

The Case for Christian Higher Education

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In today's society, the value of higher education is widely recognized. College graduates, on average, have significantly higher lifetime earnings and report greater life satisfaction than American without a college degree. They even have longer life spans on average than non-college graduates.¹

Unfortunately, while Christians generally support higher education, many Christian parents and church leaders seem to be unaware of the value of distinctively, intentional Christian colleges and universities. Whether it's a preference for the large size of a state university or the low price tag of a community college, many Christians don't consider a Christian institution when choosing a college. I think that's a mistake, and here are four reasons why:

1. Christian higher education offers an integrated and coherent approach to education.

I earned a bachelor's degree at a large state university. The education I received was adequate in its own way, but from a Christian perspective, something was missing. Although I was involved in a Christian group on campus, my study of history, psychology, chemistry, and other subjects was disconnected from my relationship with God.

Christian higher education is based on the belief that as Christians, our lives are meant to be lived as an integrated whole. We live out our Christian faith just as much at work on Monday as we do at church on Sunday. Our academic life too falls under the lordship of Christ. Thus, a Christian college seeks to integrate faith into all aspects of the institution—not just chapel or dormitory Bible studies, but the classroom, the athletic field, and the dormitory. If God is truly creator of all things, then our studies should reflect that. Students at Christian colleges not only learn about business; they are challenged to understand the field of business from a Christian perspective and to live out their Christian faith as ethical business professionals.

2. The college years are critical years for faith development.

The research indicates that the young adult years (18-25) are an important time of emotional and spiritual development. It's natural for young Christian adults to experience a struggle to "own" their parents' faith, and they often ask probing questions of their inherited beliefs. Christian colleges recognize this fact and provide a holistic learning community that seeks to nurture students' spiritual growth. Christian college students are not shielded from life's tough questions and issues of faith and doubt—that's one of the important features of higher education. But they do so within a supportive faith community, one in which the philosophy professor and volleyball coach are spiritual mentors just as much as the campus pastor.

Not surprisingly, then, research on faith development indicates that on average, students at Christian colleges are more likely to maintain religious commitments into their adult years than students at secular institutions.² (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011) Of course, there are no guarantees in higher education. But college students are more likely to grow in their Christian faith at schools that support and reinforce that faith.

3. Christian higher education is committed to academic excellence.

If what I said so far gives the impression that Christian colleges are only about spiritual growth, then let me correct that impression. As institutions that seek to follow the Apostle Paul's admonition to "do all to the glory of God," Christian colleges are committed to academic excellence across a wide variety of majors and minors. For example, in the nationally-administered Student Satisfaction Survey, students at member schools of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) reported significantly higher satisfaction rates than their peers at non-CCCU schools on a wide variety of questions related to academic quality. Examples include statements such as, "faculty care about me as an individual," "there is a commitment to academic excellence on this campus," and "the quality of instruction I receive is excellent."³

Furthermore, Christian colleges, with their belief that "all truth is God's truth," seek to foster diversity and open dialogue—two important essential traits of a healthy learning community. Given the polarized and politicized state of many secular campuses today, in which shouting and protests often crowd out genuine dialogue, one could argue that students are more likely to experience genuine interaction with different people and ideas at a Christian college than at a secular one. In fact, in the most recent National Survey of Student Engagement, students at CCCU institutions reported that their school encouraged interaction with people from different racial and religious backgrounds at a higher level than did non-CCCU students.⁴

4. Christian higher education is surprisingly affordable.

Of course, a major criticism of Christian colleges—and all private colleges, for that matter—is that they're too expensive compared to State U. While it's true in general that private higher education, with its commitment to small class sizes and personalized attention from professors, is more expensive than public education, the difference is less than many realize. That's because private colleges are also committed to providing significant financial aid to make a college education accessible to as many students as possible.

In fact, a 2015 study of college costs revealed that when one factors in scholarships and other sources of financial aid, the average *out of pocket* cost for a bachelor's degree at a private college was only \$5,000 more than at a public university (\$63,000 vs. \$58,000).⁵ And the situation is even more favorable for CCCU institutions: In a study conducted in 2014, the average student debt for CCCU graduates was about \$20,000—which was \$5,000 *less* than the average student debt for graduates of public universities.⁶

In sum, then, Christian colleges and universities offer a coherent learning experience, are committed to faith formation, are academically excellent, and are affordable. They prepare young people to be successful professionals who integrate their faith in all that they do.

Of course, as Christians, we know that life is bigger than a successful career. It's about developing into the person God has designed each of us to be, finding our calling in life, and playing our part in God's redemptive work in the world. A Christian college is a great way to begin that journey.

¹ Philip Trostel, "It's Not Just the Money: The Benefits of College Education to Individuals and Society." Lumina Foundation Report, 2015, p. 2.

² Damon Maryl and Jeremy Uecker, “Higher Education and Religious Liberalization Among Young Adults,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 90 (September 2011), pp. 181-208.

³ National Student Satisfaction Survey, 2017.

⁴ National Survey of Student Engagement, 2017.

⁵ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2015-2016. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>

⁶ The Institute for College Access & Success data, 2014. <http://www.college-insight.org>