

College Choice

Caring Christians Making Careless Decisions

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I've been blessed with a unique vantage point from which to view nearly every secret about university life and administration. I'm a third generation college president who has served in the corner office for twenty-two years. In fact, if you stop by my office, you'll see the desk where I work was my grandfather's desk when he was a president back in the 1940s.

So when it comes to understanding universities, and especially how we go about persuading high school students to attend our institutions, I know the process inside-and-out. As they say, I know how the sausage is made – and sometimes it is not pretty.

During the last decade, the competition for students has convinced some very smart Christians to make dumb college decisions. They are fooled by name-brand marketing campaigns, as well as the glamor of campus amenities and prestige rankings. Or, too often, Christian families buy the assumption that any school will do, as long as you attend a good bible study near by.

I'm deeply concerned that smart Christian families are being swayed to follow culture's value of higher education – ***Size, Sports, Status, and Sizzle*** – rather than the Godly criteria that would help students find the school that best matches their needs.

As someone who knows the industry of higher education from the inside, I often share with students and families a fresh perspective to consider as they work through this critical decision of college choice.

I believe many families are making one of the most important decisions of their life based on inappropriate criteria. And if for no other reason than the investment of time and money (not to mention, how it will shape nearly every other outcome of a graduate's life) families need to be equipped with the right standards to help them choose the school that fits them best. The typical criteria of college selection are highly inadequate for making a well-informed decision:

- A. Most families reference US News rankings, but don't realize those scores are skewed in favor of the type institutions the editors attended.
- B. All students study the quality of academic programs, but forget to examine as carefully the character of the individual doing the teaching.
- C. Some parents urge students to consider enrolling where they attended a quarter-century ago, but don't realize that while the university campus may look the same on the outside, the worldview in the classroom has dramatically shifted.
- D. Too many students make their decision (research tells us) within seven minutes after they get out of the car for a campus tour, thus, deciding on the appearance of the campus.
- E. Many students desire to attend college with high school friends, not realizing that University life will be so dramatically different that a whole new crop of friends are more likely to become their focus.
- F. Often families base this decision on money. And while that is an important factor, this critical juncture of life is too important to be guided only by the prospect of saving money. At the same time, higher tuition does not assure quality.

I'd recommend that prospective students and families move beyond these misleading criteria, and probe the schools under consideration by asking two key questions that will reveal the mission and ethos of any university:

(1) Are these people I would want to be like?

Education is not indoctrination so universities don't turn out cookie-cutter students – but they do tend to mostly come out flavored the same. During the most impressionable phase of life, many years immersed in the culture of a campus will frame the worldview of students, and will shape their path and priorities.

Great buildings and pretty flowers may be featured on the prospective student campus tour, but the meaningful evaluation of the campus comes in asking the question, “are these people I would want to be like?” For good or for bad, you will tend to become like the people of that campus because the warp-and-woof of the educational process is the defining – and then refining – that occurs in the interaction between faculty and students.

Reading the mission statement of a university won't tell you much about the place because these pronouncements all sound high and lofty. But understanding the people will tell you everything. A school's embraced mission is not revealed in a document, but in how that mission is lived out as faculty teach students, coaches respond under pressure, and how students are guided to set their priorities.

At every university you will find some wonderful people who are worthy role models. But in American higher education today, they have become a minority while the collectively skewed values of the dominating majority have imposed an unhealthy culture on most campuses. Consider these trends of deteriorating values across higher education as illustrated in these statistics from the revealing book: “The Five Year Party” by Craig Brandon.

- In 1961 university students spent 24 hours studying each week.
Today, studying has dropped to 8 hours weekly.

- The cost of college athletics has sky-rocked and the tuition hikes carry many of those additional costs. Duke spends \$25,00 for each member of the golf team (plus scholarships), and the average salary of an SEC softball coach is now over \$350,000.
- Senior professors in Ivy League universities now take sabbaticals every third year rather than every seventh. Last year, 20 of Harvard's 48 history professors were on leave.
- Binge drinking dominates the culture of most universities where 44% of students are classified as binge drinkers. Few Friday classes are offered because the campus party starts Thursday evening.
- The majority of students take five and a-half to six years to complete their four-year curriculum.
- "Professors strike an implicit bargain with their students: we will give you light workloads and inflated grades so long as you leave us alone to do our research." The Economist
- Only 10% of students say they are "totally engaged" in the educational process, while 40% report being "totally disengaged."

At the schools you are considering, talk to the faculty, staff, and students. Probe until you understand their priorities, values, and aspirations – you'll tend to become like them, so use them as a mirror to see how you fit.

(2) What does the university require of every student?

The fall semester after the 9/11 attacks the University of North Carolina implemented a significant academic policy – they required all freshmen to study the Quran.

I believe that to understand our world, and to share the message of Christ's love, we must understand other religions, so I agree we all need a better understanding of Islam.

(Although I feel assured required reading of the Bible is never likely to be recommended by the UNC faculty.)

As a university insider, when I saw that announcement my immediate question was, "how many committee meetings it did it take to get that passed?" I know the process of a campus, and I assure you it required layers of meetings to make this decision.

Because university students are very busy – every academic major, sport, club, and art, has many requirements – the institution, as a whole, can require only a limited number of activities of all students. So what a university requires of all students reveals what they value most. And knowing what they require of every student – what they value – will be the most accurate description of the school.

At Belhaven we have four requirements of all students – and these reveal what we value most for our students.

- A. **We value gifts.** We require a freshman course called Mosaic, which is designed to help students identify their gifts, and understand how to best use their gifts while studying at Belhaven and as a life-long pattern. We believe God has uniquely gifted every student, and our responsibility as educators is to help them discover those gifts, and build on their strengths.

I believe one of the problems of education is that we spend too much energy trying to make up for the weaknesses of our students rather than building on our strengths. God didn't give us gifts for them to be minimized. So at Belhaven we get

every freshmen started by taking the time and resources to help them identify and understanding their gifts and develop a pattern of life that will utilize their strengths.

- B. **We value a biblical worldview.** We require a one-of-a-kind general core curriculum that helps students understand how big ideas and trends have developed through the ages, and how our Christian worldview stands distinctive. Our “Worldview Curriculum” is built around a two-year history course covering the full span of civilization. Synched with this history course are survey courses in literature, philosophy, art/music appreciation, and Christian thought. Through this curriculum students can see how the pieces of big ideas fit together as worldviews have progressed through the centuries.

At a practical level, in the same weeks our students study the history of the Renaissance, they also read the philosophers and literature of that period, study the art and music of the Renaissance, and understand how Christian theology and the Church developed during this time. This Worldview curriculum serves as the foundation of all our academic programs, and further, we assure that worldview perspectives are built into every academic major at Belhaven.

- C. **We value worship.** We require all students to attend chapel once a week because we believe that all teaching of truth must be built on a foundation of God's Truth. The purpose of Chapel is to bring together the entire campus in a shared spiritually enriching hour that allows us collectively to be challenged to explore the depths of God’s Truth and love.

In the same way we require students to study the truth of physical science, the arts, and literature, there is no contradiction in requiring students to study God's Truth. As the study of chemistry cannot be completed from a textbook alone, the study of God's Truth also needs a "laboratory" for experiencing and understanding,

for it is not enough to study the Bible without having exposure to the worship of God, and an opportunity to understand the relationship offered to us in Christ.

D. **We value family.** Belhaven is one of only two schools in America that require a course in marriage and family for graduation. “Kingdom Life and Work” is a course that examines practical biblical teaching to help students balance their career with responsibilities at home.

No matter how successful our graduates may become in their profession, they won't be happy without the proper balance of a happy home life. If our graduates are to be prepared for the breadth of God's calling in their life as women and men of faith, they must value their families more than they do their paycheck.

By examining what we require of all students, you can clearly understand the heart of Belhaven University – we value gifts, a biblical worldview, worship, and family.

Take that same question, “what do you require of all students,” to any institution, and you'll understand what they value. And if they don't have any requirements for all students, that too, speaks volumes about the emptiness of their institutional core.

The Bottom Line

I have awarded over 15,000 diplomas during my years as a University president. And every one of those students has a story – and every story is unique. I can't guarantee how students will come out, because, after all, the real test of a University's effectiveness isn't understood until they return for their 50-year reunion when we see how they have stood up to the tests of life.

But I do know some research-based facts that drive home the immensity of the decision families are making about which university to attend:

- Of the Christian high school students who choose a public institution, at the end of their college career, 52% will no longer identify themselves as born-again or will have attended any religious service in the prior twelve months.

- The more conservative a student's background, the larger the decline in religious commitment if the student attends a non-Christian college.
- Three-fourths of university students say they are "searching for purpose/meaning in life" and an equal number expect their school to help them develop emotionally and spiritually.
- Students almost always reflect the values of the faculty of the school they attend.

Those are the facts. I believe Christian families need to weigh those realities before making their decision about which school to attend.

Our Purposeful Stewardship of Belhaven's Mission

As I've watched the oil leak tragedy in the Gulf unfold, I am convinced that the long-term negative impact of this oil crisis in the Gulf is not going to be the oil that was spilled – but its the chemical dilutants that have been added to our waters, that could have a toxic impact far beyond the damage from the oil.

Scientists are now predicting that when an oil mess is diluted like this, it enables the most dangerous portions of the oil to get imbedded in the environment for a very long time.

That is analogous to what has happened to many universities who were founded on Christian ideals. Their waters were once clear and pristine. But when they got attacked for their faith and the waters got polluted, instead of just cleaning up the mess, they started to dilute their message so that the attacks would be more tolerable and easier to manage.

And in diluting to deal with the pollution, rather than cleaning up and protecting what they treasure, the damage from the attackers became imbedded and changed their environment forever.

From Harvard and Yale a century ago, to a host of modern examples, schools have slowly diluted their Christian worldview in order to counter attacks to their biblical message. Or, a handful of fundamentalist schools have simply created their own waters that are cut off from the rest of the environment, so that their self-made lake can be kept artificially clean.

At Belhaven University, God has allowed us to serve in the world, but not be of the world – understanding and reaching the culture, without running from it. And we have done so only because we have been careful stewards of teaching an unchanging biblical worldview.

We have a diverse student body from a variety of Church backgrounds, and some with no spiritual foundation at all. Our greatest strength as a University is found in majoring in the majors of faith:

- The uniqueness of Christ as the only way to the Father
- The justification by faith alone
- The authority and inerrancy of scripture
- The transforming power of the Holy Spirit
- The reality of eternal life to come.

Like the pillars beside our fountain that symbolize Belhaven University, these timeless pillars of faith are the unmovable center of our campus.

But coupled with this, we also are committed to a spirit of Christian grace that respects varying priorities within the array of evangelical thought and worship expression. So while being deeply committed to the majors of faith, we are also committed to a culture of grace when it comes to welcoming the breadth of God's people when there are differences among us in the minors of the Christian life.

Like the fountain next to our pillars, we have a spirit of grace that allows the water to move freely – within pre-set limits – so that students can discover the fullness of the Christian life, ask the hard questions of faith, and learn to appreciate those who come out of different traditions of the evangelical Church.

In what matters most in faith, we don't budge – in what diversity of expression we are accepting. Most Christian schools cannot do this, and Belhaven's unique outlook is a mission to be cherished. And this is a mission that allows us to cherish every student.

Because of this stewardship of an unchanging biblical worldview and our balance to include the breadth of God's people, Belhaven University is a treasure among Christian higher education.

- We teach our students that God's Truth is absolute.
- We help them understand that the beliefs by which they live matter.
- We enable students to see God's sovereignty in every arena of life.
- We ground every aspect of our curriculum and campus activity in biblical principles.

That is Christ-centered higher education at it's finest.

We are not a nominal Christian university with a wholesome campus lifestyle, whose only integration of faith in the classroom or on the athletic field is to have a short prayer at the beginning of each session, and then teach from the mainstream of secular thought.

Instead, everything we do has a depth of biblical understanding and activity that prepares our students with a Christ-centered worldview that will enable them to stand up to the tests of life, rather than flounder in their faith as soon as they independently confront the culture.

There is no calling more important, no asset of this University to be more highly cherished, and no greater responsibility to hold, than to teach an unwavering biblical worldview and to be purposeful stewards of that mission.

The Best Question I've Ever Been Asked

When prospective students are considering Belhaven University, we tell them exactly who we are and where we stand. If other institutions were as forthcoming, I believe we wouldn't have so many smart Christians making dumb decisions, because they would understand exactly what they are getting into when they select a university.

As I visit with prospective students, at the end of the conversation I usually say to them, "If God leads you to Belhaven University, we'd love to work with you." Although I'm quick to add, "but if God doesn't want you here, don't you dare come here. All that matters is that you are exactly where God wants you to be."

I can say that confidently because we are convinced that God has handpicked every student attending Belhaven University. And because they are a gift to us from God, we are purposeful stewards of every single one of them.

Through the years, I've done scores of Q&A sessions with prospective and current student groups, and have heard about every question you could imagine – to the point I can nearly always anticipate the questions. But last fall I hosted the group of student Resident Assistants for breakfast as I do every year. And after sharing some of the plans for the year, I gave them an opportunity to ask questions about anything they wanted to talk about.

That morning I had a question I've never been asked – but I think it is the most important question students are most wanting answered by the university to which they entrust their future. The question wasn't the normal inquiry about buildings, programs, costs, procedures, parking or food service – it was simply, "Do you love us?"

Yes, we really do love our students, and I see that love lived out in thousands of ways across our campus. To genuinely love our students takes courage from the faculty and staff because loving students through the growth process of these years will often be a messy and jagged line of progress. But it is just the way Jesus taught that ministry should be.

Often I pray for prospective students and their families as they are working through this difficult college choice decision because it is such a complex and weighty decision. To make it worse, they are too often given misleading information and base their decision on the wrong criteria.

I don't pray that all prospective students will all come to Belhaven – we don't have room for all of them. Rather, I pray that each one will clearly understand God's choice for his or her life, because the cost of making the wrong choice is far too high.