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STATE SCHOOL? CHRISTIAN COLLEGE? NAVIGATING THE MANY CHOICES

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Economists point out what every grocery shopper already knows—that the cost of many products and services continues to increase. There are several broad categories where expenses are increasing much more rapidly than the Consumer Price Index. One of these is the cost of a college education.¹ Given the sticker shock of college, parents and students are asking if the return on investment justifies the expense. Is it worth it? What does one get from a college education? Even further, what are we trying to get? What is the purpose of a college education?

In our instant-communication, always-connected, present-tense culture, often we don't take sufficient time to reflect deeply on such questions. Your typical American is busy with life, activity, noise, and commotion, and thus may not stop to wrestle through the long-term ramifications of their decisions. When facing a significant decision, I find it is helpful to consider the various consequences and implications of the upcoming decision and to ask, "So that?" repeatedly as I try to discern my motives, goals, and desires. That is, to ask questions beyond the initial wave of answers and to keep asking until I discern the ultimate direction.

Our children are exceedingly precious to each of us, and as they move closer to the end of high school, questions about their post-high school training and education often occupy a large amount of time and thought. It is challenging enough to guide a child through his early education, middle grades, and high school years. And then

students and parents face an overwhelming number of alternatives and options for the post-high school path.

How does one wrestle through such decisions? To begin, it is beneficial to articulate the purpose of higher education. Understand that secular philosophies and Christian philosophies differ markedly on the purpose of a college education. For the present-day secular mind, college is invariably about preparing for one's future job. Certainly it is laudable to want to be well prepared for the future. Here is a point, though, where one gains further clarification by asking the "so that" questions. For example, it is desirable to be well prepared for one's future job *so that*...certainly so that one will be able to perform that role well. Perform the role well *so that*...what? To gain recognition? So that one will receive more compensation? So that society will function well? Again, in and of themselves, these goals have positive aspects, but is job satisfaction really the highest goal? Is a well-functioning culture the highest good? It is valuable to state out loud what your philosophy of education is. Then you will know what you are looking for, and if your college choices satisfy those criteria.

For the Christian, a primary purpose of education is to understand God and His world from His perspective (as best we are humanly able), so that we are equipped to glorify Him by loving Him and serving Him. God calls His people to serve Him in a marvelous multitude of callings—from the most humble to the grandest. Whatever our calling, we want to be equipped to serve with excellence and joy.

Does kingdom service require a college education? In many fields, no; in many other fields, yes. As parents shepherd their children through questions about the possibility of attending college, there should be thoughtful discussions about what a calling is and how to discern God's calling in one's life. Most seventeen- to nineteen-year-olds do not know with certainty the role to which God is calling them. College provides an opportunity to learn more about the world and about oneself. This is a period when many people wrestle with the big life questions of who am I, where do I come from, and what is my purpose in life?

Each of our children is different, and there is no "one size fits all" institution. So how are high school students and parents to go about the process of selecting the college that is the best fit? According to the US Department of Education, there are more than four thousand colleges and universities in the United States, almost three thousand of which grant bachelor's degrees.² This is an enormous selection from which to choose! (Note: given the number of colleges, there are several able to meet the particular needs of your student.) Although the majority of colleges are secular institutions, a student who is considering Christian colleges still has a very large array from which to choose. Religion had a significant role in the university curriculum from the founding years

until into the nineteenth century, when other influences increased. Desiring higher education that includes the spiritual part of our being is not new.

What would be some reasons to consider Christian colleges along with or instead of secular ones? Scripture informs parents that they are responsible for the nurture and training of their children, and that this training is to familiarize them with God and His ways. While some parents feel comfortable with hands-on educational training in the early years, most do not feel equipped to teach their own children at the post-high school level. Colleges offer professors who have devoted their professional careers to expertise in a particular discipline. When a professor is integrating into the subject matter God's perspective—whether in humanities, history, art, math, music, or any other area—college students are gaining a fuller understanding of God and His works. Conversely, when God is not made a part of the curriculum in each of the various fields, professors are implicitly teaching that God either does not exist or does not have any relevance to that subject. Hundreds of years ago, Martin Luther cautioned Christian parents not to turn their offspring over to the pagan thinkers of the day when he advised parents not to send their children where the Holy Scriptures are not supreme.³

For Christian families who desire a strong academic setting thoroughly penetrated by biblical thought, there are still Christian colleges that faithfully execute that mission. There are schools that are committed to offering both strong academics and biblical perspective. They work to train young people mentally as well as spiritually. We are called to love God with all of our mind as well as all of our heart; those are integrated rather than mutually exclusive goals. As an honest warning: Christian colleges are filled with sinful people and are not perfect. Yet even the manner in which good Christian colleges deal with the difficult issues of sinful people honors God; the process teaches the students how to live authentically. A wise high school guidance counselor once said that if we are serious about our faith, we should consider a college that takes our faith seriously.⁴

If you decide your student will pursue college, perhaps even a Christian college, what are the next steps, given the hundreds of possibilities?

PRAY FOR YOUR STUDENT

Winnowing through the multitude of options is a huge undertaking, and thus it is important for Christians to pray. Ask God to give you wisdom as you and your son or daughter face these big decisions. God promises that He will guide us as we seek Him and His will. Followers of Jesus will desire to make decisions about college from a biblical perspective, which is radically different from, and countercultural to, the general voices around us; we need God's guidance.

BE DELIBERATE

In conversation with your son or daughter, consider “what matters” and “what *really* matters.” It is so easy to get caught up in the details of the process that it is helpful to keep the big son or daughter really want out of college? What do you want for your child? How will the college impact and transform your student? People and events around us shape us, so where we place ourselves for college does affect and imprint us. Classroom instruction is a powerful influencer, but so are nonclassroom experiences.

ACADEMIC MAJOR

If your student already knows what area of study he or she will major in, it is wise to seek colleges that have a strong program in that field. For the vast majority of students entering college, however, college is the time to learn about and try out various options to discern better what their calling is. High school students may not have the opportunity to find that philosophy or audiology or engineering really appeals to them. Getting a broad liberal arts core contributes to a rich life experience and expands learning. Colleges report that students commonly change majors three times before graduating,⁵ so there may be wisdom to sampling coursework before finalizing a major.

FACULTY

Ask questions of and about the faculty. These are the adults positioned to have a significant impact on your son or daughter. Are classes taught by professors or by graduate students? What percentage of teaching faculty has earned doctorates? What level of interaction do professors have with students? Do they know students by name? What are the standards for choosing faculty members? Are there theological expectations for faculty members? Are faculty members known in their academic field? One of our son’s professors prayed through his class roster every day. Can you imagine how blessed we were to know that this man was sharing in the training of our son?

COLLEGE COMMUNITY

God created us to be in community and the influence of the community we join is powerful. Lifelong friendships are formed during the college years, and it is important to consider the college community dynamics. What level of interaction is there among students? What kind of expectations and rules are there? When visiting, does your

student feel comfortable, safe, and welcomed? A residential college experience is vastly different from a commuter college or online coursework.

Housing Options

Living options contribute to the community and culture of a college campus. Do most students live on campus, or are most commuters? How are housing decisions made? What are the alternatives if the initial housing assignment is not working for your student? What level of adult supervision is provided?

Size

Colleges vary from less than one hundred students to multiple thousands. What is the size of the student body? What are the sizes of the classes? While we may be acquainted with several hundred people, our close relationships comprise a much smaller number. Wonderful friendships are available even on the smallest campuses.

Athletics

How important are interscholastic or intramural athletic opportunities to your student? Is this an avenue your son or daughter hopes to pursue professionally after college?

Extracurricular Opportunities

Does this college offer the fine arts or extracurricular activities your son or daughter is seeking? Are there various opportunities to try some new things or to pursue current passions? Are there service opportunities?

COST

Families considering Christian colleges are investigating schools that are not funded by public revenue. Each generation experiences shock at the cost of college, and while the cost may appear significantly higher than other options at first glance, there are ways to decrease those costs through financial assistance packages, scholarships, and grants. Amazingly, if we have sought God's direction and believe He is guiding us to this particular Christian college, He has ways to provide. We are called to be wise stewards and "count the cost." But I encourage you not to eliminate a school right off because of

cost. Follow the process to the end, and if the Lord closes the door, you will know with certainty that school was not the one. Surprisingly, you may find He provides a way.

VISIT THE CAMPUSES

Where is the college located? Is this a distance that is manageable? When your son or daughter is considering various colleges, it is of the utmost importance to visit the campuses of the top contenders. More than merely meeting with college admissions staff, there is tremendous benefit to sitting in on classes, spending the night in the dormitories, and eating in the college dining facilities. Yes, this is an additional expense and takes time, but when considering the long-term impact of the college choice, this is an essential step. In the long run, actually visiting a campus can save a great deal of grief.

Congratulations on being at the point of launching your offspring to the next stage of preparation. This is what you've been working toward for many years. So begin with prayer and trust that you will be able, with God's help, to navigate the process successfully. And when you are ready to drop your child at college, a final word: bring a box of tissues—a big one.

Maren Halvorson (EdD, Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, FL) and her husband are parents of four grown sons, each of whom graduated from a Christian college before attending graduate schools. She taught in Christian schools and served as head of school in a K–12 Christian school in Charlotte, North Carolina, for more than twenty-five years. Currently she consults with schools.

NOTES

- 1 "Tuition and Fee and Room and Board Charges over Time," College Board, <http://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/tuition-and-fee-and-room-and-board-charges-over-time>.
- 2 "Fast Facts," National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>.
- 3 "To the Christian Nobility (1520)" in *Luther's Works, American Edition (AE)*, ed. James Atkinson and Helmut T. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 1966), 44:207.
- 4 Heather Mills (guidance counselor, Covenant Day School, Charlotte, NC), in conversation with the author, September 2014.
- 5 "Major Exploration," University of La Verne, <http://sites.laverne.edu/careers/what-can-i-do-with-my-major/>.