

The Case for Christian College

Amelia Harper

Like many homeschooling parents, my goal for my children has always been to provide them with a strong Christian foundation, to educate and enlighten their minds, and to prepare them for a life of service that will most likely extend beyond the four walls of our home. I have homeschooled five children for over eighteen years and this year watched the third child cross the threshold of high school graduation and go out into the world of adulthood where homeschooled students are inevitably faced with the question, "What now?"

For our family, so far, each of the children has chosen the course of Christian college education. Both my husband and I received a superior education at good Christian liberal arts college and strongly urged our children to consider that option, though we were supportive of other options as well.

Our primary goal was for them to prepare for their inevitable collision with the outside world yet still retain the faith of their fathers. We wanted their college experience to teach them independence of thought, but we also wanted them still to have a nurturing, supportive moral environment with clear rules and boundaries that limited the temptations they would encounter. We wanted them to examine the world they would be destined to face through the lens of a Christian worldview. We wanted, in short, to have them learn the skills that they would need to have to survive in the secular world, yet to gain this knowledge in an environment that would closely mimic the education they received at home.

Clearly they would not get all that at a secular college. My husband, who is a pastor, had attended a state college for a while before attending a Christian college. He knew firsthand that Christians were often mocked, ridiculed, and even threatened because of their faith. I had also heard that many secular professors consider it a personal challenge to break down the faith of young Christians and to impose a humanistic worldview in its stead. My suspicions of this were confirmed when I interviewed Professor Mike Adams for an article for TOS a couple of years ago. In his book, *Welcome to the Ivory Towers of Babel: Confessions of a Conservative College Professor*, Adams, a professor of criminology at a state college in North Carolina, reveals the seamy underbelly of a system designed to lead young people to support a liberal, immoral, and antigodly vision of the world. (The article can be found in the archives of the TOS website.)

It surprises me to see how many Christian homeschooled families choose secular colleges when the risks are so great. Why do so many parents carefully nurture and protect their children throughout their childhood only to throw them into Vanity Fair when the ink is barely dry on the diploma? Secular colleges offer more temptations and dilemmas, both physical and spiritual, than most Christians will face in a lifetime after the college days have ended. Sex, pornography, and drug and alcohol use are considered rites of passage by many college-aged students in our culture.

However, a good Christian college can be an excellent transition for the important journey a

child takes into adulthood. All this effort can be rewarding, for Christian college attendance has several advantages.

Educational Advantages

Some students find that they benefit from the competition and deadlines that college attendance offers: these pressures keep them more focused and on track with their studies. Also, though distance learning is available for a number of college degrees now, many majors still require group settings, hands-on participation, or direct teacher instruction. In addition, few students actually are set in their career choices when they begin their college career. Often students find that the college experience broadens their horizons and leads them to career possibilities that they never even knew existed until they encountered them in their college studies.

Elisabeth Marlowe, a homeschooled student who recently graduated with an undergraduate degree in creative writing (with a minor in dramatic productions) from Bob Jones University and with a master's degree in secondary education from Pensacola Christian College, took classes both with distance learning and at Christian colleges. From her perspective, the college experience did a better job preparing her for her chosen field.

"Distance learning just isn't always practical for every major," Marlowe said. "I could not receive the education I desired from distance learning classes. One on one with teachers and peers is essential to crafting your desired field of expertise ... I couldn't have done that from home."

Direct Teacher Contact

Marlowe also noted that direct teacher contact made a big difference in the two college experiences. "I did take a few distance learning courses to help me complete my degrees at a level I could handle, but these were basic classes," Marlowe explained. "I took all of my core classes on campus. Having experienced a little of each, I definitely prefer speaking with the teachers face to face. You can knock down the door, call up, or e-mail anytime to get help. If you're taking a class through distance learning, you can only receive help 9 to 5, and sometimes it's hard to explain your problems over the phone."

Extracurricular Advantages

Christian colleges also allow students to explore extracurricular activities and learn skills that are hard to learn at home. Through the college experience, my sons have taken music lessons, ministered in New York as part of a team, learned set design and lighting, played organized sports, served in leadership positions, worked in an art gallery, worked behind the scenes in operatic productions, and participated in a film project--all with Christian oversight. It would be impossible to duplicate this wide range of experiences in our small town.

Exchange of Ideas

College attendance allows students to have more freedom of discussion with others who agree--or disagree--with their opinions about a variety of subjects. As Jennifer Brown, a homeschool graduate who currently attends Liberty University explained, "College has prepared me for the real world in ways I didn't expect, such as learning to defend (as necessary) my status as a homeschool graduate. It has also stretched me intellectually as I learn to defend my viewpoint against many others."

Social Development

Christian college attendance allows students to make contacts with others who may become future colleagues in business or ministry. Also, for many homeschooled students who live in areas where there is limited contact with other young Christian adults, college may provide one of the best ways to meet a future husband or wife. In any case, they are likely to form lifelong friendships with other like-minded students. As Marlowe said, "To me one of the biggest advantages would be meeting Christians. When you're at a Christian college, you have the opportunity to meet, fellowship, and interact on a daily basis with thousands of Christians. I've made my best friends at college and friends that I plan to work with in the future."

Increase in Independence

Elisabeth Marlowe also noted how the independence she experienced in college helped prepare her for adulthood. "I also feel attending a Christian college helps especially homeschooled adolescents mature into godly Christian adults," Marlowe said. "When I was in college, I was on my own to a great degree. I was responsible for my homework and classes, curfew, laundry, finances, and deadlines. College is kind of the prerequisite for living on your own. It weans you away from Mom and Dad's constant care yet allows you to keep in contact with them. For me, college really helped me not to be afraid to take the first step toward being an adult."

Spiritual Growth

Attendance at a good Christian college can also be the catalyst that propels a young person into a more personal relationship with the Lord. As students study the Word of God together, pray together, and see prayers answered in the lives of others, their own faith can increase.

In addition, for many students, the passage to adulthood requires a healthy examination of the basis of their faith. I know that I went through this even in a Christian college. I began to question the validity of my Christian beliefs and whether I truly believed this on my own or was merely parroting what I was taught to believe by my parents. For months I faced an intense crisis of faith, but when I finally found my footing, my faith was stronger than ever because I knew it was my own. Facing this crisis while studying in a Christian environment was hard, but I shudder to think what conclusions I might have come to in a secular college when any chink in

the armor would mark me as fair prey for those who deny God.

For Elisabeth Marlowe, college had a great impact on her spiritual life. "When I began college, one of my freshman roommates told me, 'God will break you in college.' I didn't understand that then, but I do now. God had to break my will so many times to remind me that He was in control and He knew what was best. If I hadn't attended college, I wouldn't be able to face life's difficulties now, but through college I saw God perform in my life, and now He daily reminds me of those times, and I know He's sufficient to see me through."

Deciding what path to take after high school is not always easy, especially as we are now faced with so many options. For some people, distance learning may offer what they need. A friend of mine has, so far, had three sons attend a Christian college, but her daughter, who is now in high school, recently told her that she is seriously considering distance learning for college so that she can stay and minister in her home church. It is hard to argue with such logic. If you feel that God is leading you to pursue your college at home, a growing number of options are available.

However, Christian colleges are well worth your consideration if you are looking for a more traditional setting. These colleges offer a wide range of educational and social advantages for the homeschooled student transitioning into adulthood. The best advice is to do as homeschool graduate Jennifer Brown advised: "Make sure you are going where you believe God wants you."

How to Choose a Christian College for Your Family

The term "Christian" varies greatly when applied to colleges. Some are basically Bible colleges that are designed mainly to instruct pastors, teachers, and missionaries. Some are solid liberal arts universities that teach a wide range of subjects from a Christian worldview. Some are Christian in name only and abandoned solid Bible teaching years ago. For example, a representative from one college that has a denominational name once debated with me on a radio program about the advantages of teenagers exploring homosexuality. Do your homework BEFORE you go to college. Careful research can help you find the college that is the best fit for you and your family.

Read the school's statement of faith.

Christian colleges generally have a statement of faith that tells about the beliefs of the school. Check this out to see if you agree with what is taught at the school.

Check out the student handbook.

If possible, get a look at the student handbook that lists the rules and accountability procedures of the institution. No one LIKES rules, but rules can help protect students and instill the discipline they need in their future life. Parents may feel more comfortable about sending their child to a college that is committed to watching over students. And college rules often help students in the transition from a close-knit family environment to complete independence. For homeschooled students, this can be a real plus.

Check out the academic reputation of the school.

Academic reputation is not necessarily measured by accreditation. Some top-notch schools choose not to be accredited rather than compromise on issues imposed by a secular institution. Some are accredited by agencies that allow them to maintain their Christian worldview. For a student planning a career in a secular field, it is important to research how the institution is respected in the academic and business world. Ask admissions counselors what specific graduate schools accept the school's degrees. Also find out what organizations recruit from the college's student population.

Check out the catalog and website.

The catalog and website can tell you more than what majors are offered. Look at specific course titles and descriptions to learn more about the approaches taught in the classroom. Does the catalog reflect courses that teach a liberal social agenda masked as academic coursework as many secular colleges do? Is evolution taught as a viable alternative? What kind of clubs, organizations, and activities does the college endorse? All this can tell you more about the school's overall philosophy and help you learn if the school is a good fit for you.

Visit the campus.

Most colleges will allow prospective students and their parents to visit the campus and even attend a few classes, usually at no charge. This is a good way to get a better feel for campus life and see if it is for you.

Realize that no college is perfect.

Of course, you will not find a perfect place anywhere on this earth. Every college will likely have something that you do not like. There are advantages and disadvantages to every higher education scenario. But careful research can help you make a more informed decision. Also remember that not everyone who attends a Christian college is truly committed to the Lord. Use discretion in choosing friends and activities at Christian college as much as you would in your own hometown.

Biographical Information

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