

COLLEGE TRANSITION INITIATIVE

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HOW TO CHOOSE A COLLEGE: PRAY, PREPARE, PURSUE

By Matthew J. Reitnour

I entered the field of college admission at a small, private, Christian institution in Western New York during the fall of 2001.

I didn't grow up dreaming of becoming an admission counselor (who does?) but shortly after starting my new job, I realized that the work suited my interests and abilities. Roughly a decade later I made the transition to college counseling at a private, college preparatory school, where I regularly draw upon my experiences in college admission. Though there are differences between my past and current positions, one commonality is that they both provide opportunities to serve and guide students and parents in a process that can be agonizing, exciting, overwhelming and critically important all at the same time. That process is, of course, the college search.

Navigating the college search can be challenging. For starters, there are a lot of schools out there! If you lump all the post-secondary institutions in the United States together you wind up with a figure in excess of 4,000. Granted, this number can be broken down into more manageable chunks based on institution type (universities, liberal arts colleges, trade schools, Bible colleges, etc.), but the bottom line is that you're still left with a veritable cacophony of choices. How are high school students and their parents to decide among all of these options?



We like to have formulas for things; guarantees that we'll succeed if we just do things the right way. Unfortunately, life doesn't work like that, and neither does the college search. My hope is to challenge you to think deeply and Christianly about how to choose a college.

There are lots of basic questions that students are encouraged to ask as they attempt to narrow down the list of prospective colleges. How far away from home is it? Do they have the major(s) I'm interested in? How much will it cost? (A question typically asked more frequently by parents!) What do students at College XYZ do for fun? What's the student-to-faculty ratio? What's the girl-to-guy ratio? The list goes on and on...

These are not bad questions. In fact, they can be quite helpful when it comes to determining the general nature of an institution, as well as the potential level of compatibility with a particular student. I encourage students to ask these kinds of questions when they're inquiring of a college, but I also believe it's important to ponder a couple of philosophically fundamental questions as well, ones that seemingly receive little attention in our information-obsessed culture.

The first of these questions is this: ***Why are you going to college?*** I haven't conducted any empirical research on this, but my experiences and anecdotal evidence tell me that most students respond with something like this: "So I can get a good job when I graduate." Surely, this is a reasonable response; students

should expect to be adequately prepared to seek gainful employment after spending four (sometimes five or six) years at an institution of higher education. But should that be the primary purpose of a college education? Our culture seems to think so, and it shows in the burgeoning growth of "professional" programs at colleges and universities. I would posit, however, that while technical training for a job

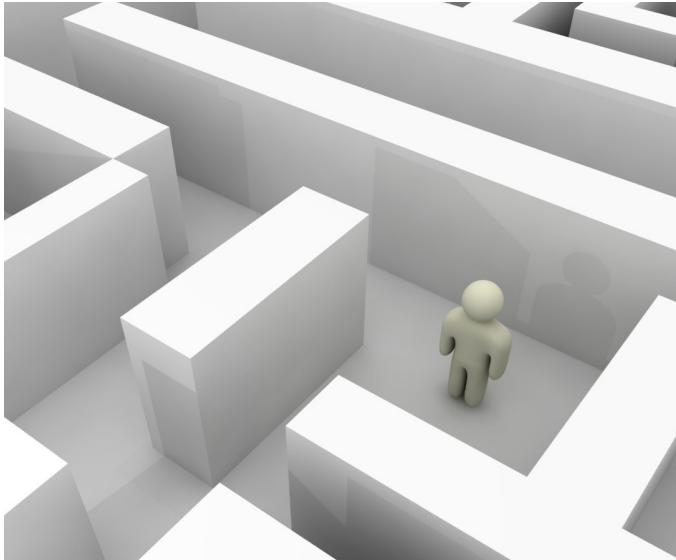
is a valuable component of a college education, it need not be one's sole purpose for attending a particular institution.

My contention is that the college experience should be about holistic development, which includes much more than just job training. Whether through intentional or unintentional means, colleges and universities

teach intellectual presuppositions, ways of relating to one another in community (or lack thereof), and "answers" to questions about ultimate reality. The years students spend in college (for traditional age students that would be 18 to the early-mid 20s) are incredibly formative, and the experiences they have during this time make a tremendous impact on *who* they will become, not just *what* they will do for a living. What gets learned in the classroom, the extracurricular activities students choose

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to engage in, and the fellow students, faculty and staff they associate with all affect their maturation from adolescence into adulthood. Because of this, my encouragement to students is to seek a college that will positively nurture the entirety of their being, not just their occupational aspirations.

The second question that should be asked, and it relates to the first, is this: ***What makes a college education a good one?*** The college search has been indelibly influenced by our consumeristic culture; in essence, we “shop” for the best college out there, consulting all sorts of pundits, who may or may not know anything more than a bunch of stats and facts, in an attempt to get a “good education.” But we rarely stop to define what a “good education” actually looks like. If you learn how to design indestructible skyscrapers, but have your faith squelched in the process, is that *good*? If you develop the ability to paint like Picasso or sing like Pavarotti,

but you never learn how to contribute to your community, is that *good*? Somewhere along the line, it seems to me, we’ve traded a full, vibrant understanding of what it means to be good, for a watered-down, materialistic version that is ultimately vacuous.

This is not to say that there is no goodness left in higher education. Surely, there is. There are a number of Christian colleges that provide a holistic education that is rooted in biblical truth, and in the secular realm there are faculty and students who represent the Christian voice, even within the pluralistic, postmodern context. The challenge for the prospective student engaged in the college search is to ascertain where, within this continuum, he/she should endeavor to fulfill the specific aspect of calling (i.e., the college experience) that God has placed upon his/her life. At the risk of sounding trite, let me offer three small words (and a brief explanation for each) to students entering into the process:



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- **Pray**—God is not a genie and I wouldn't expect a "bolt of lightning" answer to your prayers about college, but if you're serious about seeking His will for your search, commit to talking it through with Him.
- **Prepare**—Praying about the search doesn't exempt you from doing the necessary legwork. Do your research. Ask questions like those mentioned above. Talk to admission reps, alums, current students and other people you respect. And for goodness sake, be sure to visit the colleges you're considering!
- **Pursue**—Once you've made a decision, pursue it with passion. As a rule of thumb, it's generally considered unwise to enter

into anything half-heartedly. Know what you're getting into, fully engage in the process of being a holistic learner, and be open to what God will do in your life.

We like to have formulas for things; guarantees that we'll succeed if we just do things the right way. Unfortunately, life doesn't work like that, and neither does the college search. There are no pat answers to these questions, and each person will experience the college search (and the college experience) differently. My hope, however, is that the insights offered above will challenge you to think deeply and Christianly about how to choose a college.



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

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Matthew J. Reitnour is the Director of College Counseling at Wesleyan Christian Academy in High Point, NC and a member of the Board of Directors for the North American Coalition for Christian Admission Professionals (NACCAP). Previously, Matt served as the Director of Admission at Houghton College, located in Houghton, NY. He can be reached via email at mreitnour@wesed.org.