

Why Choose A Christian College?

Is A Lower Price Worth the Cost??

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Choices ... Life Choices ... We all have to make them. The next generation of college bound kids are on the verge of making one of the most important choices of their lives. Those choices with incredible life benefit or consequence include first the choice of Jesus Christ as personal Savior, then the choice of a life-partner, the choice of the college to attend, and the choice of a career. Most of us are simply naïve about the importance of the choice of a college as it relates to these other life choices. It is clear from the literature, research and experience that the choice of a college has much to do with all of these. I would like to talk to you in this article about the impact of the choice of a college on the student's short and long-term Christian commitment.

Perhaps it's my old age or something I ate that's making me cranky – maybe it's just irritation caused by hearing too many times the words that give Christian college recruiters nightmares – “we just can't afford a Christian college!” Maybe it's the lingering pain I still feel after watching one of my own children self-destruct that is the real motivating factor for wanting to get this message to other families. It is true that attending college, any college, has a significant price tag. In spite of the gallant efforts of most Christian colleges to be affordable, attending a Christian college will most likely have a higher out-of-pocket cost than a public institution, especially. State subsidies for public education are difficult to match. But the real question becomes: “Is the lower price tag worth the cost?” Let me explain by an example.

Imagine the moment you proudly help your dynamic, scholarship winning, powerfully Christian daughter move in as a freshman at a fine public institution. Now imagine what feels like a short time later the shock and grief as you begin to hear that drugs and alcohol have become a part of her life-style and are putting her and other friends in grave danger. Imagine watching the life choices she makes bring over a decade of grief to her and the family. Imagine that you are no longer imagining but remembering those moments – welcome to my reality and that of many other families. Thankfully, my wonderful daughter is being restored after many years of prayer, counsel and encouragement. She is now an incredible and successful woman and has agreed that I should talk about this to hopefully help other families avoid our pain. These memories have inspired me to a life-long research study of the impact of college choice on religious commitment – but I hope you hear the heart of a concerned father behind the stats and statements. My baby girl has such a special place in my heart. But really, no parent wants a son or daughter to endure any pain – let alone pain that can be avoided if we really understood the significance and consequence of this life choice. So ... let's talk!

Numerous authors point to the significant transition process that occurs during the college years. During this time, children really do some major maturing into the adults they become. It is a time when they shift from parental control and reliance to self-control and more self-reliance.

The college years are a time when core values from childhood are tested, sorted and prioritized into values that will last a lifetime. It is, most importantly for this discussion, a time when a person moves from an imposed faith to an owned faith that truly is the foundation for the entire life structure. Art Chickering, one of the most noted student development experts, and Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini in the classic *How College Affects Students*, all point to the college years as one of the most significant times for a student's "search for identity" as to the adult he or she will become.

Now, move this significant metamorphosis into a potentially non-supporting at best, most likely skeptical and often hostile environment. The likely result is pretty clear. Nearly twenty-five years of references show that unless at a Christ-centered college, research consistently reports a decline in religious values, attitudes and behaviors during the college years. Enrollment in selective, prestigious, non-religiously affiliated colleges (typical secular private colleges) or public colleges and universities is clearly correlated to significant decreases in religious affiliation and religious behaviors. The most obvious of these behaviors include decreases in church attendance, praying, reading the Bible and discussing religion. On the other hand, enrollment in church-related colleges of all types tends to support and strengthen the student's existing religious values and behaviors.

Let me state here that there are exceptions to these trends. Certainly, there are many fine Christian educators and administrators at non-Christian institutions. Choosing a Christian college has no guarantee of being the perfect place with perfect people that can "fix" (repair or stabilize) everyone who attends. Undoubtedly, some Christian kids are secure, stable, courageous and prepared enough to survive no matter where they attend. However, the percentages are not on their side. A few years ago, an interesting study was prepared by Gary Railsback, a fellow researcher in this area and Professor at George Fox University. Utilizing his data, I determined that over 52% of all incoming freshmen students who identify themselves as born-again who attend a public university will no longer identify themselves as born-again four years later or have not attended any religious service in over a year – over half are reporting a rejection of family religious values. The rejection pattern was similar at secular private colleges and much worse (63%) at Catholic colleges. A recent update by Railsback provided data that shows a similar rejection pattern across all types of institutions – except for students attending a purposefully Christian college. In fact the rejection rate at Catholic institutions is now 70%. Let me repeat the overall point to let it sink in a bit. At least half and possibly over two-thirds of our kids will step away from their faith while attending non-Christian colleges and universities.

The recent press release on the on-going National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose gave some interesting insights for students as they begin the college years. Although 79% of all freshmen students believe in God, 69% pray and 81% attend religious services at least occasionally, 57% question their religious beliefs, 52% disagree with their parents about religious matters and 65% feel distant from God. Certainly, college students are asking very deep questions about their faith during their college years. Unless at a Christian college, they may find themselves in an environment that is not very conducive to providing supportive answers. Asking deep questions in such a situation where most anything goes and all values are supported (except clearly Christian ones, of course) can lead to confusion at best and more likely skepticism or out-right rejection of family religious values.

A recent article (March 29, 2005) by Howard Kurtz in the *Washington Post* entitled "Study Finds College Faculties A Most Liberal Lot," reported that most faculty at non-Christian colleges

disdain Christianity with 72% indicating they are liberal, 84% favoring abortion and 67% accepting homosexuality. In most cases, students reflect the values of college faculty they encounter in their upper division course work. These are typically the advisors and mentors of students. Certainly these recent findings indicate that getting answers and directions from most faculty at these institutions may not be very supportive of traditional religious values and morals. If attending a public or other non-Christian institution, the values of those faculty members could be very different than those with which the student started his or her college experience.

My own study and Railsback's conclude that there are significant observable differences in overall religious commitment measures depending on the type or affiliation of the college attended. In my study I looked at the responses of nearly 16,000 students attending 133 different institutions. To localize the impact to only that particular school's influence, my study group was limited to only those who were still enrolled full-time at the same institution at least three years after enrolling as freshmen. It was recognized that students who stopped out but eventually returned to the same institution could have other colleges influencing their change pattern. All students were measured as freshmen and then again at least three years later using a comparable survey instrument in cooperation with the Higher Education Research Institute of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).

The following is a brief summary of the major findings of my study. These findings, although more specific than earlier studies, are generally consistent with prior research. In preparing this research, I reviewed the synopses of nearly 1,000 articles, books and studies, studied more thoroughly over 300 of these and referenced nearly 90 in my own report. Although, as stated before, there are exceptions to these trends, it is clear that the choice of a college does impact the student's religious commitment. Here are the main findings:

- 1. The affiliation of the college attended does appear to be related to the student's overall change in religious commitment as well as adherence to the student's incoming religious preference.** In other words, there is a relationship (statistically significant correlation) between the type of college students choose and what happens to their student religious commitment. There is also a relationship between the type of college attended and whether the students continue in their family's religious tradition – whether they continue to call themselves as seniors in college what they reported as their religious affiliation as freshmen.
- 2. Students who choose to attend an Independent–No Affiliation (non-affiliated or secular private), State, Presbyterian and Catholic affiliated institutions appear to experience the largest declines in overall religious commitment.** These are stated in rank order of declines in religious commitment from the largest overall decline. Private non-religious institutions (secular) show a significantly greater negative relationship to religious commitment than any other type of college, followed closely by public colleges.
- 3. Attending an Independent–No Affiliation college (secular private) has a larger negative relationship than even attending a State supported (public) college.** Although both negative, in almost all cases, there is a significant difference in the degree of negative impact on religious commitment by attending a private non-religious college versus a public college. Although most renowned secular private universities started with a religious commitment, many have become nearly antagonistic to faith.
- 4. Students who attend Independent–Protestant, Baptist and Other Protestant**

affiliated institutions report the largest increases in overall religious commitment.

These are stated in rank order of increases in religious commitment from the largest overall increase. Students who attend these institutions consistently report increases in all measures of religious commitment. In fact, the degree of change between the major decreases at secular private and public colleges to these increases is substantial. For example, comparing students attending public versus independent-protestant institutions you will find nearly four times as large a drop in church attendance and fifteen times the change in overall spirituality.

5. Students who attend institutions that are members of the Council for Christian College and Universities (CCCU) showed significant positive differences on almost all individual measures of religious commitment as well as an overall increase in that commitment compared to those who attended non-member institutions.

Attending a CCCU school is clearly correlated to increases in nearly all measures of religious commitment. Member institutions are set apart from others by their adherence to Christian principles, broader liberal arts programs and commitment to hiring only believers as full-time faculty and administrators. Students who attend these institutions are often exposed to chapels and other worship experiences that reinforce these values as well as learn from (and are mentored by) faculty who exemplify these principles. Perhaps most important for students in this time of transition, they attend, live, worship and communicate with fellow students who also endorse these values. The differences in choosing a CCCU school versus a non-CCCU school are dramatic: one-fourth the drop in church attendance, one-seventh the drop in prayer and meditation, nearly five times the increase in overall religious commitment.

6. Drop in religious service attendance was by far the greatest negative change for the population studied. There is a decrease in attendance of religious services across all students attending all types of colleges. Shifting from a possible parental expectation of attending all services and youth group meetings to a freedom of choice does offer an opportunity for the student to shift to a schedule more of their liking. However, the drop difference is instructive. The smallest drop is for students attending Baptist institutions followed by independent-protestant colleges and is comparable to the small drop at CCCU schools. Most authors agree that this one variable, church attendance, is the most important for measuring and predicting the current and long-term religious commitment of people of all ages.

7. In many cases, the more conservative the student's denominational background, the greater the change at no-affiliation private (secular) and public institutions.

Comparatively speaking, the degree of change is most pronounced among students from a more conservative background who then attend a public or a secular private institution. Students from more conservative backgrounds change more than those from less-conservative denominations when confronted with the challenges of these institutions.

One other major point needs to be addressed before discussing suggestions. It is clear that the biggest degree of change is in the first year away from home. As discussed by Alyssa Bryant in a recent article in the *Journal of College Student Development*, students become significantly less religiously active during the first year of college. It is logical to assume that the majority of eventual change occurs during this critical first year away from parental influence and time of

seeking one's own foundational life direction. Being in an environment with both peer and faculty support for these decisions in the first year of college especially, is most likely one of the greatest benefits of attending a Christian college. Being in an environment where both peers and faculty are at least critical and perhaps hostile to Christian values and morals would make this a very difficult time for a struggling freshman.

So with this information, and all these statistics and findings in mind, what would be my suggestions to students and parents who are considering lower priced alternatives to a Christian college education? Are there recommendations also for pastors and religious leaders? The following lists these recommendations with brief comments and clarifications as needed for students and parents. Quick thoughts are also listed for pastors.

Suggestions For Students:

1. **Start out right and finish strong!** -- Consider attending a faith-based institution for at least the first college year. The research discussed here shows that the first year is the most critical for setting the course of one's religious commitment in college. Getting started right with Christian faculty and peers for at least the first year away from home should be the first choice. Of course, our desire is that students select a Christian college for not only the first year but for their entire college career. Getting a chance to develop a Christian worldview for whatever career you choose is priceless. There are many good faith-based institution choices out there – from flagship liberal arts Christian colleges and universities of the CCCU to all manner of accredited Bible colleges. With the move to accreditation by reputable agencies like the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) as well as the Higher Learning Commission (HLC – regional accrediting agencies), it is easier than ever to move from one accredited institution to another. If you must transfer, check out the articulation agreements the initial Christian college has with area colleges.

This perspective is in direct conflict with those that teach that Christian kids should become salt and light in non-Christian colleges. I do wish that the conversion percentages worked as well as those with that vision hope. However, that perspective ignores the fact that most students are unprepared for the conflict of world views evident in non-Christian colleges. Dropping a beautiful diamond into the mud will not do much to purify that environment but will dirty the gem until it is unrecognizable. Our recommendation remains steadfast. Get started in a Christian college – at least for the first year away from home.

2. **Don't be blinded by dollar signs!** -- Consider college choices wisely. Of course, be sure to compare the bottom-line, out-of-pocket price. But as discussed here, the price tag is not the only issue. Your spiritual life has an eternal value that a temporal education must not undermine – that cost is much too high. Many Christian colleges go to great lengths to attract the best and brightest with substantial scholarship offers. Make sure you compare the bottom-line financial package carefully before deciding.

At the same time, too many students view Christian colleges and Bible colleges especially as having limited majors. Approximately 75% of all students change their major the first year including 50% of those that are absolutely sure. Choosing any college solely because it has a desired major may be too limited a reason for such an important life-choice. If price is still a significant consideration, you might consider a

typically lower cost Bible college for your first year to get the best grounding in general education courses possible before transferring. Many Bible colleges have outstanding academic quality and fantastic nurturing environments for not only one year's preparation but most offer reputable full baccalaureate programs in an increasingly wide variety of disciplines. Remember, the investment you make in a quality college education has a tremendous payoff in the long-term.

3. **Don't get complacent with your religious commitment and devotional life!** -- Don't abandon your religion or its practice without careful and prayerful thought. If anything, going to college should drive a person to know God better. Putting your faith and values aside to be "cool" or "in" is to sell your soul for less than nothing. No matter where you go, purpose and commit to an ongoing devotional life. The pressures of college can cause you to prioritize immediate projects ahead of your personal devotions that have eternal value. Don't let that happen. Be accountable to your home church leadership and Christian peers.
4. **Get in church and get involved!** -- Be faithfully involved in local religious groups and campus ministries. The single most important thing you can do to maintain and increase your religious commitment during the college years is to get involved with a local fellowship wherever you go to college. Secondly, find campus ministries that involve you in service to others and provide a place to be with Christian peers. Nearly all those who show any degree of religious commitment as college seniors at public or secular private colleges have been involved in local fellowships and campus ministries.
5. **Find good Christian friends and connect with caring Christian faculty!** -- Find peers who share your same concerns and values. Christian peers with whom you can share life are critical to the development of any believer – much more so, the college freshman. Connecting with life mentors can add a dimension and fullness to the educational quest that is life-changing. Finding these mentors should begin with Christian faculty advisors within your major field.
6. **Go where you can grow!** -- No matter what college chosen, make sure your religious preference is accommodated. Make sure you know the religious atmosphere of any college you choose. Even going to a Christian college that does not support your particular beliefs can be a difficult situation. Make sure that your core beliefs are not denigrated by policy or practice at whatever school you choose.
7. **Lay off "spiritual" junk food!** – Preparing for college must be deliberate and complete. Many churches place too great a value on entertaining and pleasing high school kids. While youth groups must be vibrant and meaningful to kids, there has to be a bigger purpose than occupying a time slot. It is highly recommended that all college-bound Christian kids prepare for the serious challenges of college life. J. Budziszewski's book, How to Stay Christian In College, should be required reading for a very disciplined preparation for college. Other books like Thomas Shaw's recent Collegelbound, are great preparation for students and parents.

Suggestions For Parents:

1. **Weigh the potential risks to your child's faith as well as the financial costs for the type of college being considered by your child.** Please remember what was presented in this

article. There is so much at stake in your student's spiritual life to settle for less than the best place for your student – a place they can grow spirituality as well as academically.

2. Support and encourage religious service/church attendance. Remember that this is the most important sign that a student's religious commitment is growing and maturing. Find a way, beyond demanding each week's church bulletin, which will encourage not only attendance but involvement. While considering colleges, perhaps make church visits a part of your time. Help connect your student to a local body.
3. Support and encourage involvement in campus ministries. This is about the best way to get your child involved with peers who will support the quest for spiritual growth in college. Keep in mind that many marriages begin from relationships formed in college. Especially if your child is not attending a Christian college, this may be the best way for your child to find your future son or daughter-in-law – if for no other reason, encourage involvement for the sake of your grandkids!
4. Keep involved with your college kids. Stay involved to the extent possible. Visit the college prior to your child's enrollment and during their college years. You will want to avoid becoming what Tom Wolfe has described as a "helicopter parent" in his recent book, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. This is a parent who hovers over every aspect of the student's life – not a good plan. But you must stay involved, connected and informed so visit as often as reasonable. Make sure you meet your child's friends and have them to your home on breaks and vacations.
5. Don't get snowed by rhetoric or excuses. Parents usually know when a child is "snowing" them. Do what you must to find the truth and confront in love. Although this is a transition time to full self-control and autonomy, there still must be clear accountability to the parents for many parts of life. Your child must understand your parental accountability principles before leaving for college so when those are applied, they are not surprised. Simply, you must be in a position to demand results, if necessary.
6. Don't relax – no matter where they attend. No place is perfect. No parent can really relax – ever. By keeping involved and connected, you can do much to help your student get the most out of their college years. But most importantly, you have a tremendous role in helping your child become the adult God has designed them to be.

Suggestions for pastors and religious leaders:

1. Review the faith decline and drop-out rates for your religion or denomination. What do these say about the degree of preparation of your youth?
2. Focus more clearly on preparing students for college life and the issues they might face. Get prepared for very candid conversations and questions from your youth.
3. Provide continual follow-up and support to students while in college.
4. Attract students to your church who are attending local colleges.
5. Pray diligently for discernment before encouraging any student to attend a public college even as "salt and light." Becoming salt that loses its Savior (or savor) or light that is buried under a mountain of garbage is not the best vision for any Christian young person.

Clearly I support and believe in the scripture "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6 KJV). Two quick observations are appropriate.

First, notice that it is “should,” not “would” or “could.” The natural self-will of a child is often contrary to the will of the parent. On matters of life-long importance, the parent needs to make sure that right choices are made and not abdicate this training/leadership role to a willful child. Second, perhaps we have put an unintended time-limit on the word “train.” It is clear that people in that era considered children of any age still under parental authority until they had established their own families and careers. Perhaps we have come to the erroneous conclusion that our parental training responsibility is done at high school graduation especially for those that have invested in Christian high school education or home-schooling. Most of us would agree that the vast majority of seventeen year olds are not quite ready to start their own lives without, at least, some parental input and control. The lifetime impact of training needs to be understood in light of research. Not only do students normally reflect the values of college professors of their senior year but they also tend to reflect these same values 25 years later. Perhaps we have acquiesced (given in by passivity) our responsibility for the training of children too early. Again, making sure that the family’s values are reflected in the college environment is one way to support and perpetuate these values.

So, you may ask, how big is the problem? Is this just a few kids that we would have lost anyway? Friend, the problem is astronomic in proportion. Think of it this way – of the approximately 400,000 high school seniors each year that would meet the admissions criteria for a CCCU college, only 15% are attending any type of Christian college (approximately 65,000). If we lose at only the 52% public university drop rate (remember that others have a higher rate) for all students that go to non-Christian colleges, that is a staggering loss of nearly 177,000 kids to the Kingdom. Strengthening the faith of the 65,000 in Christian colleges is commendable but losing over three times as many is horrendous.

This previously mentioned search for identity and becoming “me” is going to really happen for our kids during these college years. However, students are using this time for exploration and experimentation that is often unhealthy and unholy. In the book referenced earlier by Tom Wolfe, Charlotte’s best friend expresses:

I guess what I really mean is college is like this four-year period you have when you can try anything—everything—and if it goes wrong, there’s no consequences. You know what I mean? Nobody’s keeping score! You can do things that if you tried them before you got to college, your family would be crying and pulling their hair out and giving you these now-see-what-you’ve-gone-and-done looks? College is the only time in your life, or your adult life anyway, when you can really experiment, and at a certain point, when you graduate or whatever, everybody’s memory like evaporates.

Clearly, this vital, pivotal time of exploration is best in a structured, value-based setting that has the potential for safeguards and correction not just accommodation.

We are not facing some new process. This morphing of student family values into something different has been happening for centuries. The Babylonians (present day Iraq) understood this and implemented an interesting public educational agenda. The best and the brightest Jewish kids were selected for education in the art, history and language of the Chaldeans for a time period that was equivalent to a four-year public liberal arts baccalaureate education. The agenda was clear: change the student’s location (separate from the family roots), change the support group (remove from family, friends and church), change their names (all were given heathen names) and change their lifestyle (things that were detestable and unclean according to family tradition were forced on them). You can certainly think of comparable changes that happen within our public education system – changing name and identity to that of a fraternity or

sorority, dabbling in many things that would not be allowed in our homes, etc. – as Charlotte’s friend revealed.

We don’t know how many young people were drafted into that educational environment but we only know of four who stood. We only know one by his given family name (Daniel). For all the others that bowed to that system, they lost their future, their past, their purity, their heritage and, most likely, their God. Regrettably, even our heroes who stood probably bore the physical mark of that system. The pain and scars of emasculation were common for those who were put under the care of the court officials and eunuchs. What marks and scars will our children bear even if they make it through our public or secular education system? The question is still, who of our young students will bend and bow to the world’s system if they have to make that choice? Well, well over half are doing that now!

One final thought, the scripture shows that the captivities endured by the church of that day came about by too light of regard for faith and religious commitments. From Genesis through Revelation, there are countless warnings about the result of acquiescing to the world’s system. Most likely, the Babylonian captivity was the direct result of the complacency of the parents for generations – not standing firm on scriptural religious values. We must not let future generations label us as being complacent about something so important as the long-term spiritual lives of our children. Help them prepare for the college environment, wherever they go. Help them choose wisely ... by choosing a Christian college.

Please see the Christian Consulting web-site for the full text of Steve’s study and an updated listing of related resources used in this article – www.christianconsulting.net. Steve welcomes inquiries and responses via e-mail at steve@christianconsulting.net. He is the President of Christian Consulting for College and Ministries, Inc. (known as Christian Consulting), and has assisted nearly 150 colleges and has been privileged to touch tens of thousands of students over the years. Prior to founding Christian Consulting he was the Vice-President for Recruitment Consultation of the Noel•Levitz Center for Enrollment Management (the largest higher education consulting firm in the U.S.). His on-campus experience includes Dean of Enrollment Management, Director of Admissions, Associate Dean of Student Affairs and Director of Student Services at Oral Roberts University. He also served as the Assistant Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management and the Director of Admissions for the University of Arkansas. Steve has also been the Director of Enrollment Management at Pittsburg State University and Assistant Administrator for Portland Bible College. He has an earned doctorate from the University of Arkansas in Higher Education Administration with an emphasis in marketing – he studied the relationship of student religion and college affiliation on the change in religious commitment in conjunction with the Higher Education Research Institute of the University of California at Los Angeles. He has a MBA from the University of Portland and a BA from Oral Roberts University. He is a frequent speaker at national and statewide conferences on college student related topics.