

COLLEGE TRANSITION INITIATIVE

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FINISHING STRONG: ADVICE FOR PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

By Derek Melleby

Introduction

We try to finish strong in almost every area of life. Runners sprint toward the finish line. Sports' teams make a final push to make the playoffs. Candidates deliver their best speeches right before Election Day. Retirees talk about moving from success to significance. And then there is high school. Many students coast through their final year. Limping toward the finish line has become the norm. There's even a word for it: "Senioritis." With 11 years of schooling behind them, some students develop an allergic reaction to institutions of education.

It might be easy for parents to adapt a similar posture and coast through the final year of parenting a high-schooler. Raising teens is hard work. While most students are ready for high school to be over, many parents might be just as ready for their kids to move on. It's understandable. But that attitude could cause parents to miss a remarkable opportunity to engage their teens in more meaningful conversations. And teens need it.

According to William Damon of Stanford University, only 20 percent of teens "express a clear vision of where they want to go, what they want to accomplish and why." Many students don't seem to know why or if they want to go to college, what they want to study or what kind of career they want to pursue. I recently heard one student put it like this: "Going to college would be a waste of my time and my parent's money. I have no idea what I want to do after high school."

It's easy to be frustrated by a young person's apathy and lack of vision for the future, but have we done enough to equip teens with a better vision for how to make the most of their senior year? In his eye-opening book, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*,



***We may urge our
teens to avoid
getting complacent
during their
last years of
high school, but
finishing strong
as a parent while
they're still under
our roofs is just as
important.***



sociologist Timothy Clydesdale suggests: "More can be done to encourage those teens who do want to examine the purpose or direction of their lives by engaging them at deeper levels before the first year out of high school." As your teens get ready to transition to their senior year, here is a "3-D vision" to keep in front of them.

A 3-D Vision for Students

Seniors should develop their minds to the glory of God. Jesus said that we are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind. The apostle Paul challenged Christians to take every thought captive and make those thoughts obedient to Christ. Loving God with our minds involves taking academics and learning seriously. We honor God by using the mind He has graciously given us.

Theologian Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. puts it like this: "One way to love God is to know and love God's work. Learning is therefore a spiritual calling: properly done, it attaches us to God. In addition, the learned person has, so to speak, more to be Christian with."

Developing our minds for Christ is not just about doing well in school. It is about growing in wisdom to better serve our neighbors. The Southern novelist Walker Percey warns that "it is possible to get all A's but flunk life." Remind soon-to-be seniors that an education is for service in God's Kingdom. Invite

teens to receive their senior year of learning as a gift to grow more knowledgeable and wise about God's world.

Seniors should be intentional about discovering their gifts and talents. Students are looking for a story to give direction and shape to their lives. Many teens have gotten pretty good at going through the motions. They've learned to play their part in the "world's story." Most of their lives have been focused on trying to get good grades, get into a good college and hopefully, someday, get a good job. But very few have thought about how the gifts and talents they've been given could be used in God's story.

The beauty of the biblical story is that God gives each of us a role to play within His story and then he gives us gifts to play our role well. Be sure to tell your teen that his or her senior year should be about thinking more deeply about their passions and talents. Ask them good, open ended questions about what they care about and about

what they think their role in God's story might be. Listen intently for opportunities to point them in the direction of helpful resources or potential mentors from your church.

If your son or daughter is considering a certain career path, find a Christian in that field who can talk to him or her about what it looks like to serve Christ in a specific vocation. Helping teens discover their

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gifts and pointing them in the direction of useful resources goes a long way in helping them make plans for life after high school.

Seniors should take time to discern their calling and purpose. Too often we think about “calling” as something reserved for pastors or missionaries. The fact is that all of God’s people are called to serve Him wherever He places them. Do we think about life after high school as a calling? We need to ask seniors to consider God’s call when planning for the future. Is God calling them to go to college, to work, or to military service? And, if so, students need to be prepared.

It’s not always easy to discern our callings in life. To hear God’s voice more clearly, we need each other. As our teens enter their senior year of high school and plan for the future, be sure to remind them that they are not alone.

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PHONE: (717) 361-8429 EMAIL: DMELLEBY@CPYU.ORG

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The College of New Jersey***

Editor’s note: This article originally appeared in the May 2012 issue of *Living with Teenagers: A Christian Parenting Magazine*.

Derek Melleby is the Director of CPYU’s College Transition Initiative and author of *Make College Count: A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning* (Baker Books).

