

# Do We Hold Learning in Contempt?

By Otilie Stafford

**W**hen I was five, I sat on the steps of our Brooklyn apartment and cried because I so much wanted to go to school, where I might learn to read. To be able to read seemed to me a wonderful thing.

Soon after I learned to read, I was given a library card and the freedom to go to the library myself. Armed with a list of approved books, I roller-skated the few blocks to the neighborhood branch. Soon the list of approved books was exhausted, and after that I do not remember any restraints on my book selection, though I suppose my parents must have quietly observed what I brought home in the weekly stack of reading. The church schools were reasonably good. But I do not believe it would have mattered much what I learned in school—I was getting a start in learning in the New York libraries.

By the time I attended an academy, we had moved upstate. Our academy teachers demanded hard work of us. We studied Latin as well as French. We read a great deal, wrote some, and talked a great deal. And we were very concerned about the condition of our souls in those perilous days when the re-election of FDR was viewed by our parents as a "sign of the end."

We entered college knowing how to think, well armed with the skills of learning. Our image

of the typical Adventist was of a person who read and thought about everything. My parents and their friends argued politics, economic issues, and what was going on in the city, the world, and the church. The church was, in a way, the geography we lived in, but it was expansive enough to include everything else—music, philosophy, educational theory, mission work. It was a lively, secure, and capacious world.

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But something has happened to Adventist education since I was an academy student. I see it in the college freshmen I am now teaching. In many ways they reflect what has happened to American education in general in the past two decades, but there are problems peculiar to Adventist education. These problems grow out of concerns that have been argued by denominational educational leaders for more than 100 years. However, the present attitudes were certainly not the predominant ones a century ago.

I have been doing some research in the *Review and Herald*s of 100 years ago in connection with the upcoming centennial at Atlantic Union College. I keep thinking of my present-day freshmen as I read those old issues:

June 3, 1880: "Development is the great object for which man was created. Whatever strengthens the mind or educates the heart, ennobles, refines, exalts, and elevates the entire being. Pleasurable emotions always accompany true culture. . . . A well-drilled mind, a strong, healthy body, and a sweet, loving disposition, make life a great and wonderful thing."

Life isn't so wonderful for today's freshmen, then. Far from having well-drilled minds, they find it almost impossible to follow the logical development of thought, even in material written for popular reading, an article in *Psychology Today* for example. To think through a problem and to express it in coherent and well-developed paragraphs is agony for them. One of the young women, who admits to never reading a book outside of class assignments, sits beside my desk and cries with frustration at the alien activities of reading and writing.

## **A Broad and Firm Foundation**

June 17, 1880: "It is necessary to lay a broad and firm foundation, that the structure to be reared may be sustained. A thorough study of the principal branches of knowledge, and the resulting discipline received, will construct such a foundation, and upon it can be erected a substantial superstructure of thought and accumulated facts. Every hour deducted from this liberal preparation in the schools is detrimental to the work of the individual in after-years."

A superstructure of *thought* and accumulated *facts!* One young man who, I suspect, has a brighter-than-average mind, writes with the disconnected, unrelated style of a small child.

Chairman, Department of English  
Atlantic Union College  
South Lancaster, Massachusetts

Yet he desperately wants to succeed in college and in life, and he is bitter about the lack of firmness in the foundation he has received.

August 19, 1880: "Many of our young friends feel an ardent desire to work for the Lord,—to preach his word. Such ought to endeavor to increase their store of knowledge, both religious and scientific [by scientific of course, people in 1880 merely meant general knowledge], as their influence upon their fellow men will thereby be greatly increased. . . . The Lord's blessing rests upon this country, which has done so much for a liberal instruction even among the poorest classes."

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The young men who are planning to be ministers are sometimes the most scornful of education, feeling that somehow their "calling" gives them instant wisdom. They are genuine Elihus, announcing that those perfect in wisdom are among us. One young man ostentatiously ignores what is going on in class, wishing to make it obvious that he does not need a discussion of discursive logic. He cannot write a logical answer to a question on a test; but he is a theology major, what need has he of logic? His religion teachers are, I am sure, similarly distressed by his ignorant and undisciplined mind.

### Idle, Uncultivated Minds

Nov. 29, 1881: "It is true that nothing can take the place of personal consecration to God and the enjoyment of his spiritual blessings; yet it does not follow from this that we are to sit with idle, uncultivated minds."

Yet the most obvious characteristic of these freshmen, who have been protected from knowledge, is exactly that—idle, uncultivated minds. Ask

them to write about a serious subject, and you get rather empty papers on motorcycles from the young men and walking on the beach in the moonlight from the young women. The young men look embarrassed and apologize, but the young women! What we have done to them is tragic. They sit at a great feast of learning and are not even interested in the scraps.

Feb. 7, 1882: "A man is educated when he knows how to make a tool of every faculty—how to open it, how to keep it sharp, and how to apply it to all practical purposes."

The young Helen Keller is undoubtedly the best-known example of the mind with no tools to use. But in a less extreme way, these students suffer from the same handicap. Because of their lack of reading their vocabularies are limited to words used in oral English. This oral vocabulary is wholly inadequate for effective reading and writing. Furthermore, lack of vocabulary limits the ability to think.

Yet the *ability to think* seems to be accepted by those old *Reviews* as a necessary quality of the educated mind. They begin with certain assumptions we no longer can take for granted: that Adventist education does not subtract from the conventional education of the day, it *adds* to it.

Feb. 28, 1882: "To be well educated, it is quite as essential to form right habits of life as to complete a prescribed course of study. For example, if it is desirable to be able to read the ancient poets in their native tongue—as, indeed, who would question? is it not also desirable to form the habit of spending one's evenings in study, instead of wasting time in roaming about town and attending every entertainment that comes along?"

### Students Fearful of Knowledge

Today's freshmen are prod-

ucts of a very different view of Adventist education—that its purpose is to protect students from the dangers of learning. Far from being able to read the ancient poets in Latin and Greek, they have read very little. They have had some grammar (and are, indeed, the living proof that studying grammar has no relationship to good writing), and they have been encouraged to think that putting down incomplete sentences in short lines constitutes writing poetry. But they have been made fearful of knowledge, as though knowledge and morality were antithetical.

March 7, 1882: "Our learning need not outgrow our morals, but both together grow; and should the former tower mountain high, the latter need not stand below it. . . . It is not *study* that leads young men from God, it is spending our *whole* time and energy in study, to the neglect of our spirituality." (Italics supplied.)

C. C. Lewis wrote the above, and he discussed in the July 6,

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### Adventist education [should] not subtract from the conventional wisdom of the day, it [should] add to it.

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1905, issue the relationship between conservatives and liberals in Adventist education. The conservatives, he said, were those who merely wanted to reproduce the programs of the colleges around them; the liberals were those who wanted to incorporate the study of the Bible into the programs and to relate the Bible to those subjects where its relationship was valid. C. C. Lewis was definitely on the side of the liberals here, as was Ellen White.

The results of their zealous effort to liberalize the curriculum by including the Bible

was a strong defense of the Bible as an academic study, by Mrs. White as well as by other leaders of Adventist education. Then the defense of the Bible as subject matter seems to have been misunderstood to be an argument for teaching *only* the Bible.

"I hope that no one will receive the impression from any words I have written that the standard of the school is to be in any way lowered. There should be most diligent and thorough education in our school, and in order to secure this, the wisdom that comes from God must be made first and most important."—*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 373.

First and most important, but *not* the solitary subject matter. One can see what kept happening to Ellen White and the response to her counsel in an earlier comment by James White, in the *Review* of March 17, 1868:

Mrs. White needs the help of all who can help in the cause of truth and reform. . . . He who sees the duty of reform, and is full strict enough in any case, and allows of no exceptions, and drives matters, is sure to drive the reform into the ground, hurt his own soul, and injure others. Such do not help Mrs. W.[hite], but greatly burden her in her arduous work. . . . She makes strong appeals to the people, which few feel deeply, and take strong positions, and go to extremes. Then to save the cause from ruin in consequence to these extremes, she is obliged to come out with reproofs for extremists in a public manner. This is better than to have things go to pieces; but the influence of both the extremes and the reproofs are terrible on the cause. . . . What she may say to urge the tardy, is taken by the prompt to urge them over the mark. And what she may say to caution the prompt, zealous, incautious ones, is taken by the tardy as an excuse to remain too far behind.

This suggests something of the golden mean, the sensible middle road, which is also implied in these words by Ellen White:

Every student should feel that, under God, he is to have special training, indi-

vidual culture, and he should realize that the Lord requires of him to make all of himself that he possibly can, that he may teach others also. Indolence, apathy, irregularity, are to be dreaded, and the binding of one's self to routine is just as much to be dreaded.—*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 373.

These freshmen, who have been protected from knowledge in the belief that it is dangerous, have been taught by well-meaning teachers who have taken one side of the debate about Adventist education and have made it an entire philosophy of education. Yet it seems clear, reading both sides of the argument, that early Adventist educational leaders, including Ellen White, did not ever think that knowledge itself was harmful, but that its teaching should be transformed by minds that were familiar with

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the Bible. Yet the argument's results, both in the nineteenth century and again in our own age, was and is a kind of contempt for learning. James White, in *Battle Creek College* (July, 1877), asks this very question: "Do S. D. Adventists Hold Learning in Contempt?" and answers his own question:

"The fact is this: When the Lord shall appear, Adventists expect to leave their money here, and take their brains with them. For this reason, they value brain culture more than money. You see it becomes a simple matter of shrewd investment."

Then he quotes a preacher in Chicago who said in a sermon, "Second Adventism brings with it contempt for invention, industry, learning, and philosophy of all kinds, which would soon strand the ship of life; hence, if widely spread, it would

become a great practical evil.' "

To this James White responds:

If there were not many individuals in the ranks of S. D. Adventists of whom the above is literally true, we might well look with pity and surprise upon the large number of this very class in the ranks of other denominations. To admit the existence of *one* such among S. D. Adventists is a humiliation. . . . We find in their faith the very ingredients that would tend to stimulate S. D. Adventists above all classes of religionists to throw their whole energies into the improvement and development of man in his relations to society, as well as to God, and as an individual. (Italics supplied.)

One might cite other such statements indicating that the early Adventist Church did not see education as a protection from knowledge, but as a thorough development of skills, of knowledge, or individual growth, with Bible study and moral development affecting all.

### Defining a Good Education

In the *Review* of April 18, 1882, a definition of a good education is given:

"To read the English language well, to write with dispatch a neat, legible hand, and be master of the . . . rules of arithmetic. . . . Add the ability to write pure grammatical English. . . . These are the tools. You can do much with them; but you are hopeless without them. They are the foundation; . . . begin with these.' "

Such a beginning, of course, belongs in the elementary and secondary schools, not in college. But today colleges must begin with these in basic skills programs, as they try to give students who are already in college the skills they should have developed long before they arrived.

This, of course, is not a problem unique to Adventist colleges. The appalling ignorance of students who have supposedly been studying for

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Ellen G. White become specifically helpful in developing a meaningful religious life program:

Of all the features of an education to be given in our school homes the religious exercises are the most important. They should be treated with the greatest solemnity and reverence, yet all the pleasantness possible should be brought into them. They should not be prolonged till they become wearisome, for the impression thus made upon the minds of the youth will cause them to associate religion with all that is dry and uninteresting; and many will be led to cast their influence on the side of the enemy, who, if properly taught, would become a blessing to the world and to the church. The Sabbath meetings, the morning and evening service in the home and in the chapel, unless wisely planned and vitalized by the Spirit of God, may become the most formal, unpleasant, unattractive, and to the youth the most burdensome, of all the school exercises. The social meetings and all other religious exercises should be so planned and managed that they will be not only profitable, but so pleasant as to be positively attractive. Praying together will bind hearts to God in bonds that will endure; confessing Christ openly and bravely, exhibiting in our characters His meekness, humility, and love, will charm others with the beauty of holiness.

On all these occasions Christ should be set forth as "the chiefest among ten thousand," the One "altogether lovely." Song of Solomon 5:10, 16. He should be presented as the Source of all true pleasure and satisfaction, the Giver of every good and perfect gift, the Author of every blessing, the One in whom all our hopes of eternal life are centered. In every religious exercise let the love of God and the joy of the Christian experience appear in their true beauty. Present the Saviour as the Restorer from every effect of sin.

To accomplish this result all narrowness must be avoided. Sincere, earnest, heartfelt devotion will be needed. Ardent, active piety in the teachers will be essential. But there is power for us if we will have it. There is grace for us if we will appreciate it. The Holy Spirit is waiting our demand if we will only demand it with that intensity of purpose which is proportionate to the value of the object we seek. Angels of heaven are taking notice of all our work and are watching to see how they can so minister to each one that he will reflect the likeness of Christ in character and become conformed to the divine image. When those in charge of our school homes appreciate the privileges and opportunities placed within their reach, they will

do a work for God of which heaven will approve.<sup>11</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Pattern of God's Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin H. Littell, "Religion in the American Experience," *Religious Education* (May-June, 1976), p. 304.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Gaebelien, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, Book 2 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1958), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> ———, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1942), p. 457.

<sup>8</sup> Gaebelien, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *A New Face for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), pp. 32, 33.

<sup>10</sup> White, *Steps to Christ*, (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1908), p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> ———, *Testimonies for the Church* Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 6, pp. 174, 175.

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## Do We Hold Learning in Contempt?

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twelve years is widespread. What is unique to Adventist schools is that religious reasons have been given *defending* ignorance—knowledge being full of error, evil, and various seductions. Some of our students sincerely believe that if they leave their minds empty, God will put whatever needs to be known into them. Not one of the early leaders in Adventist education would have agreed with that theory.

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## To sacrifice academic quality is to cut at the very roots of responsible Christian education.

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Language is necessary to development of thought; reading is necessary for language development to be logical and complex. Without reading there are only disconnected bits of thought. Without the ability to sustain discursive thought, history holds little meaning, since cause and effect cannot be explored. Religion remains largely superstitious and sentimental. Moral principle cannot be understood and applied. Responsible social and political

action cannot be taken because conditions cannot be analyzed and responded to. This is not to say that individuals cannot be good people if they have undisciplined minds; but one might question the kind of goodness they have when their ignorance is *willful*.

How do schools and colleges cope with such individuals? Shrinking enrollments mean lower admissions standards. The effect of the 1960's was to drop requirements that students resented. Today foreign language, mathematics, philosophy, and logic, once required of all students, may be entirely absent from a student's program. And today's typical college student cannot write, does not read, misspells everyday words, lacks acquaintance with the most elementary notions of syntax, and *knows* very little.

### A Need for Creative Thinkers

Moreover, in the Adventist Church, young people have been left ignorant at a time when we most need creative thinkers and problem-solvers with trained minds and fresh vision to confront the questions perplexing the church. Today's freshmen, whose minds cannot follow through the development of a simple idea, must face questions that demand a knowledge of history, theology, and stylistics. Without such knowledge they can react in three ways: with panic, indifference, or obedience to some authority. The corollary of the desire to protect young people from knowledge, lest it lead them astray, is the conviction that there are "molders of thought" who should decide what people need to know and then should tell them. But what happens when these young people become the authorities? And what happens in a time of crisis when they cannot run to their neighborhood thought-molder and they are, like Job, in a

situation that no dogma explains?

### **Some Suggestions**

I have no magic directions for change, but I do have some random thoughts about what might be done. Meanwhile, I hope that the argument about Adventist education that started with the establishment of the first schools will continue with its original intensity and openness. Here are some proposals:

1. If I were the parent of a young child or teen-ager, I would try to limit the amount of television viewing done in my home, and try to return the whole family to the reading of books.

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### **Lack of vocabulary limits the ability to think.**

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2. I would set up a way in which grade school, academy, and college teachers were in constant communication, not so the college teachers could dictate to the academy or the academy to the church school, but so a constant exchange of ideas, observations, and theory might take place.

3. The society of the church needs not only disciplined minds, but also creative minds. The development of the imagination is needed for a rebirth of vision. The creation of new symbols, the content of new visions change lives, sometimes when rational arguments cannot. What Moltmann calls "the dream turned forward" gives purpose to the church. Yet we give almost no attention in our educational system to this important human faculty. We need workshops, courses, discussions, and more of the arts, the vehicle of the visions of the past.

4. Gifted students are once again in trouble in our schools. They need special programs. But teachers have little time to

inspire them, for they are occupied more and more with basic skills. Perhaps we need more widely developed special scholarship incentives. Perhaps a core of teachers on each campus who are particularly in touch with such students should be established. Perhaps there might be more waivers of requirements and the opportunity to move on to more challenging work. These able students are, after all, not a snob group, or an elitist group, but the ones we most need to keep close to the church so that they can use their talents for its benefit.

5. The distance between the church and the academic institution needs to be closed. There has always been some town-gown hostility, but in the case of the church-related institution and the church, the distrust is particularly harmful. We need ways of bringing these two groups into a closer mutual understanding. Our colleges need constituents as trustees on boards who are vitally interested in the academic world, who are more than exofficio members, visiting the campus for occasional board meetings. Faculty should be encouraged to circulate outside academic societies, so that they can create a dialog between school and society. Most of all we need to provide for more involvement of our students, who are one of the largest and most overlooked groups. Historically, missionary and evangelizing concerns and social activism have risen from student bodies. Our students need something more significant than the Super Bowl or the Muppet Show to be interested in. Adventist campuses have, perhaps, through such programs as the Student Missionary Program, done more than most in this respect; but even on our own campuses such programs affect only a small number of students. If students

see that the world outside the campus is interested in what they are doing, perhaps they will take their classwork more seriously.

6. Students might also take the importance of knowledge and discipline more seriously if they observed it more clearly in the adults whom they respect. Much has been said about life-long learning in the past few years. But the importance of growth as a life-long activity is certainly a logical part of a Christian view of life. Proverbs not only sets up a system of wisdom to be taught by the wise to the young, but it also asserts that even the wise must go on learning. If the campus were a place where parents, neighbors, aunts, grandfathers, doctors, ministers, and teachers engaged in workshops, minicourses, conferences, and seminars, students might be less likely to think that what goes on in college has nothing to do with life. Such programs could deal with both general areas of knowledge and with church-related questions.

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7. We especially need to do something for the young women of the church. The worst effects of ignorance can be seen in them. Young men may be ignorant but active; but young women are kept ignorant and passive. They have not only the sheltering effects of the school, but the sheltering of home to combat. If they are to live anything but empty and frivolous lives, they need to develop their minds and their sense of themselves as individuals whose lives have serious purpose. Perhaps there needs to be a Commission on Women somewhere, and perhaps the college

campuses are the places to begin.

At every level of the church's structure, education needs to be given the highest priority. To sacrifice academic quality is to cut at the very roots of responsible Christian education. To do it in the name of religion is shocking. Schweitzer was thinking of the need for ethical living when he said that ignorance was the greatest sin. Nevertheless, like crime and poverty, its increase is alarming. Adventists have, both in the words of their founders and in their beliefs, a basis for holding learning as important, not for holding it in contempt.

*This article is based on a talk given in November, 1980, before a professional group in Takoma Park, Maryland.*

## A Profile of SDA College and University Graduates

*(Continued from page 15)*

increase is slowly growing from 11 percent for the entire period to 13 percent for the period from 1967 to 1976, to 14 percent for the year 1976. For the period 1920 to 1966, women earned 9 percent of the doctorates awarded to baccalaureate graduates of Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities.

The National Research Council gives a breakdown of these statistics by male and female as well as doctoral areas of study. The broad categories of the statistics in the sciences are grouped under the physical sciences, mathematics, engineering, life sciences, social sciences, as well as a total for the sciences. Other categories are the arts and humanities, professional fields, and education. The professional fields include business, home economics, journalism, social work, and theology. Religion is included under arts and humanities. To

simplify this information the statistics for the periods 1920 to 1966, and 1967 to 1976 by category is given with a breakdown for male and female recipients. Institutions are listed by order of the largest to the smallest number of baccalaureate graduates earning doctoral degrees in the particular category.

The physical sciences include astronomy, physics, chemistry, and earth sciences. There is a relatively surprising show of strength for SDA doctoral study in the physical sciences through the years. It represents 12 percent of the total of 1138 doctorates and 30 percent of the total doctorates earned in the sciences.

In recent years the major producers of graduates who earned doctorates in mathematics are Andrews University and Pacific Union College. For the entire period these two institutions and Walla Walla College have

produced a little more than three-fourths of all graduates who earned doctorates in mathematics. Oakwood College has not had a doctorate in mathematics and three colleges—Atlantic Union, Columbia Union, and Union—have not had a graduate earn a doctorate in mathematics in ten years or more.

All doctoral degrees in engineering except two earned by SDA college and university graduates have been received since 1967. While Walla Walla College would be expected to produce most of the bachelor's graduates who have earned doctoral degrees in engineering, it is interesting to note that almost half have been earned by graduates of institutions that do not have an undergraduate engineering program. Three colleges—Atlantic Union, Oakwood, and Southern Missionary—have produced no graduate

**Table 5**  
**Life Sciences**

| Institution               | 1920-1966           |      |        | 1967-1976           |      |        |
|---------------------------|---------------------|------|--------|---------------------|------|--------|
|                           | Doctoral Recipients |      |        | Doctoral Recipients |      |        |
|                           | Total               | Male | Female | Total               | Male | Female |
| 1. Andrews University     | 22                  | 20   | 2      | 27                  | 24   | 3      |
| 2. Walla Walla College    | 22                  | 22   | 0      | 20                  | 19   | 1      |
| 3. Columbia Union College | 15                  | 14   | 1      | 17                  | 15   | 2      |
| 4. Pacific Union College  | 15                  | 15   | 0      | 10                  | 8    | 2      |
| 5. Loma Linda University  | 8                   | 8    | 0      | 14                  | 11   | 3      |
| 6. Union College          | 10                  | 10   | 0      | 12                  | 10   | 2      |
| 7. Atlantic Union College | 1                   | 1    | 0      | 8                   | 8    | 0      |
| 8. Southern Missionary    | 2                   | 2    | 0      | 6                   | 6    | 0      |
| 9. Oakwood College        | 2                   | 2    | 0      | 2                   | 2    | 0      |
| TOTAL                     | 97                  | 94   | 3      | 116                 | 103  | 13     |

**Table 6**  
**Social Sciences**

| Institution               | 1920-1966           |      |        | 1967-1976           |      |        |
|---------------------------|---------------------|------|--------|---------------------|------|--------|
|                           | Doctoral Recipients |      |        | Doctoral Recipients |      |        |
|                           | Total               | Male | Female | Total               | Male | Female |
| 1. Columbia Union College | 4                   | 4    | 0      | 9                   | 8    | 1      |
| 2. Andrews University     | 3                   | 3    | 0      | 7                   | 6    | 1      |
| 3. Pacific Union College  | 4                   | 4    | 0      | 6                   | 6    | 0      |
| 4. Union College          | 4                   | 3    | 1      | 6                   | 6    | 0      |
| 5. Loma Linda University  | 3                   | 3    | 0      | 4                   | 4    | 0      |
| 6. Southern Missionary    | 2                   | 1    | 1      | 3                   | 3    | 0      |
| 7. Walla Walla College    | 2                   | 2    | 0      | 3                   | 3    | 0      |
| 8. Atlantic Union College | 2                   | 1    | 1      | 2                   | 2    | 0      |
| 9. Oakwood College        | 0                   | 0    | 0      | 4                   | 3    | 1      |
| TOTAL                     | 24                  | 21   | 3      | 44                  | 41   | 3      |