

A Question of Price versus Cost



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A Christian college education comes with a price. But research suggests that every penny of that price may be worth avoiding the cost of the alternatives.

NOTE: Steve Henderson, President of Christian Consulting for Colleges and Ministries, Inc., was invited to write the following article based on his research on the faith commitments of college students at evangelical and secular colleges. In his work with Christian Consulting, Henderson, a strong advocate of Christian college education, has assisted nearly 150 colleges, giving him the opportunity to touch the lives of thousands of students over the years.

Prior to founding Christian Consulting, Henderson, who has a doctoral degree from the University of Arkansas in Higher Educa-

tion Administration with an emphasis on marketing, served as vice-president for recruitment consultation at the Noel ♦ Levitz Center for Enrollment Management (the largest higher education consulting firm in the U.S.). He has served as dean of enrollment management and director of admissions at Oral Roberts University. He also served as the assistant vice chancellor of enrollment management for the University of Arkansas.

Henderson, who also holds an MBA from the University of Portland and a BA from Oral Roberts University, speaks

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For more information, see the reader response card between pages 16 – 17 or pages 96 – 97.

frequently at national and statewide conferences on college student related topics. In this article, Henderson presents his studies on the relationship between college affiliation and religious commitment in conjunction with the Higher Education Research Institute of the University of California at Los Angeles.

Life, in many ways, boils down to choices. The choices we make go a long way toward determining how our lives will unfold. Right now, hundreds of thousands of Christian young people are in the process of making one of the most important choices of their lives—where to attend college.

This is not the most important choice they will ever make. That distinction belongs to the choice of accepting Jesus Christ as personal savior. Other important choices include the choice of a spouse and the choice of a career.

While each of these choices is distinct, they are not unrelated. Most of us fail to appreciate the extent to which the choice of a college relates to these other important life choices. The literature and the research (as well as the experiences of many) suggest a strong link between a young person's choice of a college and their short-term and long-term commitment to Christian faith.

“WE CAN'T AFFORD IT”

For those who are dedicated to recruiting young people for Christian colleges and universities, one common response causes much frustration, even irritation. The response is: “We just can't afford a Christian college.”

The truth is attending *any* college comes with a significant price tag. In spite of the persistent efforts of most Christian colleges to be affordable, I acknowledge that, in general, attending a Christian college requires higher out-of-pocket costs than do other institutions, especially public institutions, as state subsidies for public education can be difficult to match. However, my typical response to this question is to ask another question. “Is the lower price tag worth the potential cost?”

Unfortunately, I know something about cost, as some of the pain still lingers from seeing one of my own children self-destruct. I can remember how proud I was to see my

dynamic, scholarship winning, powerfully Christian daughter move in as a freshman at a well-respected public institution. I can also recall the shock and grief that came not long after when I began to learn that drugs and alcohol had become so much a part of her lifestyle that they were putting her and some of her friends in grave danger.

I witnessed the choices she was making bring over a decade of grief to her and to our family. Thankfully, after many years of prayer, counsel, and encouragement, my daughter is being restored. In fact, she is now an incredible and successful woman. She gave me permission to cite her story with the hope of helping other families avoid the pain that we experienced.

The painful memories have inspired me to dedicate much of my life to studying the impact of college choice on religious commitment. It is not my intention to “scare” anyone into making the choice for a Christian school. Neither do I contend that a Christian college or university is always the best choice for a family, as every child, every parent, and each situation are unique.

Furthermore, I do not dismiss the argument that Christian young people have the opportunity to become salt and light at non-Christian colleges. But the reality does not live up to the vision. Research plainly shows that most students are unprepared for the conflict of worldviews they will encounter at non-Christian colleges and universities. Dropping a beautiful diamond into the mud will not purify that environment. Rather it may dirty the gem until it is unrecognizable. I feel a strong obligation to share with Christian young people and their parents some of what I have discovered, to help them make fully informed decisions.

PIVOTAL YEARS

Numerous authors point to the significant transition that takes place in the college years. Teenagers enter this time still children in many ways. They leave as adults. They shift from parental control and dependence to



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self-control and more self-reliance. In addition, the college years are a time when core values from childhood are tested, sorted, and prioritized in ways that often will last a lifetime. This is also a time when people move from an *imposed* faith to an *owned* faith, one that is a foundation for their entire life structure.

Noted student development authority Art Chickering (as well as Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, in their classic *How College Affects Students*) is among those who point to the college years as one of the most significant times in a student's “search for identity.” This is a time that greatly shapes the adult he or she will become. What happens if this major metamorphosis takes place in a non-supportive environment (at best) or a hostile one (at worst)? The results of nearly 25 years of research consistently reveal that those who do not attend a Christ-centered college will experience a decline in religious values, attitudes, and behaviors during college.

Despite some exceptions, the research clearly establishes that enrollment in selective, prestigious, non-religiously affiliated colleges (i.e., typical secular private colleges) or public colleges and universities correlates with significant decreases in religious affiliation and behavior, such as church attendance, praying, reading the Bible, and discussing religion. On

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the other hand, enrollment in church-related colleges of all types tends to support and strengthen the student's existing religious values and behaviors.

To be sure, many fine Christian educators occupy the classrooms of non-Christian institutions. And no Christian college can guarantee that it will be the perfect place with perfect people who can perfectly attend to everyone who enrolls. Undoubtedly, some Christian young people are secure, stable, courageous, prepared and committed enough to survive and even thrive in their faith no matter where they attend. However, the percentages are not on their side.

LEAVING FAITH BEHIND

A few years ago, George Fox University professor Gary Railsback, a fellow researcher, prepared an interesting study. Using his data, I determined that more than 52 percent of incoming freshmen who identify themselves as born-again upon entering a public university will either no longer identify themselves as born-again four years later or, even if they do still claim that identification, will not have attended any religious service in over a year. This means over half of our kids are reporting a rejection of family religious

values if they attend a public university.

This pattern of rejection was similar at secular private colleges and much worse (63 percent) at Catholic colleges. Newer data show 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 percent. The bottom-line is this: if the past is a fair indication of the future, at least half and possibly over two-thirds of our kids will step away from their faith while attending non-Christian colleges and universities.

A recent press release on the ongoing National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose offered some interesting information on

students who are beginning their college years. While 79 percent of all freshmen believe in God, 69 percent pray, and 81 percent attend religious services at least occasionally, 57 percent question their religious beliefs, 52 percent disagree with their parents about religious matters and 65 percent feel distant from God. College students are asking deep questions about their faith. Unless they are at a Christian college, they may find themselves in an environment that is not conducive to providing supportive answers. Asking deep questions in such a situation can lead to confusion at best and, more likely, skepticism or outright rejection of family religious values.

A March 29, 2005, *Washington Post* article by Howard Kurtz, titled "Study Finds College Faculties a Most Liberal Lot," reports that most faculty at non-Christian colleges disdain Christianity, with 72 percent indicating they are liberal, 84 percent favoring abortion, and 67 percent indicating homosexuality is acceptable. In most cases, students reflect the values of college faculty they encounter in their upper division coursework. These faculty are typically the advisors and mentors of students. Certainly the above findings indicate that the answers and directions students receive from most faculty at these institutions will not be supportive of traditional morality and religious values.

QUANTIFYING THE IMPACT

Both my own study and Railsback's conclude that there are significant differences in religious commitment depending on the type or affiliation of the college attended. For my study, I examined the responses of nearly 16,000 students attending 133 different institutions. 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 findings of my study, although more specific than earlier studies, are generally consistent with prior research. In preparing this research, I reviewed over 1,000 articles, books, and studies. Although, as previously stated, there are exceptions to these trends, it is clear that the choice of a college does impact students' 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 to the students' adherence to the incoming religious preference. In other words, there is a correlation between the type of college students choose and what happens to their religious commitment during the college years. There is also a relationship between the type of college attended and whether the student continues in his or her family's religious tradition.

2. Students who choose to attend a non-affiliated independent institution (secular private), state, Presbyterian, and Catholic affiliated institutions appear to experience the largest declines in overall religious commitment. These institutions are listed in order of decline in religious commitment from the largest overall decline. Students who attend private, non-religious institutions show larger drops in religious commitment than any other type of college, even public institutions. This bears out the reality that, though most renowned secular private universities started with a religious commitment, many have become nearly antagonistic to faith.

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Recommendations for Students

I. GET OFF TO A GOOD START—

Consider attending a faith-based institution for at least the first year of college. Research shows that the first year is the most critical to one's religious commitment in college. Of course, my desire is that students select a Christian college for their entire college career. But at least begin at a Christian institution. There are many good faith-based institution choices—from flagship liberal arts Christian colleges and universities of the CCCU to all kinds of accredited Bible colleges. With accreditation by agencies like the Association for Biblical Higher Education and the Higher Learning Commission, it is easier than ever to move from one accredited institution to another.

2. DON'T BE BLINDED BY DOLLAR

SIGNS—*Consider college choices wisely.* The bottom-line, out-of-pocket price is one



factor. But the price tag is not the only issue and should not be the main issue. Your spiritual life has an eternal value that a temporal education should not undermine. 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. The “sticker price” is rarely the actual price for those who need financial assistance.

3. DON'T PUT TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON THE AVAILABILITY OF MAJORS—

Too many students view Christian colleges, and Bible colleges especially, as having too limited a number of majors. Keep in mind, however, that approximately 75 percent of students change their major during the first year. This includes 50 percent of those who first reported being “absolutely sure.” A desired major may be too limited a reason for choosing a college. If price is still a significant consideration, consider a lower cost Bible college for your first year to get a solid grounding in general education courses before transferring. Many Bible

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colleges have outstanding academic quality and nurturing environments, making them an ideal place to start. Most also offer reputable baccalaureate programs in an increasingly wide variety of disciplines.

4. 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 come to know God more. 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, commit to an ongoing devotional life. Be accountable to your home church leadership and Christian peers.

5. GET IN CHURCH AND GET INVOLVED—

Be faithfully involved in local religious groups and campus ministries.

The most important thing you can do to maintain and increase your religious commitment is to get involved with a local fellowship. Second, find campus ministries that involve you in Christian service and fellowship. Nearly all those who show any religious commitment as college seniors at public or secular private colleges have been involved in local fellowships and campus ministries.

6. FIND GOOD CHRISTIAN FRIENDS AND CONNECT WITH CARING CHRISTIAN FACULTY—

Find peers who share your same concerns and values. Christian peers are critical to the development of any believer—more so for the college freshman. Connecting with life mentors during the educational quest can be life changing. Finding these mentors should begin with Christian faculty advisors within your major field.

7. GO WHERE YOU CAN GROW—

No matter what college you choose, 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 difficult. Make sure that your core beliefs are not denigrated by policy or practice at whatever school you choose.

8. 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 ought to be a bigger purpose than occupying time. All college-bound Christian youth should prepare for the serious challenges of college life. J. Budziszewski's book, *How to Stay Christian In College*, and Thomas Shaw's *Collegebound* should be required reading for a very disciplined preparation for college.

—SH

Recommendations for Parents

1. WEIGH THE POTENTIAL RISKS TO YOUR CHILD'S FAITH ALONGSIDE THE FINANCIAL COSTS.

There is too much at stake in your child's spiritual life to settle for less than the best place for him or her. Christian students need to 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 maturing. Find a way, beyond demanding to see each week's church bulletin, that will encourage attendance and involvement. While considering colleges, perhaps make church visits a part of your time. Help connect your student to a local fellowship of believers.

3. SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE INVOLVEMENT IN CAMPUS MINISTRIES.

This is the best way to get your child involved with peers who will support the quest for spiritual growth in the college years. Many marriages result from relationships formed in college. Especially if your child is not attending a Christian college, involvement in a campus ministry may be the best way for your child to find an ideal son or daughter-in-law. So, if for no other reason, encourage involvement for the sake of your grandkids!

4. STAY INVOLVED WITH YOUR COLLEGE KIDS.

To the extent possible, stay in touch with your college son or daughter in meaningful ways. Visit the college prior

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3. Students who attend independent Protestant, Baptist and other Protestant affiliated institutions report the largest increases in overall religious commitment.

These, again, are listed order of increases in religious commitment from the largest overall increase. Students who attend these kinds of institutions consistently report increases in all measures of religious commitment. This increase in religious commitment stands out especially when compared to the major decreases at secular private and public colleges. Those attending public versus independent-Protestant institutions, for example, experience nearly four times the drop in church attendance and fifteen times the drop in overall spirituality.

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

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. They also learn from (and are mentored by) faculty who exemplify these principles. Perhaps most important for students in this time of transition is that they attend, live, worship, and communicate with fellow students who endorse these same 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, and nearly five times the increase in overall religious commitment.

5. A drop in religious service attendance was by far the greatest negative change for the population studied.

There is a decrease in attendance of religious

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to your child's enrollment and during the college years. You will want to avoid becoming what Tom Wolfe, in his recent book *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, has described as a "helicopter parent," one 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; perhaps invite 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 then confront in love. Although this is a time of transition to full self-control and autonomy, there still must be clear accountability to the parents for many parts of life. Your child should understand your parental accountability principles before leaving for college so that when these principles are applied, they are not surprised. To put it most simply, you must be in a position to demand results, if necessary.

6. KEEP PRAYING—NO MATTER

WHERE THEY ATTEND. No place is perfect. No parent can ever relax. By keeping involved and connected, you can do much to help your student get the most out of their college years. You have a tremendous role in helping your child become the adult God has designed him or her to be.

—SH

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 students to shift to schedules more of their liking. However, the specifics are 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 factor for measuring and predicting the current and long-term religious commitment of people of all ages.

6. 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 attend a public or a secular private institution. To put it another way, students from more conservative backgrounds change more than those from less-conservative denominations when confronted with the challenges of these institutions.

Most of the change in students' attitudes and behaviors takes place during the first year away from home. As discussed by Alyssa Bryant in an article in the *Journal of College Student Development*, students become significantly less religiously active during the first year of college. That this is the case should come as no surprise, as students, for the first time in their lives, are no longer under their parents' control and influence. This is also a time for students to begin thinking more on their own and for building a foundation for their life's direction.

Thus, being in an environment that includes both peer and faculty support for good decisions, in the first year of college especially, is one of the greatest benefits of attending a Christian college. In contrast, being in an environment wherein both peers and faculty are critical of if not hostile to Christian values and morals can make this first year a very difficult time for a struggling freshman.

The results of the research have led me to make several recommendations primarily to
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Recommendations for Pastors and Religious Leaders

1. Review the faith decline and drop-out rates for your church and/or denomination. What do these say about your youths' degree of preparation?

2. Focus more intentionally on preparing students for college life and the issues they

are likely to face. Prepare for candid conversations and questions.

3. Provide continual support to students who are away at college.

4. Attract college students to your church.

5. Pray diligently for discernment before encouraging any student to attend a public institution, even as "salt and light." Becoming salt that loses its savior (or savor) or light that is buried under a bushel is a poor vision for any young person.

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students and parents who are together considering lower priced alternatives to a Christian college education. I also have recommendations for pastors and other religious leaders. See pages 90 – 92, 96 – 97, and above.

“TRAIN UP A CHILD”

Clearly I believe and support 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 the word 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 lifelong importance, parents need to make sure that right choices are made. They should not abdicate this training/leadership role to a willful child.

Second, perhaps we have, albeit unintentionally, put a time limit on the word “train.” It is clear that people in the era when this passage was written considered children of any age to be 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 finished at high school graduation, especially for those who have invested in Christian high school education or home schooling. Most of us would agree that the vast majority of 17-year-olds are not quite ready to start their own lives without some parental input and control.

We need to understand the lifetime impact of good early training in light of the research. Not only do students normally reflect the values of the college professors of their senior year, but they also tend to reflect these same values 25 years later. Perhaps we have too early acquiesced—given in by

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Want to know more?

Here are the best phone numbers to use when requesting information about colleges and universities advertising in this issue. You can also request information on any of these schools by filling out and sending in the reader response card between pages 16 – 17 or pages 96 – 97. CampusLifeCollegeGuide.com is another source of information about Christian colleges and universities.

Belhaven College (MS)	800/960-5490
Boyce College (KY)	800/626-5525
Calvin College (MI)	800/688-0122
Carson-Newman College (TN).....	800/678-9061
Cedarville University (OH)	800/CEDARVILLE
Concordia University (NE).....	800/535-5494
Crown College (MN)	800-68-CROWN
Davis College (NY)	800/331-4137
Gordon College (MA)	866/464-6736
Goshen College (IN)	800/348-7422
Houston Baptist University (TX).....	281/649-3211
Indiana Wesleyan University (IN).....
.....	866/GO-TO-IWU
Judson College (IL)	800-879-5376
Liberty University (VA)	800/543-5317
Messiah College (PA).....	800/233-4220
Olivet Nazarene University (IL).....	800/648-1463
Oral Roberts University (OK).....	800-678-8876
Palm Beach Atlantic University (FL).....
.....	888/468-6722
Point Loma University (CA)	800/733-7770
Seattle Pacific University (WA).....	800/366-3344
Southwestern Assemblies of God University(TX)
.....	888-YES-SAGU
University of Mobile (AL).....	800/946-7267
Warner Southern College (FL)	800/309-9563
Waynesburg College (PA)	800/225-7393



passivity—our responsibility for the training of children.

Young people's search for identity is going to 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 Tom Wolfe's book, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, 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 negotiated in a structured, value-based setting that has the potential for safeguards and correction, not just accommodation.

Let us not underestimate the magnitude of the problem. Of the approximately 400,000 high school seniors each year who would meet the admissions criteria for a CCCU college, only 15 percent (approximately 65,000) are attending any type of Christian college. If we lose them at only the 52 percent public university drop rate (remember that others have a higher rate) for all students who go to non-Christian colleges, that means that at least 177,000 young people have moved away from the faith. Strengthening the faith of the 65,000 who attend Christian colleges is commendable, but having three times that many fall away is horrendous.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What we are facing is nothing new. This morphing of students' family values has been happening for centuries. The Babylonians understood this and implemented an interesting public educational agenda. The best and the brightest Jewish children were selected for education in the art, history, and language

of the Chaldeans for a time period equivalent to a four-year college education. The agenda was clear: change the students' location (separate from the family roots), change the support group (remove from family, friends and church), change their names (all were given non-Jewish names), and change their lifestyle (things that were detestable and unclean according to family tradition were forced on them).

It is not hard to notice similarities to the Babylonian educational agenda within our public higher education system. Young people identify with a fraternity or sorority instead of a church. They dabble in many things that would not be allowed in our homes, and the list could go on.

We don't know how many young people were drafted into the Babylonian educational environment, but we know of only four who stood, and only one by his given name, Daniel. All the others who bowed to that system lost their future, their past, their purity, their heritage, and most likely their God. Even our heroes who stood probably bore the pain and scars of emasculation, a common occurrence 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? Which of our young students will bend and bow to the world's system if they have to make that choice? Over half are doing it now.

From Genesis through Revelation, there are countless warnings regarding the results 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 their Scriptural religious values. We must not let future generations label us as complacent about something so important as the long-term spiritual lives of our children. Help them prepare for the college environment wherever they go, and, perhaps most importantly, help them choose wisely. . . **Remember that the lower price may not be worth the cost.**

The full text of Steve Henderson's study, as well as an updated listing of related resources can be accessed at www.christianconsulting.net. Steve welcomes inquiries and responses via e-mail at steve@christianconsulting.net.