

Teaching Adventist History in North American Adventist Colleges/Universities

Seven years ago, at the Oakwood hosting of the ASDAH conference, the Adventist historians spent quite a bit of time having a conversation about why it was that we seem to have so little contribution to our church—how can we be a bigger part of the conversations and education of the church? Why aren't our books or research more widely integrated into the knowledge of the Adventist community? It appears that at least part of such a contribution could/should happen through teaching Adventist history at our schools. This project represents a survey of the 9 traditional Adventist undergraduate institutions in the United States, with a beginning towards understanding the following questions:

1. What are the requirements for Adventist history at each institution in terms of which majors have to teach it or what proportion of General Education includes Adventist history? Is the class upper or lower division credit?
2. Which departments is it being taught in—religion or theology? Is it being taught by someone with history training or primarily theology training? Does this matter?
3. What textbooks are being used, and what is the emphasis in the class—19th century? American history?

The following represents some of the information collected in this survey:

Informal survey of US Adventist Colleges/Universities (Walla Walla, Oakwood, SWAU, Southern, WAU, Andrews, La Sierra, Union, PUC)

Historians surveyed: 6 Theologians surveyed: 8

Adventist Heritage taught in:

religion department: 5/9 (taught by someone trained in history—3/5)

history department: 3/9

both: 1/9

Discipline Preference:

Historians who thought it should definitely be taught by someone trained in history: 4/6 (1 theologian also said this)

Theologians who thought that it was important that it be taught by theologians or in a religion department: 2/8

People who said that what was important was the perspective taken by the teacher, rather than the specific discipline: 1 historian and 6 theologians

Schools that use

Schwartz: 5 (4 of these were in departments where it was taught by historians)

Something by **Knight:** 7

Both: 4

Upper Division: 5 (all the schools where it is taught in the history department, plus Union, where it is taught in the school of religion)

Lower Division: 4

Focus on **19th century** with very little on 20th: 7/9

Focus on the **US**: 6/9

Significant focus on **Ellen White**: 6/9

Schools/Situations where it has switched departments:

Andrews—religion added it last year in addition to history

Union—education department stopped teaching it, so it is just religion now

PUC—used to be both history and religion, but 10 years ago they combined it

La Sierra—just switched to history from religion this year, and this may or may not continue

Medical Colleges

Loma Linda—Adventist Heritage and Health offered several times a year and part of gen ed curriculum; Loma Linda Perspectives also incorporates SDA history and beliefs

Kettering—just recently developed an Adventist studies course which could be part of gen ed requirement for 4 year degrees

Adventist University of Health Sciences: No class with the title of Adventist beliefs/perspectives or content seems to be regularly taught, but I was unable to speak to anyone there.

Observations:

1. People think students don't read as much and so are assigning Knight (as opposed to Schwartz) because of brevity.

2. Ellen White and her writings are included in all but one of the classes I surveyed—Sometimes the same people teach a class that focuses on the church and that focuses on Ellen White, but it seems as if people are worried if they don't cover her and how to read her writings in this class they won't have a chance to do so and so that shapes the content of the class.

3. It seems important what the relationships are between the historians and theologians in any given institution—how much trust is there, how much understanding about what is being taught in which classes

4. Historians tend to use Schwartz more and those who use him tend to focus more on global issues than those who use Knight or other American-focused texts.

5. All the professors I surveyed articulated as one of their goals that they wanted their students to develop an appreciation of their church's history. Most of them thought that this could happen whether taking a primarily belief/theology-centered approach or a more strictly contextual and historical approach. They **all** thought that context mattered. They all wanted to help build the faith of their students and cultivate a joy for studying their church's history.

6. Many professors expressed a sense of tension regarding what the goals of the theology/religion majors were and what historians might want to be doing, even as they thought there didn't have to be such a tension.
7. Most classes seem to include controversies or issues as part of their curriculum. If they include anything in the twentieth century at all, it was things like Questions on Doctrine, race relations in the US, the Ford controversy, the equality of women.
8. Upper division courses seem to include more primary text readings.

Final Questions/Issues to raise:

1. Is there a difference between Adventist Studies/Beliefs and Adventist History? Is the purpose of this class to provide a history of Adventist beliefs, or the practice of the church?
2. What about global perspectives? If the goal is to understand how Adventists got started (Adventist Origins?), is it okay to just focus on the US? Do we need to think about missions and how Adventism changed over time and place?
3. Should this part of general education curriculum under "religion" or as part of the history requirements? Could it be tailored to the geography of the SDA schools teaching it? (For instance, outside the US, there would be a focus on the local history?)