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# Graduate Business Education in Adventist Colleges and Universities: History and Challenges

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GRADUATE  
BUSINESS EDUCATION  
IN ADVENTIST COLLEGES  
AND UNIVERSITIES:

**HISTORY AND  
CHALLENGES**



**G**raduate business education is in high demand everywhere, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Since 1990, 34 Master's programs in business have been started at various Adventist colleges and universities; 14 of these programs were initiated between 2005 and 2010. How did graduate business education get its start within the denomination? What is its story?

Sometimes the confluence of timing and vision gives a particular institution or a person the opportunity to “mother” growth in a particular area, which subsequently supports the church’s institutions in a unique way. Such is the case with graduate business education in Adventist higher education. Interestingly, its roots, like the roots of the medical work of the church, were established in Battle Creek, Michigan. Battle Creek Sanitarium became the “mother” of a large number of Adventist hospitals and medical institutions, with its graduates leaving Michigan to serve around the world.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Battle Creek College, the church’s first institution of higher learning, which eventually became Emmanuel Missionary College and then Andrews University, was the educational “mother” whose offspring established undergraduate business education, and ultimately graduate-level training, around the world.

### The Beginning

The *First Annual Catalogue* (1875) for Battle Creek College did not list specific courses but did include *Mayhew’s Practical Book-keeping Embracing*

*Single and Double Entry, Commercial Calculations and the Philosophy of Morals of Business* (1866) as one of the college textbooks. The *Second Annual Catalogue* included bookkeeping as a separate course.<sup>2</sup> By 1879, the college had a Commercial Department, which continued when the school moved in 1901 to Berrien Springs, Michigan. Other Adventist colleges that opened between 1880 and the early 1900s also had commercial departments. The typical curriculum included courses in the history of business, bookkeeping, business law, office machines, and various secretarial subjects.<sup>3</sup>

Because the late 1800s and early 1900s were the era of the “self-made” businessman, commercial departments did not possess significant academic stature at most colleges and universities, public or private. While Ph.D. degrees existed in some disciplines, they were not available in business. The courses offered by commercial departments were seen as too practical to be part of a standard university curriculum, but they were considered essential in an Adventist college because of the need to train church employees.

The years after World War II brought major changes to colleges and universities across the United States, as thousands of men took advantage of U.S. Government funding for advanced education as they sought to reintegrate into U.S. society after the war.<sup>4</sup> Enrollment in all colleges and universities across the U.S., Adventist schools included, increased dramatically—in some cases doubling almost overnight.<sup>5</sup>

Business curriculum offerings expanded and became more specialized in response to the enrollment expansion.<sup>6</sup> Along with specialization came an increased demand for business fac-

ulty, especially academically trained teachers with terminal degrees. At the same time, a new business accrediting body, the AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) developed standards for business curriculum, library holdings, faculty qualifications, and faculty research. Departments of business became schools and colleges of business and gained significant academic respectability within their academic communities. Doctoral programs in all business specialties quickly developed at the major universities across the United States, and to some extent in Europe.

Adventist schools struggled to keep up with the rapid changes in the business field. In the early 1950s, the church had only about 30 to 40 business teachers—all white males.<sup>7</sup> The business faculty of the typical North American Adventist college throughout the 1950s and into the mid-1960s consisted of one or two men. If a woman was hired, she generally taught only secretarial courses like typing and shorthand.

By the late 1950s, the male business faculty members usually had earned Master’s degrees. Dr. Robert Firth, chair of the business department at Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska) from 1952-1964, described his resources as: “two faculty, a small office in the basement, a phone, a typewriter, a shared reader, and \$500 a year for books and magazines for the library.”<sup>8</sup> Firth taught six classes a semester and took graduate work toward his doctorate in management at the University of Nebraska in his “spare time.” He completed his Ph.D. in management in 1960—the first doctorate in management in the denomination. At that

B Y A N N G I B S O N A N D R O B E R T F I R T H





**Page 40: Secretarial science student in the 1970s. Above: Early Adventist college business departments often focused their curriculum on secretarial skills—shown above is the Emmanuel Missionary College (now Andrews University) Stenographic Department, 1911-1912.**

time, seven Adventists, worldwide, had business-related Ph.D.'s, most of them in economics or accounting, but none in management (e.g., Economics: Ralph Kooreny at La Sierra College [Riverside, California] and Charles Stokes at Atlantic Union College [South Lancaster, Massachusetts]; Accounting: Robert Boyd at Pacific Union College [Angwin, California]).<sup>9</sup> Wayne VanderVere, who taught at Southern Missionary College in Collegedale, Tennessee (now Southern Adventist University), and is probably the best-known Adventist accounting teacher, received his Ph.D. from Michigan State University in 1967. VandeVere was the first Seventh-day Adventist to hold both a Ph.D. in accounting and the CPA certificate.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Need for Business Graduate Education**

By the early 1960s, the Adventist Church recognized the need for quali-

fied personnel with graduate degrees in varied fields to serve its growing educational institutions around the world. Accordingly, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary was transferred from Washington, D.C., to the campus of Emmanuel Missionary College in Berrien Springs, Michigan. The move made it possible to create Andrews University, with initial graduate programs in teacher education, school administration, and ministerial education.

In 1964, Robert Firth was asked to join the Andrews University faculty for the specific purpose of developing a graduate program in business to help upgrade business personnel in church institutions. Although the church initially focused on developing graduate programs in the United States, these early moves would be repeated around the world and in every division. The graduate programs in other territories, but especially those specializing in business, would model their graduate programs after the ones at Andrews.

Dr. Firth's assignment to strengthen

the undergraduate business program at Andrews, create an M.B.A. curriculum, and find the necessary faculty for the graduate program—all in one year—was a difficult one. Given the scarcity of church members with doctorates, Firth described the experience as one of "searching for faculty" everywhere possible.<sup>11</sup>

The Andrews M.B.A. program opened in the summer of 1965 with Firth and Wayne VandeVere (borrowed from Southern Missionary College for the summer) teaching the classes to the 10 students enrolled in the program. Five years later (1970), the business faculty at Andrews consisted of a total of five faculty (all Caucasian men), three of them doctorally qualified in business. By the time Firth retired from Andrews University's School of Business Administration (SBA) in 1993, it had 21 business and computer science faculty, 15 of whom had doctorates, three of whom were women, and two of whom were minorities.

Firth served as chair of the Business Department at Andrews from 1964-1978 and remained a member of the business faculty until his retirement. Between 1978 and 1993, he developed the Andrews University Press and made many overseas trips as part of the institution's affiliations program. His work with affiliations during the 1980s and early 1990s helped Adventist colleges around the world to build and improve their business programs through consultation and in some cases, by arranging scholarships to Andrews University that provided advanced business education for business faculty at affiliated campuses.

Today, most of those colleges are highly acclaimed universities offering their own degrees that are fully recognized by their local governments. Some of them, such as Babcock University and Valley View University in Nigeria and Ghana respectively, have surpassed the mother school, Andrews University, in the size of their business enrollments.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of the first graduate business program at Andrews University and the foundation laid by the initial faculty under the direction of Robert Firth cannot be overemphasized. When starting graduate business education at Andrews University in 1964, Firth studied the AACSB standards and requirements and followed their recommendations for a "common body of knowledge" as a basis for requiring courses for undergraduate majors and the graduate program. As a result, the curriculum he developed has become a worldwide model that has helped to maintain a standard of excellence in business education within the Adventist educational system.

Many of the original purposes of the Andrews M.B.A. program have been fulfilled as numerous Adventist institutions (educational, medical, publishing houses, food factories, and conference, union, and division offices) have been staffed by its graduates. While the alumni records at Andrews University are incomplete, it is known that its M.B.A. graduates from the first 25 years went on to serve the church at all levels of direct church administration (conference, union, and division), as well as to replicate the Andrews business program

at colleges and universities around the world. For example, the university's M.B.A. business alumni have taught or are currently teaching at 20 colleges and universities.<sup>13</sup> At the present time, three division treasurers are graduates of the Andrews M.B.A. program, as well as the General Conference treasurer and undertreasurer. Numerous union and conference treasurers, General Conference auditors, and hospital and school administrators are also alumni of the Andrews business program.

Although the second Master's program in business in Adventist educational system was started at La Sierra University (then a campus of Loma Linda University) in 1982, the real growth in graduate business education

within church-related colleges and universities did not begin until the 1990s. As Figure 1 indicates, over the past 20 years there has been an explosion of graduate degrees in business offered at the denomination's colleges and universities, starting with an M.B.A. with a health-care emphasis at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (Philippines) in 1990, an M.B.A. at River Plate Adventist University (Argentina) in 1991, and at Montemorelos University (Mexico) in 1993. The challenges of rapid growth are discussed later in this article.

The influence of the School of Business at Andrews University has continued through its sponsorship, since 1997, of the biennial summer confer-

**Figure 1**

**Starting Dates for Adventist Business Master's Programs Worldwide<sup>14</sup>**

1990-1995	1996-2000	2001-2005	2006-2010
Six programs	Nine programs	Five programs	Fourteen programs

**Figure 2**

**Summary of Adventist College and University Business Programs, in 2011<sup>16</sup>**

Division	Number of Schools Offering Four-year Business Programs (Undergraduate or Graduate)*	Identified Business Faculty*
East-Central Africa	5	31
Euro-Africa	None Identified	N/A
Euro-Asia	2	19
Inter-America	9	63
North America	11	75
Northern Asia-Pacific	2	14
South America	8	156
South Pacific	3	21
Southern Africa-Indian Ocean	3	19
Southern Asia	3	21
Southern Asia-Pacific	11	131
Trans-Europe	1	None Identified
West-Central Africa	3	79
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>641</b>

In some cases, it was impossible to identify whether a business program existed at a college/university or how many faculty were in the area of business because the breakdown by discipline was not available in either the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* or in General Conference statistics. As a result, these numbers are probably understated.



**Above: Robert Firth (1964-1993) and Dale Twomley (1978-1983) both served as chairs of the Department of Business Administration at Andrews University. Twomley was named the first dean of the School of Business Administration when it was formed in 1980.**

**Right: Malcolm Russell, longtime economics professor at Andrews University (1979-2002), chats with students in front of Chan Shun Hall, current home of the School of Business Administration.**



ence for Adventist business faculty worldwide. These conferences provide a venue for presenting research papers, encouraging research collaboration and conversation about issues of mutual concern, and opportunities for professional growth for business education faculty throughout the denomination's higher education system. The increasing numbers of business education faculty attending this conference from outside of North America indicates that it is fulfilling a worldwide need for a collegial and professional forum for Adventist business educators.

### The Picture Today

In 2010, 62 Adventist colleges and universities offered four-year business programs and/or graduate work in business.<sup>15</sup> Eleven of these colleges/universities are in the North American Division (NAD); five of which offer a Master of Business Administration degree. Outside the NAD, numerous Adventist colleges/universities offer graduate work in business, in addition to related undergraduate programs. Two church universities in the Philippines offer a Ph.D. in business (Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies and the Adventist University of the Philippines).

In 2011, the current number of identified business faculty at these schools, as included in the *Seventh-day*

*Adventist Yearbook*, was 641—a huge increase over the 30 to 40 business faculty in denominational schools in the 1950s. The student population at the Adventist colleges/universities with these departments/schools has continued to increase over the years as well. Schools with enrollment greater than 3,000 students (2009 figures—the latest available) are in West Africa (Babcock and Valley View universities), the Philippines (Adventist University of the Philippines), Korea (Sahmyook University), South America (Brazil Adventist and Peruvian Union universities), the Caribbean (Northern Caribbean University and University of the Southern



Caribbean), and the United States (Andrews University). Many business programs in East Africa, Central Africa, Argentina, Inter-America, Indonesia, and the United States are approaching enrollments of 3,000.

### Current Challenges

What blessings God has given and what growth the Seventh-day Adventist business programs have achieved since Battle Creek College started its Commercial Department in 1879 and even since the 1950s! We have much for which to praise God. However, with growth comes both new problems and challenges that are familiar to those who entered graduate business education in the 1960s. Specifically, the challenges are as follows:

1. **Insufficient numbers of Adventist faculty.** All colleges and universities must search for business faculty. But the challenge is magnified when a college or university desires to recruit business faculty members who are *also* committed Seventh-day Adventists. One reason for the shortage of business faculty is that graduates have many options within the business field other than teaching. Thus, despite the fact that Adventist schools graduate high numbers of business students every year, few of them go into teaching and even fewer of those work in Adventist schools. As a result of the faculty shortage, many institutions contract their business classes to local business people or educators at local colleges and universities. These individuals may or may not be Seventh-day Adventists.

2. **Academic quality of faculty in business.** Closely tied to the shortage of faculty to staff Adventist business schools is the lack of discipline-specific training in business for the faculty who teach business courses. Outside of the United States, business is often the largest major on campus, a fact that only increases the need for appropriately educated faculty to staff all the subject-area classes that must be taught to an ever-increasing number of students. At times, the only solution seems to be to find someone (anyone!) who is willing to teach a business class, irrespective of his or her academic background. The

School of Business at Andrews University, from time to time, receives calls for help from around the world, asking for books or teaching helps for someone who “had a bookkeeping class in high school” whom the caller wants to teach a college accounting class “because no one else is available.” While one can certainly understand the immediate pressure to find a teacher for a class that is about to start, hiring poorly qualified teachers does not strengthen a school’s educational program in the long run.

3. **Academic quality of the programs offered.** There is increasing pressure from the tertiary institutions’ various constituencies to offer a wide variety of business specialties. Within the United States, the pressure to increase undergraduate offerings and/or Master’s programs often occurs because of declining or static enrollment at the institutional level (even if the business school’s enrollment is stable or growing). Outside of the United States, where business programs already have large enrollments, the pressure to increase offerings may result from local competition or the expertise of one or more faculty members.

As a result, some colleges and universities find themselves offering more programs or majors within the business department than they can support with sufficient qualified business faculty. Business accreditation bodies have long questioned the viability of a program or major built primarily on one individual.

Whether or not the Adventist college/university seeks business accreditation, it is unwise to create a curriculum based on the strength of a single faculty member, as that does not provide different perspectives on the subject taught and may jeopardize the program if that professor leaves the school. Institutions should analyze their programs and build on areas of strength, while at the same time considering the needs of and opportunities available to their students.

4. **The demand for graduate business programs.** The above issues have produced increasing pressure in Adventist colleges/universities worldwide to offer graduate business programs, irrespective of their readiness to do so. The call is often heard for the church to “grow its own” to accommodate increasing business enrollments and to



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**Slimen Saliba, dean of the Andrews University School of Business Administration (1984-1993), displays the model of Chan Shun Hall, the new home for the school that was built in 1989. Inset: The building today.**

address the growing shortage of academically trained business faculty. While “growing its own” is an excellent strategic goal, doing so at the expense of quality academic programs may produce unfortunate and unintended consequences. Conversely, careful planning can lead to strong programs that positively influence multiple constituencies far into the future.

As Adventist schools worldwide seek to inaugurate or grow business programs, they should keep in mind that standard qualifications for undergraduate courses require the faculty to have Master’s level degrees, with department heads having doctoral degrees. To teach courses at the Master’s degree level, faculty must either hold doctoral degrees in their specialty or be recognized experts in their fields. Offering a Ph.D. requires that the university be able to support the research required for this terminal degree, including extensive faculty and library resources.<sup>17</sup>

As a church, we must immediately address the growing demand, especially

outside of North America, for sufficient business-qualified Adventist faculty, ideally with doctoral degrees, and for quality academic programs that will equip business persons in the 21st century. If we do not have well-trained Adventist teachers for the growing business student population within our institutions, the options are to (1) employ non-Adventist teachers for what is, in many cases, the largest department on campus, or (2) limit business enrollment until Adventist faculty can be found/trained. Given that many schools see a business program as a source of financial support for the school as a whole, it is likely that schools will hire non-Adventist faculty for the church’s business programs. This choice will make it more difficult to train young people for business within the church’s educational philosophy.

Several possibilities exist for meeting these challenges:

As noted above, two Adventist institutions in the Philippines have developed doctoral programs in business and one more, Montemorelos University in Mexico, has received approval

from the General Conference to begin its candidacy once certain conditions are met. The church has a responsibility to adequately support these programs to ensure that they are not just viable, but excellent, in order to attract top-quality Adventist students.

Alternatively, the church might consider establishing doctoral programs in business at the General Conference-sponsored graduate schools that already exist in the various divisions. While this would likely be an undesirable choice for those schools already hosting or planning to host business doctoral programs, it could help the church to pool its already-stretched resources in locations that are currently GC supported, but geographically close to the student’s home country. An alternative would be for several divisions with members who speak the same language to collaborate on offering business doctoral programs.

Another approach that could be productive: If the school lacks sufficient re-



sources to offer a doctoral degree in business, it might consider partnering with its already-established school of education. For example, when the business department lacks the faculty or library resources to introduce a Ph.D. program in business (given the business requirement for dissertations and extensive research in specialized areas), the business faculty might collaborate with the professors in the school of education to create a doctorate in business education, thus combining the strengths of two faculties. Such a degree would be specifically designed to meet the need for teachers of business education within the church.

The church might also consider setting aside funding at the division level to sponsor select business faculty to Adventist or public universities for doctoral study. This has been done in the past, with admittedly mixed results. Those who have been sponsored often do not return to the institution once they receive their terminal degree. However, many of the business faculty presently serving in our colleges and universities around the world gained the opportunity for additional education through church sponsorship. The church should not entirely reject this option, even if the return on its investment proves to be less than desired.

In the late 1950s, the church moved to address the shortage of educationally qualified workers by creating a university to upgrade personnel across all church institutions in the disciplines of education, administration, business, and theology. As a result of that vision and commitment, today one can go to almost every Seventh-day Adventist organization and institution around the world and meet a graduate from Andrews University. The General Conference should make a similar commitment today to train the necessary teachers, business managers, and accountants for its organizations and institutions. This would require vision and funding, but the demand and need already exist.

We have come far in our journey from a Commercial Department at Battle Creek College to graduate education in business at numerous Adventist colleges and universities around the world.

We have trained many graduates to work for the church and serve as loyal laypersons. But the task is not yet complete. Despite the challenges, we must move forward with vision, courage, and confidence that the God who has brought us this far will certainly be with us as we move into the future. ✍

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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**Robert Firth, Ph.D.,** is Professor of Management, Emeritus, at Andrews University. During his professional career, which was primarily focused on

teaching and administration, he also authored/co-authored five books, including Cases in Denominational Administration, which was used in college classes for a number of years after its publication in 1978. Following his retirement in 1993, he moved to Georgia where he and his wife presently reside.

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