

Adventist Virtual Learning Laboratory

“And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear” (Isaiah 65:24, NIV).

Background

Without any formal directive or advance planning, Adventist educators across North America unknowingly began preparing for a unique K-22 distance-education collaboration. This God-led grassroots initiative did not occur because of any one person or institution; rather, *it is a genuine collaboration among Adventist educators who share a vision of using new technology and the Internet to promote exemplary Adventist education for anyone, anywhere, anytime.*

Many projects and programs either were being planned or were already underway before the Adventist Virtual Learning Laboratory (AVLL)¹ began. These included K-12 distributed education, K-22 curriculum support, library resources, and online higher education. For example:

K-12 Distributed Education Solutions. On the East and West coasts of the United States, a K-12 distributed-education project was developed to meet diverse needs. On the East Coast, Adventist Education for the 21st Century (AE21),² located in Orlando, Florida, was developed to help small schools offer grades 5 to 8. It has now expanded to include grades 9 to 12. AE21 is sponsored by the North American Division (NAD) and the Florida Conference, with administrative help from the Southern Union. On the West Coast, Silver State Adventist School³ in Reno, Nevada, developed an online high school program in response to requests from families in the Nevada/Utah Conference who wanted to keep their children home rather than send

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them away to distant boarding academies.

K-22+ Curriculum Support. Many teachers and administrators long for access to the multitude of materials produced by divisions, unions, and conferences but find it hard to track them down or even find out what exists. The NAD-sponsored CIRCLE Project⁴ was developed to provide an easily accessible, searchable database of Adventist-produced materials, as well as other resources for Adventist educators.

Library Resources. The Association of Seventh-day Adventist Librarians (ASDAL)⁵ had for years been working collaboratively across institutional boundaries and was already well on its way to making library resources available online to Adventist education students.

Higher Education. Many Adventist colleges and universities were already providing distance-learning courses. For example, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, was developing a distributed-education version of the Master of Divinity degree. Andrews also had a Leadership Doctoral Program,⁶ which combined face-to-face (on campus and in regional groups) and online learning. La Sierra University in Riverside, California, had several teaching credential courses online.⁷ In addition, the School of Business at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee, was putting its M.B.A. program online.⁸

These are just a few examples of online distance-education projects that were being developed or were already in place before AVLL began in January 1999. Many other pro-

grams would contribute to the AVLL collaborative effort.

Vision

AVLL is a grassroots project whose mission is to help K-22+ educators collaborate in developing and sharing Adventist distributed-education courses and programs. Their motto is to meet the learning needs of people from "Birth to Eternity—lifelong learning for the whole person."

AVLL believes that "together we stand; divided we fall." By collaborating, even the weakest school, college, or university can become a stronger influence locally and can serve the needs of individuals in the global community. If done well, collaborative alliances will help all Adventist educational institutions by giving them more courses and services to offer their resident students. Through its consolidations and shared resources, an alliance can also improve cost effectiveness by reducing needless competition and costly duplication of services.

While many excellent quality distance-education courses and programs are offered by var-

ious schools, most are not faith-based. Therefore, AVLL believes that Adventist online learning can fill a unique niche.

First Conference – January 1999

The initial AVLL conference was held in Orlando, Florida, at the Florida Conference office. Adventist educators came for varying reasons: Some were alarmed by collaboration between big-name universities and large corporations in developing online education. They wanted to combine church resources to improve the marketing of Adventist education. Others focused on outreach possibilities, hoping to take advantage of new opportunities to make Adventist education more widely available. Attendees at this first AVLL conference agreed on the need to redesign Adventist education for the 21st century in ways that went far beyond a "technology facelift."

To learn from others who were already successfully teaching online, AVLL invited the University of Central Florida⁹ and The Florida High School¹⁰ (completely virtual) to describe their strategies for online instruction. These presen-

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tations helped AVLL participants to better envision what online learning could look like and how to produce quality programs.

By the end of the conference, participants had created goals for a shared vision of lifelong (birth-to-eternity) Adventist learning.

The Maui Adventist School offers distance education for children in Hana, a remote part of the island.

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The members of AVLL believe that God is leading the church to think differently...and more cooperatively than ever before.

Second Conference – September 1999

The second AVLL conference also met at Orlando, Florida, in September 1999. This time, the attendees were guests of the Celebration Health Florida Hospital.¹¹ The conference theme was “Breaking Down the Walls: Creating Unity Amidst Diversity.”

Des Cummings, Jr., executive vice-president of marketing and public relations for Celebration Health Florida Hospital, energized the group by charging educators “to change the world!” and to envision their job as creating compelling experiences and eternal moments—times when love is so strong that we later go back to those moments for strength. “God always thinks and acts BIG—we are to emulate Him,” Cummings urged. He challenged AVLL to return to the core principles of Adventist education and to aim for excellence.

Inspired, AVLL participants began working to create a structure for collaboration between institutions, a design for exemplary online courses, and the infrastructure to support both. The working groups were higher-education administration; K-12 administration; curriculum; and information systems and resources.

The Adventist Association of Academic Administrators (AAAA) met concurrently with AVLL to help plan the radical changes necessary for institutions of higher learning to collaborate. The administrators proposed structures, policies, and procedures for working collaboratively across institutional boundaries.

The K-12 group wrestled to find ways to promote and coordinate the three main K-12 distributed-education providers: AE21 (Orlando, Florida), Home Study International¹² (Silver Spring, Maryland), and Silver State Adventist School (Reno, Nevada). By the end of their meetings, they had created a working model, built

a development plan, and forged new working relationships.

The curriculum group wrote online education standards to ensure that AVLL would promote only quality, Christ-centered, learner-focused educational experiences. Its first draft of online education standards was refined at the next conference.¹³

Effective online instructional strategies that support the implementation of

integrating faith and learning into distance education, as well as into Web enhancements for face-to-face courses. Bailey Gillespie, executive director of the Hancock Center for Youth Ministry and Professor of Theology and Christian Personality at La Sierra University (Riverside, California); Stuart Tyner, La Sierra University church young adult pastor; Constance Nwosu, at that time administrative assistant to the dean of the School of Education at Andrews University; and George H. Akers, retired General Conference director of education, expanded the vision of developing spiritual applications in classrooms both face-to-face and online.

The conference also focused on developing environments for active online learning. James Tucker of the School of Education at Andrews University challenged the group on how to cope with “The Fourth Wave” while modeling active learning. Richard Osborn, North American Division vice-president for education, conducted a conference-call presentation and discussion with AVLL participants on how distance education can work for Adventists. Don Van Ornam, dean of the School of Business Man-

agement at Southern Adventist University (Collegedale, Tennessee), motivated the group with his closing keynote address, “Turning Reality Into Reality,” on ways to put everything they had learned together.

Listservs

AVLL’s vision could not be forged in only three short conferences, so conversations and debates continue through AVLL listservs, face-to-face meetings, and telephone calls. Some of the discussion topics with which participants have had to wrestle include the following: identifying what is truly unique about Adventist education; figuring out what online instruction should look like; brainstorming about possibilities for the future of Adventist education using distance learning; and integrating faith and learning.

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the standards are available online.¹⁴ In addition, this group focused on networking institutions for course development and course sharing.

The information technology group grappled with the many technical issues, procedures, structural designs, and protocols necessary to support an Adventist online educational collaboration. This group included the librarians, who continued to refine their plans to facilitate online Adventist learning with hassle-free online resources.

Third Conference – June 2000

The third conference was held June 25-30, 2000, at Andrews University. It focused on

AVLL is an open, inclusive organization of people who share the desire to develop an innovative, distance-education collaboration. Anyone interested in participating in AVLL may join.¹⁵ All listserv discussions are archived for AVLL participants to review.

AVLL Initiatives and Spin-offs

Although AVLL is not sponsored by any organization or institution and has no traditional power structure, it has had a great deal of influence. For example, TAGeducation,¹⁶ an organization that seeks to empower and strengthen Adventist distance education, was developed using the AVLL vision and goals. Two consortia are also being organized to plan ways to share credits and tuition between institutions. Collaborative frameworks are being developed by the Adventist Distance Education Consortium Task Force (higher education) and the Adventist Consortium for Distance Education (K-12). And finally, the North American Division Office of Education recently created a new, specially funded position for a person who will help guide distance education at all levels.


Organization and Future

The June 2000 AVLL conference participants decided to create a loose organizational structure to provide momentum and to keep AVLL on track. Until this conference, there had been no official leadership, just cooperative efforts by volunteers to organize conferences and initiatives. The new organizational structure consists of a nine-person steering committee¹⁷ committed to the broad, collaborative vision of AVLL. They will work closely with the NAD distance-education director. This new organizational structure will seek to encourage collaboration in Adventist distance education while maintaining a dynamic, grassroots energy. AVLL plans to continue as a think-tank for educational innovation.

Conclusion

The members of AVLL believe that God is leading the church to think differently, more in-

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clusively, and more cooperatively than ever before. The collaborations that have been growing throughout the North American Division and around the world can help every Adventist educational organization and individual who wants to learn. When we see traditional institutional barriers breaking down and collaborative alliances forming, we join with Jeremiah to say: *"Ab, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you"* (Jeremiah 32:17, NIV). 

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or on the World Wide Web at <http://www.tageducation.org/>.

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15. For information on AVLL: <http://www.tageducation.org/>.
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