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# The Fire This Time: Enrollment Drops Threaten North American Academies and Colleges

by Tom Smith

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This year enrollments in North American Adventist academies began a precipitous drop, which projections indicate will continue until 1990. Our academies in North America have lost nearly 2,000 students since 1981.

Just three years from now (fall 1990) enrollments will plunge as dramatically at North American Adventist colleges and universities. Since 1981 the universities have already lost 1,748 full-time students. The colleges will continue to drop until the mid-1990s. An imminent and decisive drop in secondary and college students, then, is the first and most important conclusion to draw from analysis of recent enrollment figures in Adventist schools in North America.

The second conclusion is that the kind of student attending both Adventist academies and colleges is changing—from boarding to commuting students. That means that the number of urban day academies is increasing at a time when rural boarding academies are closing. In colleges, part-time and adult students are enrolling in larger numbers and constitute an increasing proportion of total student hours.

Our colleges, universities, academies, and elementary schools are interdependent. Each one's

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survival depends on the health of the others.

## *The Imminent Plunge in Enrollment*

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For years, the single most accurate predictor of Adventist college and university enrollments has been patterns of enrollment on the elementary and secondary levels. To predict the future, we must look at what is happening in the system as a whole. (See Figure 1.)

**Past and Projected Enrollments of North American Adventist Schools**

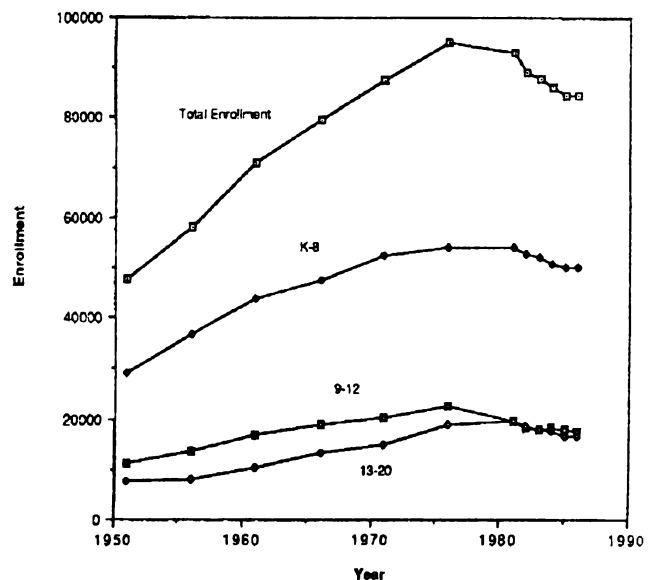


Figure 1

Let's start with the elementary sector, then proceed to academies and colleges. As in the nation, Adventist elementary schools had their fewest overall number of students in 1985. However, in that year kindergarten and grade one showed higher enrollments, and since 1986 the increased number of students in the lower grades has meant a steady rise in overall Adventist elementary school enrollment. Indeed, national demographic patterns of births and recent enrollment patterns in Adventist schools indicate a likelihood that for the next four years there will be increased elementary enrollments from kindergarten through grade six.<sup>1</sup> In the long run, that bodes well for Adventist academies and colleges.

But what is most relevant for the immediate future of academies is the fact that the highest elementary school grades—seven and eight—declined in numbers during 1986-1987. (See Appendix, Table 1.) Hence, Adventist academies face a crisis as early as next school year (fall 1988).

The academies have already been dropping in enrollment. There were almost 2,000 fewer students in Adventist academies in 1986 than five years before, in 1981. During that time, enrollments declined every year but 1984. As recently as the 1986-1987 school year, overall enrollment dropped by 165 students (See Appendix, Table 2). Despite the loss of only two seniors and a healthy increase (+274) in grade 11, significant decreases occurred in grades nine and 10. Add to those small ninth and tenth grade classes small seventh and eighth grade classes, and a bleak picture for Adventist secondary schools appears until 1990.

Unfortunately, these projections for Adventist schools are made more plausible by coinciding predictions for public secondary schools. Adventist secondary enrollments, like those in the public sector, will not begin to increase above their current levels until after 1995.<sup>2</sup>

What about the situation in North American Adventist colleges and universities? Since 1981 their enrollment has dropped by the equivalent of 2,748 full-time students. Just in the past three

years there has been a drop of 968 full-time equivalents. (See Appendix, Table 4.) Happily, last year (1986-1987) there was a smaller drop—336 full-time equivalents—than the decline of 632 the previous year.

Still, Adventist colleges across North America lost 315 freshman in 1986, a drop similar to what happened in 1982, 1983, and 1984. This drop of more than 300 freshman in 1986 took place despite a decrease of only 48 graduating academy seniors from the previous year. This would indicate that Adventist colleges face not only a decreasing pool of academy graduates, but also a declining enthusiasm on the part of those fewer academy graduates to attend Adventist colleges.

### *The Changing Face of Adventist Students*

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Most dramatically, on both the academy and college levels, the students are commuters. On the secondary level, while less than 6,000 students live at senior boarding academies, more than 9,000 commute to senior day academies. (See Appendix, Table 3.) Since 1981 there has been a decline of 1,210 students at our boarding academies, and only about one-third that number, 486, at our day academies. During the 1985-1986 school year alone, while 193 fewer students than the year before were living at rural Adventist boarding academies, 216 more than the previous year were traveling each day to urban day academies.

Less dramatically, but still statistically significant, has been the increase since 1980 in elementary students from the Hispanic (from 7.2 percent to 9.9 percent) and Asian (from 4.7 percent to 6.2 percent) Adventist communities in North America, while the black student population has remained steady at 22 percent and the percentage of white students has decreased slightly, from 64.9 percent to 61 percent.

At Adventist colleges and universities an increasing number of students are older and/or attend part-time. While overall enrollments were

decreasing during the year 1984-1986, the number of graduate and professional students increased by 198. During the same period of overall decline in enrollments, unclassified students—most of whom are in nontraditional, adult, part-time programs—increased by 186. (See Appendix, Table 4.)

Both the Adventist schools that had the most obvious rise in enrollment last year—Atlantic Union College and Columbia Union College—have vigorous programs for non-traditional students. For example, Columbia Union College enjoyed an increase of 75 full-time equivalents because of a dramatic increase in a student headcount of 197, largely due to an increased enrollment in an evening program catering to part-time, adult students.

Historically, Adventist enrollments at all levels have paralleled national patterns. Nationally, from 1983 to 1993, the 18-24-year-old population should decline 18 percent, 25-34 year-olds de-

crease by 4 percent. During the same period those 35 years old and up are expected to increase by 37 percent! Full-time students are projected to decrease by 17 percent, and generate only slightly more credit hours than nontraditional students.

## *The Shape of the Future*

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In projecting the future of Adventist education in North America, a central fact is the widening gap between total membership and number of students in Adventist schools. The percentage of members in Adventist schools has dropped from a high of 20.6 percent in 1961 to its present level of 12 percent. (See Figure 2.) Studies commissioned by the North American Division Boards of Education are attempting to learn from Adventist families why they are—and are not—sending their children to Adventist schools. Careful analysis of these sur-

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## At the Center of the Church's Vision— Academic Excellence

“There is an incipient vision to this church that is waiting to be mobilized.” That is how Mitchell Seltzer and Eliot Daley, consultants to the North American Boards of Higher Education, concluded their report to top denominational leaders attending the Annual Council this October in Washington, D.C. Rather than the polarization some Adventist leaders warned them they would find, Seltzer and Daley discovered members have a “strong central vision.” While that vision continues to value better education in religious principles and standards, North American Adventists says that their highest priority is improvements in academic excellence.

Before the end of the year the North American Division will receive the final report (including some 500 pages of computer tables) from what are called the Seltzer Daley Companies. Based in Princeton, New Jersey, they have conducted surveys for top American corporations. In January the boards of education for North America will meet in California to start long-range planning for the entire system of education.

The October report to church leaders provided preliminary results of a major survey of how 1,419 Adventists in North America (including 110 ministers, 143 educators, 183 students) evaluated their entire kindergarten-through-university educational system. An amazing 96 percent of the members contacted by phone completed the 45-minute, 162-question survey interview. Researchers followed the same procedures they use in all other surveys. Seltzer and Daley are confident, they told denominational leaders, that “this research very clearly, in our estimation, has given voice to the central sentiment of the church.”

Supporting their contention is the fact that on a scale measuring religious views and lifestyle practices the average respondent to the survey placed himself or herself right in the middle, between extremely liberal and extremely conservative. The survey also found what many members might have anticipated: overwhelmingly (from 82 percent for colleges to 88 percent for grade schools), North American Adventists regard their schools as essential or very important for the future of the Adventist church and its faith.

veys should help us learn how the present trend might be reversed.

What we already know from patterns we have analyzed in this report indicates that elementary

school enrollments should continue to rise. However, if secondary enrollments are to increase, more attention may need to be paid to expanding day academies, which are increasingly

### North American Church Membership Compared to Opening Enrollments in North American Adventist Schools

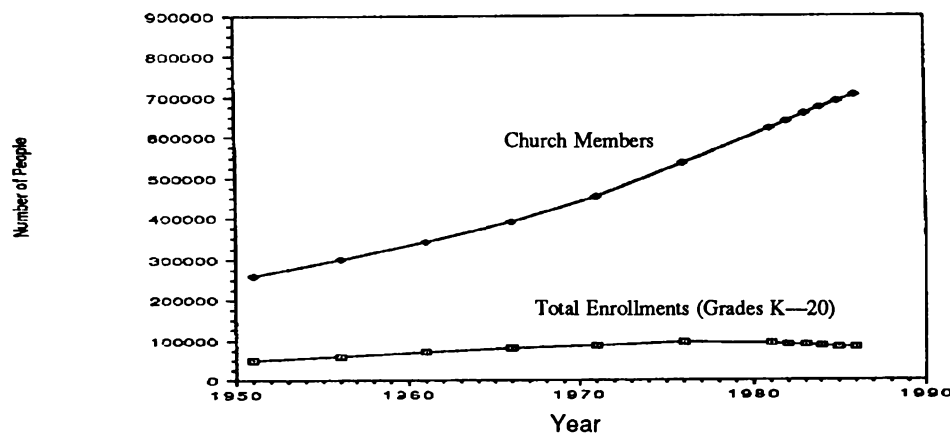


Figure 2

What surprised many denominational leaders was Seltzer and Daley's conclusion that the "cry for competence" is the "main message of the report." They found that "in every case academics by at least a statistically significant margin outstrips religious considerations as the area in which people are asking for change." For example, when it came to evaluating teachers, a substantial majority of members said that they should be caring and committed, but even more said that it was "extremely important" or "absolutely essential" that the teacher have academic competence.

Given the deep commitment of Adventists to their schools and their equally passionate concern about the level of academic excellence at Adventist educational institutions, Seltzer and Daley identified what they considered "potentially the most-disturbing and lethal question of all. There is the potential that Adventist parents will one day ask themselves if there is a distinction between being a good parent and being a good Adventist. That is to say, are my responsibilities to help my children fulfill the full range of their promise compromised by my loyalty to the Adventist Church if I put them in an Adventist school?"

The urgency that the church, by improving the excellence of its schools, avoid forcing that dilemma on parents, is underscored by the attitude of students from 19 to 25 years of age toward Adventist education. Within just five years,

their decisions as to whether or not they will send their children to Adventist schools will begin determining the survival of the Adventist school system. Daley said this group, who will soon be young parents, express the lowest level of belief in the need for an Adventist school education, the lowest regard for Adventist schools, and the highest regard for public schools.

While Seltzer and Daley stressed the necessity for the church to take decisive action, they also pointed to a source of reassurance: The present breadth and depth of interest among members in improving Adventist schools. (Seltzer and Daley were astounded that 23 percent of the survey respondents said that they provide direct financial support for a student not a member of their family. A dramatic confirmation of Seltzer and Daley's contention that "ownership of both the system, its problems and its solutions is very widespread," is the fact that members look for improvement from parts of the church closest to them—local congregations, conferences, unions.

While members' answers to survey questions amounted to a ringing demand for action, Eliot Daley, for one, certainly did not think that the voice of the membership was one of despair. "The present moment," said this non-Adventist Christian, "requires both fervent prayer and hard work."

If North America is to avoid seeing one or two Adventist colleges disappear, Adventist colleges will have to increase the percentage of Adventist academy and high school graduates that they enroll on their college campuses. The percentage of total membership attending Adventist schools is declining, and the percentage of graduating academy and high school seniors going on to Adventist colleges is also decreasing. A situation cannot continue where, for example, Andrews University outstrips the other Adventist colleges by enrolling as freshman over 50 percent of the

academy graduates in its region—the Lake Union.

Equally importantly, all Adventist colleges will have to significantly expand programs for part-time, adult students. Our analysis of enrollments in Adventist elementary and secondary schools indicates that the increase in nontraditional and older students that is just beginning in Adventist colleges and universities will have to be accelerated. This change must occur if there are to be enough students for the present number of colleges in North America to continue to operate.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. U.S. Department of Education, *The Condition of Education: A Statistical Report*, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington, D.C. 1985. However, decreases in school-age populations during this period are predicted for areas in the Atlantic and Columbia unions. Increases of 20-25 percent are expected in Mid-Central America, in the sunbelt states of Florida, the Southwest and California, and in the state of Washington. The largest

increases are predicted for Mississippi and the Rocky Mountain states.

2. *Ibid.* Public secondary school enrollments peaked in the late seventies, and then decreased 6 percent between 1980 and 1985. They are expected to decrease another 12 percent between 1985 and 1990, for an overall drop of 18 percent between 1980 and 1990. They are projected to reach a low in 1990 and then have small increases in the nineties.

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## APPENDIX

### North American Division Elementary Opening Enrollment By Grades (Table 1)

Year	GRADES								
	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Total 1986	3,028	6,335	5,994	6,021	5,923	5,672	5,828	5,727	5,601
Total 1985	2,826	6,116	5,961	5,939	5,750	5,795	5,717	5,937	5,934
Gain/Loss 1986/85	+202	+219	+ 33	+ 82	+173	-123	+111	-180	-333
Gain/Loss 1985/84	+365	+ 48	- 84	+148	-145	-111	-160	-317	-438
Gain/Loss 1984/83	+187	- 186	+165	-125	- 87	-129	-286	-457	-412
Gain/Loss 1983/82	+119	+ 276	- 12	-105	- 67	-311	-520	-493	+342
Gain/Loss 1982/81	+121	-177	- 160	-186	-459	-542	-329	+397	+ 17

### North American Division Secondary Opening Enrollment By Type of School And By Grades (Table 2)

Year	Senior Acad.		Junior Acad.		Totals				Special
	9th	10th	11th	12th	9th	10th	11th	12th	
Total 1986	15,232	2,372	17,604	4,980	4,643	4,212	3,677	94	
Total 1985	15,143	2,626	17,769	5,227	4,843	3,938	3,679	82	
Gain/Loss 1986/85	+89	-254	-165	-247	-200	+274	-2	+12	
Gain/Loss 1985/84	-325	+30	-295	-326	+191	-57	-73	-30	
Gain/Loss 1984/83	+30	+57	+87	+365	-97	-140	-57	+16	
Gain/Loss 1983/82	-247	-1	-248	-2	+2	-4	-198	-46	
Gain/Loss 1982/81	-1,227	-45	-1,272	-164	-118	-362	-604	-24	

APPENDIX (cont'd)

Senior Academy Opening Enrollment By Residence (Table 3)

Year		Boarding Academy Students	Day Academy Students
Total NAD 1986	2,678	5,904	9,262
Total NAD 1985	2,825	6,097	9,046
Gain/Loss 1986/5	-147	-193	+216
Gain/Loss 1985/4	-133	-168	-157
Gain/Loss 1984/3	-99	-194	+224
Gain/Loss 1983/2	+17	+2	-249
Gain/Loss 1982/1	-292	-657	-520

Comparative Fall Enrollment Report 1984-1985-1986 (Table 4)

College/University	HEAD COUNT												FTE		
	Undergraduate			Grad & Grad/Prof			Unclassified			Total			Total		
	84	85	86	84	85	86	84	85	86	84	85	86	84	85	86
Andrews University	1,984	1,925	1,890	1,028	1,096	1,141	22	11	22	3,034	3,032	3,053	2,538	2,474	2,476
											-2	+21		-64	+2
Atlantic Union College	538	458	508				89	109	80	627	567	588	440	406	450
											-60	+21		-34	+44
Canadian Union College	249	276	252				14	26	11	263	302	263	231	264	247
											+39	-39		+33	-17
Columbia Union College	896	704	1,031							896	834	1,031	538	456	531
											-62	+197		-82	+75
Kettering College of Medical Arts	463	407	440							463	418	440	334	305	319
											-45	+22		-29	+14
Loma Linda University	2,518	2,324	2,228	1,678	1,689	1,753	414	377	587	4,610	4,390	4,569	3,836	3,681	3,606
											-220	+179		-155	-75
Oakwood College	1,326	1,140	953							1,326	1,141	978	1,240	1,111	934
											-185	-163		-129	-177
Pacific Union College	1,301	1,328	1,364	3	4	23	99	70	112	1,403	1,402	1,499	1,264	1,327	1,364
											-1	+97		+63	+37
Southern College of SDA	1,508	1,338	1,256							1,622	1,468	1,327	1,225	1,130	1,041
											-154	-141		-95	-89
Southwestern Adventist College	647	682	726							683	734	795	570	586	605
											+51	+61		+16	+19
Union College	838	683	582							898	749	670	761	640	566
											-149	-79		-121	-74
Walla Walla College	1,524	1,469	1,368	24	11	14	101	87	70	1,649	1,567	1,452	1,458	1,423	1,328
											-82	-115		-35	-95
<b>Totals</b>	<b>13,792</b>	<b>12,734</b>	<b>12,598</b>	<b>2,733</b>	<b>2,800</b>	<b>2,931</b>	<b>949</b>	<b>1,070</b>	<b>1,135</b>	<b>17,474</b>	<b>16,604</b>	<b>16,665</b>	<b>14,435</b>	<b>13,803</b>	<b>13,467</b>
											-870	+61		-632	-336

Revised December 1986