Campus

I believe any college or university can create a campus culture focused on service. Accomplishing this takes a concerted effort by campus groups and supporters, but the outcome is worth the energy. From my experience at Union College, I see five essential steps to creating a culture of service:

1. Model a life of service.
2. Give leadership responsibility to students.
3. Mix one-time and ongoing opportunities.
4. Create a tradition of honoring service.
5. Build service into the curriculum.

Before we can ask others to serve, as teachers and administrators we must first become servants ourselves. The Seventh-day Adventist Church remembers this lesson through the ordinance of foot washing. At Union College, I am reminded of it each August during the annual student move-in event as administrators, faculty, and staff haul furniture up the residence-hall stairs. I take pride in seeing my coworkers brave the heat and back pain to actively illustrate the priority we place on helping others.

An alumnus now employed at Union College, Scott Cushman told me he remembers when he was a freshman, returning to the car for another load to find that the church pastor and a science professor were already carrying his things to his room. “I was speechless—stunned, amazed, and relieved,” Cushman said. “I think that’s when I first felt completely certain I had chosen the right college. Now that I work here, I never miss the student move-in event. I want every student to have that same feeling I experienced 10 years ago.”



In connection with a fundraiser, UC students lined the campus sidewalks with luminaries in a visual representation of the 2,000 to 4,000 U.S. lives lost each year to domestic violence.

The institution that invests wholeheartedly in a service culture will continually seek ways to expand and strengthen the campus focus on service. When administrators, faculty, staff, board members, and church members join students in serving others, students sense the importance of service.

When students, properly trained, mentored, and empowered, plan and promote service activities, their peers are more likely to participate than when school employees are in charge. A campus that cultivates a student-centered, student-directed environment is a campus that is well on its way toward creating a service culture.

Creating and sustaining a student-centered campus requires the buy-in of key supporters: administrators, faculty and staff, constituents, alumni, and board members. Each of these groups must agree that trusting and empowering student leadership offsets the risks involved. Student leaders may not always perform as responsibly, maturely, or wisely as their adult counterparts would. Their lack of experience means results may be flawed or slow in coming. However, these arguments can be countered by stressing that it is our mission to educate. How else are students to learn leadership if we are not willing to give them the freedom to occasionally fail?

These risks can be minimized with training and support. Identifying and mentoring students who demonstrate a passion for service becomes the task of administrators, faculty, and staff as well as experienced student leaders. No matter how effective the training, there will always be risks. Empowering students to use their God-given gifts to lead their peers can be frightening, but more often is deeply rewarding.

Identifying service opportunities with varied levels of commitment throughout the school year ensures that service remains central to the collegiate experience and lowers perceived barriers to volunteering. With schedules already filled with classes, work, studying, and socializing, students are often hesitant to search out volunteer opportunities on their own. Also, few students at Adventist colleges come from the communities in which our campuses are located and rarely have connections to local organizations.

At Union College, a volunteer coordinator in Campus Ministries identifies and promotes opportunities, forging those con-



UC students fed the homeless at a local soup kitchen during Project Impact.

Adventist schools must do more than merely offer service options. We must build service into each institution's mission and model it as a deeply felt passion.

nections for other students. This student leader uses chapels, vespers, and Sabbath school to advertise service options that may start as one-time events, but can turn into a long-term relationship between the student and an organization.

Early in the school year, Union College takes a day off classes for Project Impact. Besides helping more than 50 local organizations each year and raising the college's profile in the community, this event allows students to help others and connect with organizations before making commitments. Many students return to campus ready to find time in their schedule for regular, long-term service with the organization where they spent their day.

In addition, each campus co-curricular organization is challenged to create service opportunities. Clubs, sports teams, and even campus departments and academic programs have developed relationships with organizations that outlast the stay of any one student or employee.

This year, Union College's Social Work Club teamed with the Peace and Social Justice Club to create a moving illustration of the plight of abused women and children in America. They covered the campus with 2,000 luminaries to represent the casualties of domestic abuse each year. The event helped promote a fundraiser the following Sunday for the Friendship Home, a local organization providing aid to women and children affected by domestic violence. The Friendship Home's



Each year, Lincoln's mayor acknowledges the value of Project Impact during a press conference. In 2007, Project Impact student leader, Ann Bryant, presented Mayor Chris Beutler with a T-shirt from the event.



On Project Impact Day 2007, students power washed chairs for the Lincoln Children's Museum and performed other cleaning tasks.

On Project Impact Day 2008, more than 800 UC students, faculty, and staff gathered under the campus clock tower before heading out to more than 50 sites in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Safe Quarters Drive has been hosted on the college campus for the past five years, and because of this connection, students have found new ways to serve.

Creating a culture takes more than simply empowering leaders and providing opportunities. It requires institutional self-talk—reinforcing, reminding, and affirming who we are in our communication with the campus.

At Union College, we post periodical articles, thank-you notes from those who have been served, and pictures of students engaged in service. For major service events, we show videos of the event to students, who enjoy seeing themselves and their friends in action.

Having students share their service experiences allows them to adopt an identity of service and validates our constituents' expectation that Seventh-day Adventist education makes a difference for students and others alike. Parents Weekend, Homecoming, and graduation are great opportunities to showcase successes in student-initiated service experiences and to cast a vision for these audiences of the value and importance of maintaining this commitment. An offering appeal normally reaps great dividends at such events and can be invested in student-led projects.

Any campus can create traditions that celebrate service and unite students and alumni in a common bond. Union College is known as the College of the Golden Cords because of its commitment to a tradition begun in 1906. Each homecoming weekend, threads leading from an image of the clock tower to mission fields around the world are hung to commemorate students and alumni who served a year or more overseas. This tradition and its prominent visual display remind students they are part of a legacy of mission service.

Promoting a tradition of service should also be part of recruiting the students who will continue it. Prospective students should see the campus' commitment to service whenever possible and understand that service is an important part of Adventist college life.

When students, properly trained, mentored, and empowered, plan and promote service activities, their peers are more likely to participate than when school employees are in charge.

Service can also be a powerful recruiting tool. When Taleah Valles, now a sophomore, visited Union College on a cross-country road trip with her brother, she saw the campus family gathering to spend a day in community service. She declared that she wanted to go to a school where students spent their time helping others, and enrolled that day. When prospective students see opportunities to serve others on our campuses, they will be even more excited to become an active part of our schools.

Many colleges build service into the curriculum, requiring students to engage in service-learning experiences. While these efforts do not qualify as volunteerism, they do provide students with opportunities to experience the joys of serving others and to sense the difference they can make. Service begets service, and required service experiences may inspire students to volunteer in the future. Also, because most curricular service opportunities relate to a field of study, they provide a preview of professional life, build résumés, and create important contacts for future employment.

The foot clinics provided by the Division of Health Sciences at Union College exemplify the benefits a long-term, recurring service opportunity. Since the early 1990s, nursing students, and more recently, physician assistant students, have participated in biweekly clinics caring for the feet of the homeless and near-homeless. Consequently, the community has learned to trust and depend on their aid. Students are required to participate only four times—once a semester during their first two years of college. However, according to Jeff Joiner, the division chair and a professor of nursing, "Once students get over the fear factor, many go multiple times each semester. We have juniors and seniors who volunteer even though it's not required."

Service is not a panacea for all the challenges facing our in-



Union College president and author of this article, David Smith, adds his support and sweat to Project Impact's projects each year.



In 2007, Project Impact participants helped the local Native American center prepare for a powwow.



A junior communication and graphic design major works with Linda Becker (right), UC vice president for student services, to fill back-to-school backpacks at the Lincoln Good Neighbor Center.



David Smith is President of Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Rich Carlson, who was an invaluable resource in the writing of this article, providing examples and research results.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. College Board and Art and Science Group, "Research Dispels Millennial Theories." *StudentPoll* 6:2 (2008). College Board Publications. <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/data-reports-research/trends/studentpoll/millennial>. Accessed October 30, 2008.
2. All Bible texts in this article are quoted from the Revised Standard Version. Bible texts credited to RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.
3. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), p. 104.
4. _____, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1909), p. 409.
5. _____, *Sons and Daughters of God* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1955), p. 273.
6. _____, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 265.
7. _____, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 396.
8. While I know from my colleagues at other institutions that a spirit of active service is alive on all Adventist campuses, my position at Union College means that data and examples from Union are most readily available to me, and thus appear more frequently in this article.
9. Gina Jacob, *Crafting a Culture: A Guide to Successful Campus Ministries* (Lincoln, Neb.: AdventSource, 2006).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
11. Richard Carlson, "Longitudinal Survey of Recent Graduate Involvement." Internal assessment study (unpublished), Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2003-2007.
12. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 273.

stitutions of higher learning, but I believe it offers the current generation a credible answer when people question the value of an Adventist education. There is no one correct approach to creating a culture of service, and each institution will need to adapt to the needs of students and the existing campus atmosphere.

Union's service-oriented environment took time and faith to create. Our institution owes a debt of gratitude to the many people who have devoted themselves to cultivate it, foremost among them Rich Carlson and the students he has mentored during his 27 years as chaplain. The culture of service continually changes as new leaders emerge and others leave, but at the core, it connects to the historic mission and goals of our faith.

Seventh-day Adventist education involves training not only for this life but also for the life to come. Experiencing the joy of serving others leads to a lifetime commitment that will continue into eternity. "A life of service is the truest, noblest life that man can live . . . It is in a life of service only that true happiness is found."¹² And that is what we want for our students: training and experiences that provide glimpses into the joy of putting others first and living to serve them and to serve God. ☞