



A team representing the Adventist Accrediting Association evaluates Roorkee Adventist College (Roorkee, India) in November 2006. Article author Lisa Beardsley is third from the left.

# THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF THE ADVENTIST ACCREDITING ASSOCIATION

BY LISA M. BEARDSLEY

**W**hat assurance can a student, parent, or employer have that an Adventist school provides quality education? How is quality defined, and by whom? Does the work of the Adventist Accrediting Association duplicate work done by other accrediting bodies (and there are many), or does it add unique value?

The root of accreditation is from the Latin, *accredere*, “to give credence to.” Through the process of accreditation,

credence is given to a school’s claim that it is achieving its mission. It signifies that the school has met minimum criteria of quality.

Accreditation provides a number of benefits: Credits earned are transferable to other schools. Students can obtain government-guaranteed loans and grants. The institution is eligible for funds from a variety of sources. Students who earn a degree from an accredited institution can enroll in advanced studies and qualify for exams that license them to enter various professions like medicine, dentistry, or law. Accreditation provides employers

with the assurance that new graduates have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills to enter the profession for which they have studied. It assures the school’s constituency that it is true to its purpose and mission and deserves ongoing support.

The accreditation process itself is beneficial. It provides an opportunity for the institution to reflect and engage in dialogue about what it is doing. First, it participates in a process of self-study, then continues that dialogue with a team of academic experts. Visiting teams from the Adventist Accrediting Association are

uniquely qualified to assist the schools they visit, since they are experts in their fields and share a philosophical commitment to redemptive education in an Adventist milieu.

**T**he majority of institutions need several forms of accreditation for different purposes. In most cases, affirmation by the government, regional accreditation agencies, or professional organizations enhances a school's marketability and makes its graduates more attractive to secular employers. But in a few cases, the requirements of secular accreditation entities have distanced the school from its constituency or compromised institutional values. The competing demands and constraints imposed by external accrediting bodies or partnership arrangements with non-Adventist universities may require prayer and negotiation to resolve.

### **Ensuring That Adventist Education Is Truly Adventist**

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context of a redemptive goal, the AAA also evaluates evidence that the school is comprehensively achieving success in the spiritual domain and that it is truly "Adventist." Accreditation by the AAA is available only to church-owned-and-operated schools and degree programs. A variety of indicators are examined to affirm that the overall educational experience furthers the development of the whole person and promotes a biblical worldview. The complete list of standards and criteria for review can be found in documents at <http://education.gc.adventist.org/approval.htm>.

Abbreviated criteria apply to institutions with regional accreditation. This eliminates unnecessary duplication and allows the evaluation team to focus on whether the school is achieving its mis-

sion in the spiritual domain and is integrating faith and learning in content areas and worldview.

### **The Accreditation Process**

The accreditation process is cyclical and seeks to foster continuous quality improvement. Several months before a campus accreditation visit by AAA representatives, the institution writes a report ("Self Study"), in which it reflects on its own performance. The report also provides evidence that it has responded to recommendations from the last visit and shows how it meets or exceeds standards and criteria.

A team of carefully selected peer reviewers then visits the campus to corroborate the report and examine the institution's capacity and educational ef-



Evaluation team from the Adventist Accrediting Association, with administrators and faculty of Valley View University (Accra, Ghana), December 2007.





Institutions must provide evidence that they meet AAA criteria.

fectiveness. The experts on the visiting team examine many forms of evidence, using the following approaches:

- Conducting interviews with students, faculty, staff, and members of the board of trustees;
- Examining enrollment, retention, and employment data and trends;
- Reviewing the qualifications of faculty and administrators;
- Assessing the adequacy of the physical plant and student housing;
- Reviewing the minutes of various meetings to assess institutional decision-making capacity and confirm that student learning outcomes are used to “close the loop” in processes and instruction;
- Visiting the library and resource centers to review their holdings;
- Evaluating Internet access;
- Examining indicators of the quality of worship services;
- Checking on the quality of the food in the cafeteria.

Because the primary focus is evaluative, at the end of the visit, the team writes a report on its findings and makes a recommendation to the board of the Adventist Accrediting Association regarding the accreditation status of the institution. The team can recommend that accreditation (or candidacy) be approved (or extended), or that it be withheld or withdrawn. Even positive votes by the board almost always endorse the recommendations for improvement made by the visiting team.

Loss of accreditation means that the

school's credits and degrees may not be recognized within the Adventist system, affects insurability by Adventist Risk Management, and constitutes a warning sign to prospective students, potential employers, and the church constituency.

The most common weaknesses revealed by accreditation visits are the four “F’s”: financial weakness, faculty fit, facilities, and faithfulness to mission.

#### Finances

A strong university or college will have a robust financial base with diversified income derived from tuition, industries and services, appropriations and gifts (including endowments), and research grants.

### What Is the AAA?

The Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (AAA) is the denominational accrediting authority for all tertiary and graduate educational programs and institutions owned by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is responsible for evaluating the quality of the denominational institutions' programs and their implementation of the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education in order to foster the unity and mission of the church (*GC Working Policy*, 2006-2007, pp. 233, 234).

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In addition to a good revenue base, the institution must demonstrate financial integrity in all its dealings. The visiting team reviews audited financial statements to ensure that internal control is sound, generally accepted accounting practices are followed, and funds are deployed to adequately support academics, library and learning resources, student services and the co-curriculum, and spiritual programming.

#### Faculty Fit

It goes without saying that the faculty must have the appropriate qualifications to teach in their respective disciplines. But they need more than that. There must be a good fit between the values of the faculty and those of the school. The teachers at a college or university are key to the transmission of values, as C. S. Lewis observed:

“This very obvious fact—that each generation is taught by an earlier generation—must be kept very firmly in mind.... The moment we forget this we begin to talk nonsense about education.... None can give to another what he does not possess himself. No generation can bequeath to its successor what it has not got. You may frame the syllabus as you please. If we are skeptical, we shall teach only skepticism to our pupils, if fools only folly, if vulgar only vulgarity, if saints sanctity, if heroes heroism. Education is only the most fully conscious of the channels whereby each generation influences the next.... Nothing which was not in the teachers can flow from them into the pupils. We shall all admit that a man who knows no Greek himself cannot teach Greek to his form: but it is equally certain that a man whose mind was formed in a period of cynicism and

*By means of the accreditation process, the institution demonstrates how it aligns effort with resources to provide the best academic education possible that also nurtures and matures faith and prepares students for positions of leadership in their communities and churches.*

disillusion cannot teach hope or fortitude” (“On the Transmission of Christianity,” *God in the Dock*, p. 116).

It is not the policies, historical roots, buildings, required chapel attendance, or the vegetarian food that make Adventist education Adventist. Rather, it becomes a reality through the day-by-day mentoring of committed church members who share their faith and not just their passion for a particular area of study. For this reason, the increasing trend of employing faculty of other faiths (worldwide, nearly 25 percent of all tertiary faculty in 2005, up from 18 percent in 2000) is of concern to the Adventist Accrediting Association. This increase parallels an upturn in the percentage of students from other faiths enrolled in our colleges and universities: from 25 percent to 38 percent during the same five years. Without faculty members who are thoroughly committed to Adventism, who will pass on the faith to the next generation?

### Facilities

Historically, Adventist higher education has been residential and located in rural areas. Despite changing demographics (more schools located in urban areas and a larger percentage of commuting and part-time students), our colleges and universities still need to provide safe, comfortable, and healthful facilities. At times, an accreditation team includes a representative from Adventist Risk Management to ensure that adequate safety measures are implemented, such as deterring intruders while still allowing efficient and rapid egress in the case of a fire or other emergency.

Building and maintaining technology-smart classrooms, laboratory and clinical facilities, dining halls and housing for single and married students, all add to the cost of Adventist education. But living in a safe, healthful environment and

being exposed to healthy lifestyle habits are important parts of a wholistic education.

**S**tudents typically complain about the cost or lack of variety in “cafeteria food”; some desire vegan food while others want to be served meat. A few even choose to use alcohol or illicit drugs even though they agree to refrain from doing so in their application to attend the school. Although no school, teacher, or student is perfect, high standards for healthful living and attractive surroundings are still part of the vibrant Adventist educational package.

### Faith and Faithfulness to Mission

The final “F” of accreditation is the most important. In addition to meeting all the expectations for quality education (e.g., program integrity, faculty qualifications, adequate learning resources), faith is foremost. The integration of faith and learning happens most naturally under

the skillful eye of dedicated, godly teachers.

Programs that nurture faith (devotionals, worship services, mission trips, required courses and modules in religion) are all part of the spiritual master plan that every school should have. Some pull back from the task of trying to measure the spiritual domain, believing that schools cannot possibly be accountable for student choices. They rationalize that since God gave humans free choice, who are we to question students’ decisions?

The fact that some students will use their power of choice in undesirable ways, or that the spiritual domain might be difficult to measure does not excuse a school from being accountable for and intentional in the task of strengthening faith and promoting an Adventist worldview. Adventist schools build on students’ prior learning and experiences in spiritual life as well as in academics. That growth continues into doctoral studies and does not end with undergraduate education.

Spiritual growth and development can be measured and quantified using the same principles of measurement that are used to evaluate other learning—for example, through pre- and post-tests and by assessing the impact of interventions against benchmarks over a period of time.

Students and their parents select Ad-

## Areas Reviewed by the Adventist Accrediting Association

- Criterion 1: History, Philosophy, Mission, and Objectives
  - Criterion 2: Spiritual Development, Service, and Witnessing
  - Criterion 3: Governance, Organization, and Administration
  - Criterion 4: Finances, Financial Structure, and Industries
  - Criterion 5: Programs of Study
  - Criterion 6: Faculty and Staff
  - Criterion 7: Library and Resource Centers
  - Criterion 8: Academic Policies and Records
  - Criterion 9: Student Services
  - Criterion 10: Physical Plant and Facilities
  - Criterion 11: Public Relations and External Constituencies
- Compliance with the International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education (IBMTE) for programs in Religion and Theology

From Accreditation Handbook, Part III. Table 1. Standard for Review by the Adventist Accrediting Association.

ventist education from among other options. And so our institutions must put forth deliberate, concerted effort and resources to provide quality academics, positive modeling, and integration of faith and learning inside and outside the classroom. Through the accreditation process, the institution demonstrates how it aligns its efforts and resources to provide the best academic education possible—while also nurturing faith and preparing students for positions of leadership in their communities and churches. The church's accreditation process helps the institution accomplish these goals.

The Website of the Adventist Accrediting Association provides guidelines for developing a spiritual master plan, but allows institutions some freedom to determine how to accomplish and measure spiritual education and faith formation in their students. Whatever plan the school embraces, it should identify the spiritual goals of the institution, describe how it plans to meet them, develop a list of indicators measuring the extent to which outcomes have been achieved, and show what has been done to improve on performance. In this way, institutions substantiate that they use numerous types of feedback to improve practice and policy.

At last, a vote. When the board of the Adventist Accrediting Association votes on the status of an institution, it designates a date until which the accreditation is valid. Accreditation is for a limited period, with a maximum of five years. An annual progress report is often required. Schools that are still developing or that raise some concerns are often required to have an interim visit. This is to keep the channels of dialogue open between the institution and its constituency. Institutions with a solid track record and many forms of other accreditation (regional/national and professional) may have an “administrative” interim visit by a small team at the midpoint of regional accreditation (typically in the fifth year of a 10-year regional accreditation period).

### The Team's Report

Members of the visiting team seek to write a fair and collegial report, but usually spend no more than a week on cam-



Lots of lawn surrounds married student housing at Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (Philippines).

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pus. Two steps are taken to ensure that the evaluation is as accurate as possible. First, an exit report is given to highlight major findings, commendations, and recommendations before the team leaves campus. The institution receives a draft and is invited to report any errors of fact within two weeks. When the report is finalized, such errors of fact are corrected. However, should an institution still wish to dispute the findings and recommendations of a visiting team, it may appeal to the board of the Adventist Accrediting Association. The board may authorize another team to visit the school or

choose some other method to consider the concerns of the institution.

Accreditation provides not only accountability for the integration of faith and learning and for quality education, but also serves as a forum for reflection, commitment (including financial commitment by governing boards or sponsoring organizations), and collaboration between gown and town—in this case, the church. The process promotes transparency and demonstrates accountability to the church constituency. Furthermore, this form of intentional dialogue fosters collaboration and understanding between the work of education and the work of the church. ✍



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