

Homeschoolers Headed for Higher Education: A Talk with Five Schools

By John and Diane Wheeler

We adopted the classical model for homeschooling our five children a number of years ago for many reasons—the study of the good, the true, and the beautiful; the study and discussion of the Great Books; the chronological study of history; the study of classical languages; the gentle and flexible rigor model; and the application of a biblical worldview to all of our studies and to all of history, to name a few. Now our oldest is 14, and the reality of the college years is on the horizon! If God has put college in the future for our children and it seems at this point that He has, then how can we be sure that we are preparing them for success? What qualities are important to colleges in their incoming students? What preparation is expected? What words of wisdom would they offer as we look into the process of college applications?

We sent these questions to representatives of five different colleges, and we got some very interesting answers. We received helpful responses from Dr. David Whalen, Dean of Faculty at Hillsdale College; Dr. David Noe, Assistant Professor of Classics at Patrick Henry College; Terry Stollar, Director of Admissions and Development at Gutenberg College; Dr. Roy Atwood, President of New St. Andrews College; and Rosemary Harty, Director of Communications at St. Johns College. Each school has a unique vision, varying expectations, and widely divergent views about faith and truth. But, there is much in the way of expectations and advice that they all have in common.

A Teachable Spirit and Strong Work Ethic

At the top of the list of qualities they think are important for incoming freshmen is a teachable spirit and a willingness to work hard. Dr. Noe says, “We are looking for students who have a strong work ethic . . . a teachable disposition, one willing to take direction. A high opinion of oneself that is unwarranted is the greatest impediment to successful learning.” Dr. Atwood writes, “We seek students who have a teachable spirit and know how to work hard with joy.” Mr. Whalen wants students with “intellectual hungers, a sincere desire to study for its own sake, not just jump through academic hoops. Students need to be alive to the wonder of the created order . . .” I love this; one of the things about classical Christian education is this delightful emphasis on the worship of a God of wonder, a God of order.

Reading, Writing, and Thinking about the Great Books

Also high on the list of what these schools expect is an interest in reading, discussing, and writing about ideas. All these schools will expect their students to be eager to read the great works and to write about them. At these colleges, students are not expected to sit back and watch the professor; instead, they are highly engaged in discussion, exploration, and discovery. St. Johns is an extreme example. Rosemary Harty writes that St. Johns students are “directors of their own education. Their teachers will be a hundred plus great books, from Plato and Aristotle to de Tocqueville, Twain and Einstein . . . We call our faculty members ‘tutors.’ Their role is to be model learners.”

It is a little different at Patrick Henry College. Students have a little less freedom but are still

expected to be greatly engaged in writing and discussion of the Great Books. Dr. Noe writes, “The best preparation for succeeding at PHC is one in which the student does not shy away from difficult subjects, reads the Classics, and learns to write with precision and accuracy . . . In addition, students should follow the advice of Pliny to read, not many works, but a few important works carefully. In other words, carefully reading Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Herodotus’ *Histories*, four or five of Plato’s *Dialogues*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and a few of Cicero’s speeches is far better preparation than any one hundred titles, fiction or nonfiction, from the last fifty years.”

At Gutenberg College, Terry Trollar says, “The best preparation . . . is to read voraciously and discuss good and great literature.” Students have “an interactive education where they can read works and then talk about what they learned with others who long to do the same . . . Gutenberg offers a unique program that encourages them to learn and to ask deep-seated, scary questions without flinching. At Gutenberg, we feel Truth can stand up to tough scrutiny.”

Goodness, Truth, and Beauty

Also common to these classical and Great Books schools is an expectation that students will have a keen interest in what is good, true, and beautiful. Mr. Whalen writes, “students should also have a well cultivated and encouraged love of good, beautiful, and true things, so that their education does not become the mere acquisition of data or the mastery of information.” Students should give careful attention to being well rounded Christians who delight in truth, goodness and beauty, and not be myopic eggheads,” according to Dr. Atwood.

Academic Preparation

Most of the colleges expect between two and four years of foreign language, preferably Latin, and at least three years of math. Three years of science is also expected, preferably with lab work. Dr. Atwood adds, “Our students will read mountains of challenging books each year, so prospective students should develop their reading speed and comprehension.”

Nontraditional Students

Some Great Books and classical schools are uniquely appropriate for students who may not have been successful in high school, but who have a sincere desire to learn and a willingness to engage and interact over ideas. At Gutenberg College, some freshmen—says Mr. Stollar—are older students who did not do well in high school and became disillusioned with education, but later realized that they had some questions that could be answered through studies of the Bible and the classics. They are ready for a rigorous academic program after figuring out what their questions are and after a few years of maturing. St. Johns also offers a program that may appeal to a unique type of student. Students take few tests; grades are not highly emphasized; and competition with other students is not part of the culture—students work together.

Do Your Homework: Visit the College

Each school strongly recommends that prospective students do careful homework as they choose which college they would like to attend. Students should visit the colleges, talk to students and

professors, and even sit in on classes. Dr. Atwood writes, “Don’t trust all the glitzy brochures or slick advertisements. College recruiters, even Christian ones, have become as notorious as used car salesmen. Too many students and families rely on what others say or think rather than doing their own careful study.” Rosemary Harty urges that students come for “an overnight visit, and a visit to a seminar and other classes. That way, prospective students can talk with faculty members and current students.”

Each School Is Unique

We have a brief survey here of only five colleges, each with some commonalities, but each with a very different vision. At Patrick Henry, the vision is “to train young people who, by God’s grace, will lead the nation and shape the culture.” Students are trained to get involved in the culture—government, policy-making, and education. At Gutenberg, the goal is to prepare students “to engage our culture and to be personally prepared to face the difficult questions that life throws our way without seeking trite, proof-texted simplistic answers. We are truly like L’Abri, except a L’Abri that has students for four years rather than two weeks or three months.” New St. Andrews has a focus on community interaction and church involvement. Students are encouraged to board with Christian families or share apartments together, and student service and accountability “strengthen their Christian experience and spiritual growth in a way that cannot occur in a cloistered, age-segregated campus setting.” At St. Johns, the vision has little to do with job skills and employability but rather “the ability to think critically, to write and speak clearly, to be prepared to assume the responsibilities of an educated citizen in a democracy.” Hillsdale is more traditional with their vision: “A place where excellence is expected ... where students are highly sought after; truth is pursued and a traditional liberal arts education is still a reality.”

Pray and Do Your Best

Mr. Whalen has some great closing advice. He writes, “Applying to college is important, but not nearly so important as what happens in college. Select the right school or schools, pray, do your best on the application, then commit yourself to four years of incredible intellectual, moral and even spiritual formation. This four-year span is like no other. It will remain a great period, remembered with delight and wonder, for the rest of your life.”

Each of our children is being prepared for a unique purpose, so the search for the appropriate place for college is one that requires prayer and plenty of homework. I hope that our brief peek at these five institutions gives you hope for the possibilities that are available. May God grant that we might someday be able to look back with our children on their college experiences and say, as Mr. Whalen did, that it was filled with delight and wonder.

Biographical Information

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