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**HOW COLLEGE IMPACTS  
STUDENT SPIRITUALITY**

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# How College Impacts Student Spirituality

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A lot of Christians are concerned about the young adults who have grown up in the church. They worry about the influence of secularism and the media on the young people's commitment to Christ and their involvement in the church. Within the Adventist Church, I hear people trying to quantify how many of our young people are leaving the church. And I hear stories from too many of my friends about their own children who no longer live as Christians. What is going on? Can we stop the bleeding?

Young adults are most vulnerable for leaving the church during their college years or just afterwards. So, the future of the Seventh-day Adventist Church depends to some extent on the impact that college has on Adventist young adults. Whether the college is an Adventist college or a state university, the Church has a vested interest in how these educational institutions impact their students spiritually. We obviously need to know how well Adventist colleges and universities (shortened to *colleges* hereafter) are meeting their spiritual goals, which are central to their mission.

But why should we be interested in the impact of state universities on the spiritual lives of their students? Because it is estimated that each year 50,000 Adventist students attend state universities and other non-Adventist tertiary institutions (Sahlin, 1998, p. 122). What is happening to Adventist students on these secular campuses? Adventists are not the only Christians concerned about the effects of the state universities on faith. In a large national sample using Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) data, Railsback (1994) found that of those students who identified themselves as "born-again Christians" when they entered college, only 34% identified themselves as "born-again Christians" as exiting seniors. And only 28% of the seniors indicated that they had attended church in the past year.

## The Role of Adventist Colleges in Passing on the Faith

Central to the mission of each Adventist college is the goal of deepening students' relationship with Christ and of inspiring and preparing them to serve him. These mission statements grow out of the Adventist philosophy of education, which states education's aim and mission as "prepar[ing] students for a useful and joy-filled life, fostering friendship with God, whole-person development, Bible-based values, and selfless service in accordance with the Seventh-day Adventist mission to the world" (*Philosophy*, 2003).

Because Adventists have a holistic understanding of spirituality, all five basic outcomes that our education philosophy asks tertiary institutions to work toward are actually spiritual outcomes. (See Appendix A) The college is the means by which the Adventist Church has chosen to pass on the faith to the young adult generation. History proves the power of formal education as an evangelistic tool.

During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther devoted extensive effort to educating the masses, even insisting that girls should be taught to read because everyone needed to read the Bible for themselves. He wrote a catechism for adults, and one for children. He advocated that schools should be provided at public expense for all children, rich or poor.

Wherever Protestantism went, education followed. Calvinism penetrated the centers of learning in Europe and in the American colonies. Education was such a powerful tool of evangelism that the Roman Catholic Church made a counter attack with a new system of schooling—the Jesuit schools started by Ignatius of Loyola. These schools soon became superior in quality to the Protestant schools primarily because of their careful selection and training of teachers. The Jesuits and their schools are credited with helping to halt the progress of the Protestant Reformation in Europe (Eavey, p. 153).

Only sixteen years after the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, they established Harvard College in 1636 for the training of pastors. Christians have always recognized the importance of education to the survival of the faith and the faithful discharge of Jesus' command to "make disciples" (Matt. 28:18-20).

Only eleven years after the formal organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Battle Creek College opened its doors. It had a rocky beginning because Ellen White did not want it to follow the pattern of contemporary college education. To a large extent, her vision eventually prevailed, and other colleges were also established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Knight, 1996, pp. 390-393).

Even though the public school system in 19<sup>th</sup> century United States taught Protestant morals, the Adventist Church decided that it needed its own elementary and secondary schools. The Adventist lifestyle was counter-cultural even then. Through the years, parents have made real sacrifices to send their children to Adventist schools.

But Adventist beliefs are changing. Here I am not referring to changes in doctrines, which may be occurring, but to values and lifestyle. Increasingly more parents and students are willing to give finances and/or prestige priority over a "Christian education." Recent announcements from Ivy League universities that they are going to give full scholarships to students whose parents earn less than \$100,000 a year will only siphon off more of our most talented young people. Henderson (2003) asks parents to consider the hidden cost of sending their children to secular institutions—the risk that they will abandon their faith is higher when they attend such schools. Large numbers of Evangelical parents are getting that message. Evidence of a commitment to Christian education can be seen in the fact that enrollment at schools belonging to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) increased 60% in the years from 1990 to 2001

(Riley, 2005, p. 7).

Contrast that enrollment figure to what has been happening in recent years in Adventist higher education. The increase in Adventist college and university enrollment has gained only 5.6% over five years, while church membership has increased 7.1%. We are not even keeping up with membership growth.

Table 1:  
NAD church membership compared to head count enrollments in 14 NAD colleges/universities

Organization	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	Increase	
						N	%
Church membership	992,046	1,006,317	1,024,03	1,041,68	1,062,189	70,143	7.1
College/University	22,436	23,091	23,297	23,612	23,692	1,256	5.6

Statistics provided by the General Conference Office of the Secretariat and the General Conference Department of Education, March 2008.

Those parents and students who still value an Adventist education and make the necessary commitments to it expect that the faith will be taught and that certain lifestyle standards will be maintained and that there will be a good chance that their children will find an Adventist mate while attending college. Now I am not going to advocate that we get into the match-making business, but the whole rationale for our existence has its foundation in passing on the faith and the Adventist Christian lifestyle.

An important item that may not be on anyone's agenda is that we must not only teach the faith, but like the early Christian catechumenal schools, we must teach our students to maintain it once they are outside of its protective environment. Some parents and students and even faculty decry this bubble of protection provided by the Adventist campus. They talk disparagingly about an Adventist ghetto. There are disadvantages: We can become so comfortable that we don't want to leave it and become isolated from the larger community or we do not use the time in the bubble to prepare students for life outside of it. Michael Wilkins (1991), dean of the faculty at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, addresses the issue of the Christian college bubble:

. . . by depreciating a so-called bubble, we may indicate that we misunderstand the very purpose of the institutions that can be invaluable in preparing us for life. I will use an analogy from a related experience to explain. I was the squad leader of an airborne infantry squad during most of the year I spent in Vietnam. The last thing I would have wanted was some young guy right off the block coming over to join our squad, with me having to try to teach him combat techniques while we were in the middle of a battle. What he needed was a period of time, in relative peace and safety, where he could be taught all of the skills necessary to make him most effective for his tour of duty in combat. . . . Institutions—the college campus, the seminary, the Christian conference grounds or training center, and even the local church—have come into existence for the purpose of giving people the time and circumstances in which to become better prepared to live more effective daily lives. (pp. 146, 147)

How well are we doing at preparing our college students to live a Christian life in a materialistic, secular world? With so much at stake for our young adults and our church, how can we determine the extent to which we are meeting our goals? We have to do assessment.

## Assessing Spiritual Outcomes

When the discussion turns to the assessment of spirituality, people sometimes respond with skepticism or even hostility. Without question, skepticism in human ability to assess spirituality is well founded, but not completely justified. I would like to address three of the challenges to the assessment of spirituality: (1) Spiritual growth results from the redemptive work of God; (2) Defining spirituality and describing what a vibrant spirituality in a college student would look like has not yet been done in agreed-upon operational terms necessary for research; and (3) Empirical research on human beings is always reductionistic.

Spiritual growth from God. Since Christians believe that spiritual growth is both the gift of God and the work of the Holy Spirit that effects a change in the nature of a human being, this question follows: how can an internal state be measured? The Bible itself says that the human heart is deceitfully wicked--who can know it? How can we make value judgments about the spiritual life? Many would argue that such judgments cannot be made. However, Richard Butman (1990) says, "whether we acknowledge it or not, we make judgments all the time, especially about religious attitudes, beliefs and behaviors in ourselves and others" (p. 19). The assumptions behind the judgments, however, are seldom evaluated.

Obviously, spirituality cannot be studied directly. We can observe "only its concomitants, correlates, and consequences" (Moberg 1989, p. 17). In research terms, spirituality is a construct. For example, intelligence is a construct. We cannot measure it directly--indeed, there is even controversy over how to define it; yet through measures that have been developed, much has been learned about intelligence in the past 100 years.

Jesus himself has provided insight into how we can assess the work of the Holy Spirit. When Nicodemus responded with incredulity to his statement that a person must be born again, Jesus explained how we can perceive the work of the Holy Spirit: "You should not be surprised at my saying, You must be born again. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8 NIV). There is much that we cannot know about the work of the Holy Spirit, but we can "hear its sound." And see its effects. These are what we must measure. Although it is difficult to measure spirituality because of its subjective nature, Dittes (1971) says "in principle [religion] is as accessible as any psychological phenomena. Religion, even as spiritual life, remains a human phenomenon" (p. 82).

Description of spirituality. Another reason we resist the assessment of the spiritual life of our students is that we do not have a clear idea of what Christian spirituality is. I have chosen to use

a simple definition used by the editors of the Christian volumes of the *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedia*: Christian spirituality is the lived experience of Christian belief (Cousins 1990, p. 41). To operationalize this definition for research, we need to answer such questions as: What knowledge must our students have to live out their Christian beliefs? What values, attitudes, and commitments grow out of Christian belief? What practices sustain Christian belief? What behaviors does Christian belief result in?

Reductionism of research. Those who question the possibility of measuring spirituality are often repelled by the reductionism that is necessary in empirical study. Basinger (1990) admits that social science research does not completely represent underlying reality. When variables are operationalized, they are “always impoverished representations of the phenomena of interest,” and “some phenomena (such as religious beliefs) are more prone to impoverishment than others” (Williams, Taylor, and Hintze 1989, p. 353).

Recognizing the limitations of empirical research in the study of spiritual development does not require us to reject it as worthless. How can colleges and universities know if they are reaching their goals if they do not assess for them? Ironically, our accrediting agencies are pushing us to do this. The purpose of collecting assessment data is to help leaders make decisions. Decisions will be made. The question is: What will the decisions be based on?

I have organized the findings of college impact on student spirituality into five sections:

- General findings from research at secular colleges and universities
- Findings from research on Christian students at secular colleges and universities
- Findings from research on Christian students at Christian colleges and universities
- Findings from research on Adventists at Non-Adventist colleges and universities
- Findings from research on Adventists at Adventist colleges and universities

## General Findings from Research at Secular Colleges and Universities

Anyone studying college impact must begin with an acknowledgment of the work of Feldman and Newcomb (1969), who were the first to compile and synthesize research on the impact that college has on students. The next major compilation was done by Pascarella and Terenzini in their book, *How College Affects Students* (1991), which reviewed 2,600 empirical research studies conducted primarily in the 1970s and 1980s. Among these many studies, they “identified only a handful of studies that examined in any rigorous fashion the net effects of college on changes in students’ religious attitudes and beliefs” (292). They found limited but consistent evidence for declines in “conventional religious preferences, religiosity, and religious behaviors” (p. 293). I will list findings that they gleaned from a decade of research on “religiosity” and religious activities (p. 280).

1. Almost all the literature since 1967 “fairly consistently reports statistically significant declines in religious attitudes, values, and behaviors during the college years. . . . The shifts include changing (usually dropping) affiliation with a traditional church, a

reduction in church going or prayer, alterations in beliefs about a supreme being, or a decline in general religiosity” (1991, pp. 280-281).

2. Some of the change toward secularism may be “more a function of changing societal values than college effects” (1991, p. 293).
3. Attending selective or prestigious schools produced “significantly greater than expected decreases in conventional religious affiliation and in religiousness (that is, praying and reading the Bible)” (1991, p. 303)
4. Attending a church-related college “tended to produce increases in religious orthodoxy” (1991, p. 303).
5. There is a link between the faculty members’ religious preferences and the tendency of students to change their religious commitments. If the faculty and student body had a mix of nonreligious and mildly religious people, individual students’ commitments would move to the secular; where faculty and students had a greater commitment to religion, individual students tended to maintain their initial commitment (1991, 315).

In 2005 Pascarella and Terenzini published volume two of *How College Affects Students*, in which they looked at research done primarily in the 1990s. They found that evidence on the change in religious attitudes and values was “both more sparse and more mixed” (284). In the time lapse between the collection of their data and the present time, research interests have already changed, and it is unlikely that anyone will be able to refer to the 2000s as producing a sparse amount of research on religion or spirituality. Research on college students and spirituality is exploding. Alexander Astin (1993), for years the director of the HERI at UCLA, has had access to North America’s largest database on college students. Now as co-principal researcher along with his wife, he adds to the HERI data collection the largest study of college student spirituality ever undertaken—112,000 in Fall 2004 with 15,000 followed up in Spring 2007. The research aims “to discern . . . the level and intensity of spiritual experience among college students” (Higher Education Research Institute, n.d. b). A faculty spirituality survey was also given to 65,000 faculty in Fall 2004. This research is being funded by the Templeton Foundation (Higher Education Research Institute, n.d. a).

### Findings from Research on Christian Students at Secular Colleges/Universities

Railsback (1994) used the large data bank (3,643 students) of HERI to do a longitudinal study on stability and change of religiosity among students from 1985 to 1989. Highlights of his findings are given below:

- Of conservative Protestant students who said in 1985 that they were “born again Christians,” in 1989 only 66% of those attending claimed that status (p. 49), while 94% of student attending CCCU institutions retained that status ( pp. 87-88).
- “Students who dropped away from the born-again faith were not likely to end up in a conservative church where the born-again commitment is considered essential, but

instead dropped out entirely from affiliation with a religious group, or moved to a liberal or moderate denomination where being born again is not stressed” (p. 51).

### Findings from Research on Christian Students at Christian Colleges and Universities

Much more can be learned about the spiritual growth of Christian young adults when the research is done on Christian campuses because spirituality/religiosity is defined in terms of the Christian faith, not just in terms of “meaning making” or “trust in the Other” or “feelings of transcendence.”

In 1994, more than 50 of the CCCU’s 90+ member institutions collaborated on a significant assessment initiative launched partly with a \$222,000 grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and continued with another FIPSE grant of \$258,225 (FIPSE, 1997). Completed in 2000, the project "Taking Values Seriously: Assessing the Mission of Church-related Higher Education" was a longitudinal study of freshmen, seniors, faculty, and alumni two years after graduation. Researchers employed the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey (CIRP) and the College Senior Survey (CSS) in conjunction with student interviews. Interviews were video-taped of incoming freshmen and again when these same students were seniors.

The research model was based on Marcia’s (1980) four identity statuses, which expand on Erikson’s work. Erikson (1968) says that at each stage of life, a person must go through a crisis (more like a questioning) on certain issues. For young adults, establishing an identity is a major task. In the CCCU project, students’ identity was examined in the area of career choice, gender relations, and religion. A student’s identity development was classified into Marcia’s four categories depending on whether or not they had gone through a crisis and whether or not they had made a commitment: foreclosed, diffusion, moratorium and achievement. The following table will provide a visual explanation

Table 2:  
Marcia’s Identity Statuses as Related to Crisis and Commitment

	No commitment	Commitment
No crisis	Identity diffusion	Identity foreclosure
Crisis	Identity moratorium	Identity achievement

In an earlier study, Van Wicklin, Burwell, and Butman (1994) found that only 17% of seniors at a Christian college had gained identity achievement while 43% remained with identity foreclosed. It may seem that to graduate from a Christian college with one’s faith identity in a foreclosed state is a good thing. Such students have come to the college with the faith of their childhood and early adolescence and are leaving with that same faith unchallenged and intact. However, Van Wicklin, Burwell, and Butman say that though they may have acquired knowledge



for a career or profession, “they have not acquired . . . a transformed image of self and world sufficient to serve as a foundation for adult life” (p. 85).

Garber (1996) supports that assertion. For several years, he was on the faculty of the American Studies Program, an interdisciplinary semester of study on Capitol Hill, sponsored by the CCCU. During the years that he worked with students from Christian colleges, he was puzzled by the fact that some students who appeared to understand the relationship between their beliefs and their way of life, who were even active in college religious activities--when they left the university began little by little to “disconnect what they said they believed from how they lived” (p. 33). Other graduates maintained their faithfulness. To try to find out what kept some faithful, he interviewed people who had attended Christian colleges, who had graduated at least 20 years previously, and who continue to live lives consistent with their Christian beliefs.

This is what he found: they were people “(1) who had formed a world view sufficient for the challenges of the modern world, (2) who had found a teacher who incarnated that world view and (3) after college, who had forged friendships with folk whose common life was embedded in that world view. There were no exceptions” (Garber 1996, 111).

The first two of these criteria fall within the responsibility of the college. Teachers need to be aware of the role they play in establishing faith. Worldview development continues and intensifies in college. In a recent major research undertaking by the CCCU, faith development as defined by James Fowler (1984) is being studied. The project, which is called Faithful Change, was funded by the Templeton Foundation. Using Fowler’s definition of faith as the way people reason and how they make meaning, students were interviewed in depth and their faith was classified by stage. About half of the graduating seniors sampled had reached the 3.5 transitional stage going half way from a faith that is based on conformity to a faith for which they take personal responsibility. For this age group, the 3.5 transitional stage indicates desirable developmental growth. Why do some reach this stage while others do not? One of the preliminary findings is that crisis, “understood in the classical Eriksonian sense, is a key driver” (Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004, p. 100). Holcomb and Nonneman explain this definition of crisis and what promotes it:

Crisis . . . refers to a prolonged period of active engagement with, and exploration of, competing roles and ideologies. Used in this sense, crises include anything that challenges people to examine what they believe and why. For development to occur, other beliefs and viewpoints must be not only recognized but also engaged, with a period of critical analysis ensuing. (p. 100)

Sharon Parks (1986), who collected her data, not from quantitative research, but from her years of work as a campus chaplain and in other academic positions, supports the proposition that development requires the experience of conflict. She likens the experience to shipwreck. When we “suffer the collapse of” or even seriously question “our sense of self, world, and God, our whole being aches or is disoriented or is bewildered or feels empty--drained of those rich connections that create significance and delight and purpose” (p. 24). Young adults must be given a dream and a community. She uses these two metaphors to point out that “young adults

require a meaningful ideology (a dream) and a grounding community” (p. 99). Based on her research with graduate and undergraduate students, Parks says, “Never before and never again in the life cycle is there the same constellation of forces available to enable the formulation of life-transforming vision” (p. 96).

To what extent should Adventist colleges and universities provide a safe place and opportunities to engage in the exploration and critical analysis of other beliefs and viewpoints? And when students graduate from college, to what extent does the church serve as a community and a place to explore and question?

### Findings from Research on Adventists at Non-Adventist Institutions

One of the great blind spots that Adventists have is regarding what happens when Adventist students attend non-Adventist institutions of higher learning. We have anecdotal evidence, but little evidence based on sound research techniques. Carolyn Macomber, a Religious Education doctoral student at the Seminary, is currently transcribing hour-long interviews she conducted with 39 Adventist young adults who are attending 27 different non-Adventist tertiary educational institutions. Many people waiting for her findings.

In his landmark 10-year longitudinal study, Roger Dudley (2000) began in 1988 with 1,523 Adventist youth ages 15 and 16. When the study ended 10 years later, 578 (about 1/3) of the original group, now young adults, completed the form. Did the type of college the students attended make any difference in retaining their membership in the Adventist Church? Of the responding young adults who attended all or mostly all Adventist schools during high school and college, 92% were members at age 25. If they had attended part Adventist schools and part non-Adventist schools, 79% remained members at age 25. If all or most of their schooling was in non-Adventist schools, 72% remained members at age 25 (Thayer, 2008b). Dudley speculates that many of the young people who dropped out of the study are no longer church members, which would lower the percentages in all categories if all original subjects had completed the final survey. Dudley (2000) estimates that “at least 40 percent to 50 percent of Seventh-day Adventist teenagers in North America are essentially leaving the church by their middle 20s” (p. 35).

One of the first to report on data from the Higher Education Research Institute’s Spirituality in Higher Education project, Henderson (2003) studied 18,554 cases of exiting students who took the College Senior Survey (CSS) in 2002 and had data available from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey (CIRP) when they entered college. He investigated the relationship of a student’s religion or denomination and the affiliation of the college attended with the degree of change in religiosity over the college years (pp. 6, 56). His study is of interest to Adventists because in his findings he makes mention of a small number (21) of Adventist students in the study. Most of these Adventist students attended state universities; at least 5 or more attended Roman Catholic institutions. Those attending other types of educational institutions were fewer than 5. No Adventist colleges or universities were in

the data bank for the years he studied. Henderson's two findings related to Adventist students are as follows:

1. Of the 21 students indicating that they were Seventh-day Adventists when they entered college, 19 made the same claim in 2003 (p. 88).
2. Students from the Seventh-day Adventist denomination were among students from only 5 types of denominations or religions that made positive change in Henderson's composite religiosity scale. Adventist students attending state universities went up in religiosity; those attending Roman Catholic institutions went down (p. 121).

### Findings from Research on Adventists at Adventist Colleges/Universities

In 1996 when Robert Folkenberg was President of the General Conference, the *Total Commitment to God* document was presented at Annual Council. It was a call for all Adventist institutions, including colleges and universities, to develop mission-directed spiritual objectives, to assess how well the objectives were being achieved, and to use the resulting data to improve the achievement of those objectives (McBride, 1998, 24). The document's subtitle, "A Declaration of Spiritual Accountability in the Family of Faith," raised concern that there was a hidden agenda to the document. The document itself contained guidelines for assessing the spiritual accountability of both Adventist educational institutions and their faculties. In March 1997 an Adventist Higher Education Summit was held at Loma Linda University with President Folkenberg present as issues related to the document and to assessment were discussed. Speaking from the perspective of a faculty member in his presentation at the summit, Duane McBride, professor of sociology at Andrews University, expressed the concerns of faculty members regarding the Total Commitment document and pointed out the different roles that church administrators and university scholars play (McBride, 1998).

The April/May 1998 issue of the *Journal of Adventist Education* was devoted to issues raised by the Total Commitment document. In 1999 an ad hoc committee of faculty from NAD colleges and church administrators met in Florida to develop a model for a spiritual master plan and assessment guidelines that could be adapted and used in Adventist colleges and universities. A few weeks before the committee actually met, Folkenberg resigned the presidency of the General Conference.

How much the Spiritual Master Plan monograph was used, I do not know. I do know that for most colleges, spiritual assessment quickly made its way to the back burner. I could find little in published literature about spiritual assessment undertaken by Adventist colleges, and trying to get unpublished internal data proved unsuccessful. What I will now present comes from assessment conducted at Andrews University. Given the similar purposes of Adventist colleges and universities, it should be possible to generalize—with caution—to the sister institutions of Andrews University.

### **Investigating commitments**

In 1997, the University Assessment Office did a cross-sectional study of the Christian commitments of incoming freshmen and undergraduate alumni. We made a distinction in our analysis between young alumni (29 and younger) and older alumni (30 and older). A cross-sectional study, which measures at the same time people in different age or grade categories, does not measure change over time as accurately as a longitudinal study, which follows the same people through the years. However, it does contribute to our understanding of college impact or differences caused by maturation—an important distinction that is difficult to discern.

Freshmen were (statistically significant) higher than both groups of alumni in the commitment to (1) belong to a church; (2) observe the seventh-day Sabbath, and (3) pray daily. Older alumni were more committed to giving “systematic tithes and offerings” than younger alumni or freshmen. The highest commitment for all groups was the commitment to “accept Jesus Christ as their only Savior,” and the lowest commitment for all groups was the commitment to “support world evangelism through personal participation or financial contribution” (Thayer & Thayer, 1999).

The younger alumni showed the highest commitment on only two items, and the differences were not statistically significant. On all 13 of the other commitments, younger alumni scored lower than freshmen or older alumni. This age dip in religious commitment is also seen in other studies of religiosity (Thayer, 1996).

At the present time, the Christian Commitment Survey (Williams, 2006) is given every year to exiting seniors. The survey asks participants to state their commitment to 15 areas of Christian spirituality. A unique feature of the survey is its response mechanism; instead of the typical Likert scale of “never” to “almost always,” it uses these options:

- Have not made this commitment
- Am not keeping this commitment
- Keep when convenient
- Make considerable effort to keep
- Will keep even at great personal sacrifice

Looking at the cumulative data from 2001 to 2006, it is instructive to note the percentages of Adventist students who have not made or are not keeping each of the commitments. The commitments of 1,520 Adventist seniors are given in increasing order of negative commitment. (Thayer, 2008a).

#### Percent of Adventist seniors who have not made or are not keeping commitments

- To accept Jesus Christ as your only savior 2.9 %
- To live a lifestyle that promotes physical health 3.3 %
- To know God 3.4 %
- To submit to God’s will for your life 3.8 %
- To observe the seventh-day Sabbath 4.8 %
- To use the Bible as God’s authoritative revealed word 5.0 %
- To reflect & apply Christian values in your career to

glorify God	5.5 %
• To pray daily	5.8 %
• To belong to a church	7.0 %
• To tell others of the Christian message as found in Scriptures	10.0 %
• To live by biblical principles of sexual morality (sex only within marriage)	10.3 %
• To read or study daily the Bible or devotional literature	12.1 %
• To give systematic tithes and offerings	13.1 %
• To participate actively in the life and work of a local church	17.2 %
• To support world evangelism through personal participation or financial contribution	18.8 %

Looking now at the commitments that the Adventist seniors are “willing to make at great personal sacrifice,” the top three commitments are as follows:

Percent of Adventist seniors who are willing to keep commitments at great personal sacrifice

• To accept Jesus as your only savior	65.5 %
• To observe the seventh-day Sabbath	58.2 %
• To use the Bible as God’s authoritative revealed word	53.1 %

It is important to remember that commitments do not necessarily translate into behaviors; however, it is unlikely that a person will practice a counter-cultural belief without being committed to it.

**Investigating beliefs**

In the 1997 surveys of freshmen and undergraduate alumni mentioned above, we asked 11 questions related to Adventist beliefs. For the analysis of these questions, we separated freshmen, younger alumni, older alumni, and those who were not members of the Adventist Church. Both freshmen and alumni of all ages were included in the non-Adventist group in order to have a reasonable-sized sample. I will report on just four of the questions, which produced interesting patterns of response. The questions and the response options can be found in Appendix B.

Origin of the universe: Age and denominational differences appear in the responses to this item. Among SDAs, more than 60% selected the most conservative position: that God created this earth and all life forms on this world in six literal contiguous 24-hours days under ten thousand years ago. The younger the respondent, the more likely he or she is to select the most conservative position. More than 35% of those who are not SDAs also selected this position. Most SDAs not selecting this choice said they believe that the life forms, but not the earth itself had been created by God in six literal contiguous 24-hour days under ten thousand years ago. The older the SDA respondent, the more likely he or she is to select this response. The second most popular choice made by those who are not SDAs is this response: “God progressively created all life forms on our world over a period of millions of years.” Although about 42% of

those who are not SDAs believe that millions of years were involved in the creation or evolution of the earth and its life forms, only about 12% of SDAs so believe.

What happens at death?: This question was answered quite consistently by all groups. More than 90% of SDAs and just over 40% of those who are not SDAs selected the response that describes the traditional SDA position on what happens at death. The remaining 60% of those who are not SDAs scattered their choices among all of the other possible responses, with the traditional Protestant teaching that “the soul of the person goes to heaven or hell for eternal punishment” being selected by about 25%.

Writings of Ellen White: About 50% of the SDA freshmen and more than 80% of both the young and older SDA alumni, and even about 25% of those who are not SDAs, believe that “Ellen White was inspired by God to reveal truth and events not found in the Bible, but that are in harmony with the Bible.” The only other response that was selected by all groups was the belief that her “writings can be used to evaluate doctrines derived from the Bible.” About 45% of those who are not SDAs said that they “do not know anything about the writings of Ellen White.”

Understanding of the SDA Church: Both SDA freshmen and SDA alumni basically divide their answer to the question about their understanding of the SDA Church between two responses: The largest number—all three SDA groups cluster around 60%—believe that “it has a special message and mission for the world today”; most of the rest—the three SDA groups range from about 30% to 36%—believe that it “is the remnant church of the book of Revelation.” The largest group of those who are not SDAs (about 45%) believe that it “is just one among many Protestant denominations.” A few of those who are not SDAs (6%) and a very few (2%) SDA freshmen believe that the SDA church is a cult.

### **Miscellaneous findings**

From my work as Director of University Assessment (1996-2000), I collected data from a variety of sources and gave a sample of the findings in the *Journal of Adventist Education* (Thayer, 2000, 24). Here are a few of those findings:

- The most important criterion students use to evaluate a faculty member’s spirituality is the faculty member’s “concern for and care of” students. (See also Thayer, 2002, 2005; Thayer, Bothne, & Bates, 2000.)
- Work supervisors who befriend students contribute in important ways to student spiritual growth. (Work supervisors are second only to faculty in importance.)
- Students say that attending church services and having personal devotions rank first and second, respectively (among a list of 14 basic campus religious activities) in importance toward contributing to their spiritual growth. Attending chapel contributes the least.
- “Reading and studying the Bible” is the best predictor (among spiritual disciplines) for a student to make strong commitments to submit to God’s will, to live by biblical principles of sexual morality, to give systematic tithes and offerings, to participate in the life and work of a local church, and to tell others of the Christian message.

## Assessment in the Future: What *Should* Adventist Colleges Be Doing to Pass on the Faith?

Before we can determine how well Adventist colleges are doing at passing on the faith, we need to know what they ought to be doing. We find those “oughts” from theology and the social sciences. We look to theology to tell us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and we look to the social sciences to tell us the developmental tasks of the young adult years 18-25. With insights from these two disciplines, we can at least know what we should be trying to do.

Very few researchers have done research specifically in the area of discipling. Instead, studies most closely related to discipling are conducted using the terms religion, religiosity, spiritual growth or spiritual maturity, spirituality, and faith development or faith maturity. Because universal definitions of these terms do not tell Christians what they most want to know about the spirituality of their young adults, Christian researchers need their own theoretical model for assessment.

I have been working with a team of people at Andrews University and a committee from the General Conference ministries departments to further develop a model of discipling that I first introduced at a workshop for General Conference ministry directors (Thayer, 2006). Taking the three indicators that Jesus himself said identified his disciples, and using some of the terminology of Jeffrey Jones (2006) and Bill Hull (2006), and applying learning theory to spiritual growth, I postulated that what is needed for discipling can be accomplished through four basic processes. The model is called the *Growing Disciples Model* (Ministries Committee, 2007). See Figure 1. This model presents the contribution of theology to the task of discipling..

The Christian academic world knows how to teach the teachings of Jesus, but to get that teaching translated into behavior is another matter; it takes more than the acquisition of knowledge. Also, somehow in the curriculum or co-curriculum, relationships must be made healthy and deep—the relationship with Christ, with themselves and others. Students must be encouraged and empowered to serve God and to minister to others. The basic processes of the Growing Disciples Model are (1) understanding the teachings of Jesus; (2) deepening relationships with Jesus, ourselves, and others; (3) ministering to others through service and evangelism; and (4) preparing to accomplish these tasks.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Deepening relationships: Growing in relationship with Jesus, oneself, and others</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Understanding: Growing in the knowledge of Jesus and his teachings</b></p>
<p><i>Biblical base:</i> “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:35 Love God completely; love oneself correctly, love others compassionately. Matt 22:37-39</p> <p><i>Description:</i> Experiences that encourage people to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ through personal and corporate Christian practices; to grow in self understanding; to grow in relationship with others.</p>	<p><i>Biblical base:</i> “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” John 8:31 Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. Matt 28:20</p> <p><i>Description:</i> Experiences that give people new knowledge and understanding about Jesus and his teachings so that their love and obedience will increase.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Preparing: Growing in the skills of one’s giftedness and application of God’s Word to life.</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Ministering: Growing in participation in God’s mission of reconciliation</b></p>
<p><i>Biblical base:</i> He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, etc. Eph 4:7-8, 11 He gave various gifts to people <b>to prepare God’s people</b> for works of service—to build up the body—until we become mature. Eph. 4:12</p> <p><i>Description:</i> Experiences that encourage people to know, claim, and develop their gifts, discern God’s call to them, and acquire the knowledge and skills needed to live out that call faithfully and effectively.</p>	<p><i>Biblical base:</i> “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” John 15:8 “Whatever you did for the least of these, . . . you did for me” Matt 25: 34-40 “Go . . . and baptize.” Matt 28:19</p> <p><i>Description:</i> Experiences that provide opportunities for people to participate in God’s mission by living out their call in service to others and in bearing their personal testimony about Christ.</p>

Figure 1: Growing Disciples Model

## Morphing into the Tail on Spiritual Assessment

Whether or not Adventist colleges have ever been in the forefront on assessing the spiritual growth of their students is questionable. However, without immediate and major attention to the assessment of spirituality, we will most certainly become the tail. As I have reviewed the literature on spiritual assessment, I have been amazed at how secular institutions are promoting spirituality (sometimes referred to as character development or values education) on campus as part of the holistic development of students. This movement is not coming from the academic faculty, but from the student development (student affairs; student services) officials. Their professional organization, NASPA, has a web site with an electronic journal called *Journal of College and Character* (NASPA, 2007).



The Center for College Student Values at Florida State University has developed the Inventory for Assessing the Spiritual Growth Initiatives of Colleges and Universities. This inventory presents 10 principles that represent “institutional standards or priorities related to spiritual growth in college” which are then “delineated into 34 specific institutional practices that serve as benchmarks or markers of institutional commitment to character development” (Center for College Student Values, n.d.). These principles and practices represent serious thought on the spiritual growth of students. Could the day come that Adventist students would find more intentional initiatives at state universities to help them grow spiritually than they could at Adventist colleges? I hope not because fostering the spiritual life of students is central to Adventist colleges’ mission and because secular institutions are not committed to fostering Christian spirituality.

What chance is there that the 15 Adventist colleges and universities in the North American Division would pool their talent and resources to create our own Inventory for Assessing the Spiritual Growth Initiatives of Adventist Colleges and Universities? We may not be able to get large grants like the CCCU to assess how well we are discipling our students, but together we can learn from one another and create an interest in assessment of spirituality. Such assessment is only a means to an end and that end is the discipling of Adventist college students.

The only control the Adventist church has over the impact of secular institutions on Adventist students attending them is through church members’ relationships and work with the students. Since the local churches near large state universities will need to bear the responsibility of finding and reaching out to Adventist young adults on those campuses, we also need to develop an inventory for assessing the discipling initiatives of Adventist churches. Such an inventory should deal with the discipling of all members because we cannot disciple our young adults if we ourselves are not growing as disciples.

With Adventist colleges and Adventist churches committed to the discipling of our young adults, we could influence in positive ways their college years whether they attend Adventist colleges or secular institutions.

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APPENDIX A

RESPONSIBILITIES AND OUTCOMES  
FOR ADVENTIST TERTIARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

## RESPONSIBILITIES AND OUTCOMES FOR ADVENTIST TERTIARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Adventist institutions of higher education provide students a unique environment needed in pursuit of learning in the arts, humanities and religion, sciences and various professions, within the perspective of the Adventist philosophy of education and spiritual commitment. Adventist higher education (1) gives preference to careers that directly support the mission of the Church; (2) recognizes the importance of the quest for truth in all its dimensions as it affects the total development of the individual in relation both to God and to fellow human beings; (3) utilizes available resources such as revelation, reason, reflection, and research to discover truth and its implications for human life here and in the hereafter, while recognizing the limitations inherent in all human endeavors; (4) leads students to develop lives of integrity based upon principles compatible with the religious, ethical, social, and service values essential to the Adventist worldview; (5) fosters—particularly at the graduate level—the mastery, critical evaluation, discovery and dissemination of knowledge, and the nurture of wisdom in a community of Christian scholars.

### ***Students completing the tertiary level at an Adventist institution should—***

- *Have had the opportunity to commit themselves to God and therefore live a principled life in accordance with His will, with a desire to experience and support the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.*
- *Exhibit proficiency in critical thinking, stewardship, creativity, appreciation of beauty and the natural environment, communication, and other forms of academic scholarship toward fulfillment of their vocations and lifelong learning.*
- *Manifest social sensitivity and loving concern for the well-being of others in preparation for marriage and family life, citizenship within a diverse community, and fellowship within the community of God.*
- *Maintain a consistent lifestyle that demonstrates a commitment to optimal health practices essential to effective adult living. This includes careful use of time and discriminating selection of music, media, and other forms of entertainment.*
- *Answer God's call in the selection and pursuit of their chosen careers, in selfless service to the mission of the Church, and in building a free, just, and productive society and world community.*

APPENDIX B

RESPONSES TO FOUR BELIEF QUESTIONS

## Origin of the Universe

Which statement best describes your understanding of the origin of the universe?

1. God created this earth and all life forms on this world in six literal contiguous 24-hour days **under** ten thousand years ago.
2. God created all life forms on this world in six literal contiguous 24-hour days **under** ten thousand year ago.
3. God created all life forms on this world in six literal contiguous 24-hour days **more than** ten thousand years ago.
4. God progressively created all life forms on our world over a period of millions of years.
5. God created our world over a period of millions of years using the principles discovered by Darwin.
6. The world and all its life forms evolved without any involvement by God over a period of millions of years.

## What Happens at Death?

Which statement best describes your understanding of what happens to a person at death?

1. The “breath of life” returns to God; the body decays but will be resurrected at Jesus’ second coming when eternal life or eternal death will be given to each person.
2. The person experiences a transition to another stage of life.
3. The soul of the person goes to heaven or hell for eternal reward or eternal punishment, depending on how the person lived.
4. The person’s personality and individuality become extinct; there is no life after death.
5. I do not know.

## Writings of Ellen White

Which statement best describes your understanding of the writings of Ellen White?

1. Ellen White’s writings contain no more truth and wisdom than do the religious works written by leaders of other denominations.
2. Ellen White’s writings present God-inspired messages in terms of her own time and place.
3. Ellen White was inspired by God to reveal truth and events not found in the Bible, but that are in harmony with the Bible.
4. Ellen White’s writings carry the same authority as the Bible.
5. Ellen White’s writings can be used to evaluate doctrines derived from the Bible?
6. I do not know anything about the writings of Ellen White.

## Understanding of Seventh-day Adventist Church

Which statement best describes your understanding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

1. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is the remnant church of the book of Revelation.
2. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a special message and mission for the world today.
3. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is just one among many Protestant denominations.
4. The Seventh-day Adventist Church teaches doctrines that place it in the category of “cult.”

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