

MINISTERING  
to the  
SECULAR STUDENT  
in a  
CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

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## MINISTERING TO THE SECULAR STUDENT IN A CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

### Introduction

Within the world of Christian academia there are a number of active organizations to discover and nurture the Christian students attending secular colleges and universities, e.g. "Campus Crusade for Christ" and "InterVarsity Fellowship". This paper will suggest a method to identify the secular student who chooses to attend a Christian college (or university) to discuss some of the reasons this student chooses to attend a Christian college and to suggest avenues through which concerned Christian institutions, through concerted efforts of committed faculty, staff and students, can minister to the needs of these often neglected students.

### Identifying the "secular student"

**(Note: It is imperative that one understands the intent of the following categorization. It is not to establish a method of "judgment" for each student of group of students, nor is it intended to suggest that everyone make a list of their students using these categories. Rather, it is to enhance our understanding of all students. Christian educators must realize the varied nature of the student population, to be able to recognize the needs of students with different "worldviews" and to minister to each student accordingly).**

In an attempt to clarify the use of the word "secular" throughout this paper (and to avoid any connotations of "Dualism"), reference will be made to three categories of Christian **values**, along with three levels **student mindset**, and each will be designated as follows:

- 1) The first category is the student's religious affiliation. A student professing to be a Christian of the institution's particular faith, regardless of whether the commitment is genuine or superficial, is identified by the number "1". Any other student professing to be Christian is given the number "2". A student who doesn't profess Christianity at all is designated by the number "3".
- 2) The Second category has to do with the student's personal relationship with God

(which only God can know for certain). A student who appears to have a "strong and growing" relationship is assigned the number "1". And the student we can only assume has a "fair and holding" relationship is given the number "2". The student who, from all appearances, has a "weak or absent" relationship is designated by the number "3".

3) The third category involves the student's attitude to the institution's standards of behavior or "mores". The student who has or would suggest a higher level of standards is assigned the number "1", while the student who is essentially comfortable with the standards as they are given the number "2". Any student who feels the institution's mores exceed his or her personal "comfort level", and is either inwardly bothered or openly resists the imposition of such standards of behavior is identified by the number "3".

The following table depicts the various categories in an abbreviated form:

THE SECULAR PROFILE OF A STUDENT  
VALUES

S T U D E N T  M I N D S E T		RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION (1,2,3)	PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD (1,2,3)	STANDARDS OF BEHAVIOR (1,2,3)
	L E V E L O N E	"1" Christian (same denomination as institution)	"1" "Appears" to be Strong and Growing	"1" Higher than Institution
	L E V E L T W O	"2" Christian (Diff. Denomination than institution)	"2" "Assumed" to be Fair and Holding	"2" Similar to Institution
L E V E L T H R E E	"3" Non-Christian	"3" "Appears" to be Weak or Absent	"3" Lower than Institution	

Select one number from each column to obtain a Composite Profile.

**Some observation regarding this table**

First: In general, from the standpoint of the institution, the conservative values are in LEVEL ONE. Second: In general, a student with a profile from either LEVEL ONE

or LEVEL TWO or any combination of LEVEL ONE or LEVEL TWO will be unlikely to pose discipline problems. Third: A student whose profile involves LEVEL THREE is not necessarily a discipline problem but is often a student who needs special attention in the area of ministry, Fourth: The **Personal Relationship with God** (center column), is the primary concern of this paper. Here is where the "secular" student is identified, if at all. The student on either LEVEL ONE or LEVEL THREE Of this column is sometimes identifiable by actions, but the relationship from LEVEL TWO is often difficult to assess. Too often we error in assuming the student is "healthy and well", when in reality he or she is "sick" and is either afraid of the "Doctor", the "staff" or both. We, as "Staff", shouldn't let this student out of our "hospital" in such a condition!

### **Examples of profiles in conflict**

The "2:1:2", when transferring from a rather liberal Christian college where dancing is permitted to a more conservative college, may suddenly find himself/herself a "2:1:3". Now in conflict with the mores of the new institution, this student, a sincere, committed Christian, must confront the resultant feelings of resentment, anger, guilt or discouragement (to name just a few!). How can we minister to this student?

Another student, a "3:1:3", is applying for admission to a college which does not knowingly admit students who drink alcoholic beverages. Should this student who, as a devout Jew, drinks wine at Passover and a few other occasions, lie when filling out the application forms (its common knowledge that many "1:3:3" students pass admission standards this way!) Should the student tell the truth and hope for the best, or, should the institution rethink the rationale behind the acceptable **standards of behavior?**

Should the institution institute reforms in an attempt to create an environment where the "1:1:1", "1:1:2", "2:1:1" and "2:1:2" students will feel more at home--"where seldom is heard, a secular word"? We need better answers to these and myriad other questions just as difficult.

We can begin by recognizing our own values, as individuals and as an institution, and then making concerted efforts to relate these values to our own mindsets before attempting to relate perceived student values. Only then can we be in a position to address these questions and to more effectively minister to forgotten students (or potential students) whose textbooks don't have all the answers.

### **Some thoughts on Christian colleges and Christian education**

Volumes have been written on these topics, with considerable variation of opinion as to what a Christian college is composed of. First, some conclusions as to what don't comprise a Christian college. One only has to look at Harvard, Yale, Princeton and the University of Southern California, all founded as Christian institutions, to recognize the fact that no matter how pious, saintly or well-intentioned the founding fathers of an institution are, their intents and purposes can be lost to time. It takes eternal vigilance and often assertive action of "academic watchdogs" to protect the Christian interests of an institution.

It is not the name of a college or whether it offers a full-spectrum of religion courses, including advanced degrees in theology and biblical languages, or who its teachers, administrators or chancellors are that determine a college's right to be considered "Christian". The true indicators of the values of a college are its graduates--do the graduates reflect Christian values and perspectives? Any college whose graduates' "worldviews" are little different than those of graduates from a secular college has lost sight of its vision, has aborted its mission and has lost its very reason for existence!

A Christian college is a college, which provides its students with as ideal an environment as possible in which to obtain a Christian education, which has very little, if anything, to do with degrees! The education itself is not obtained by reading a certain number of books on theology, or by taking a religion major or even by attending chapel for four years without a skip! Even the student who chooses to engage in off-campus outreach programs for the underprivileged is not assured of a Christian education.

To receive a Christian education an individual must learn to know Jesus Christ--know Him well enough to explain Him to someone else. One must understand how to communicate with Him, to worship Him and to glorify Him. One must understand how much He loves and cares for His people including himself/herself and to be able to share this love with others. Each individual must even know how to please Him and how to prepare for His second coming.

We must make knowing Jesus Christ the central theme of our college campuses if it is going to continue to have value for God's Church. The students need to observe the character of Christ being reflected in the faculty and staff, and to feel free to mingle and to unashamedly share the own Christian experiences and convictions with others. They must develop a zeal to share His love--to fulfill the Gospel Commission.

Knowing Christ is not the only part of a Christian education, for we are to develop our mind and body as well as the soul for the glory of God. Our educational ----, facilities should provide adequate areas for physical development and time should be provided within the daily schedules for obtaining physical exercise so that our students may be as physically fit as possible. Their God-given talents should be developed in order that they may more perfectly reflect the image of their Creator. In harmony with the development of body, mind and soul comes career preparation, where the student can

learn to use his whole being in the advancement of the cause of God. The student should be given liberal examples of how the career of choice can be best used to bring glory to God and to hasten His Second Coming. Careful planning is required by concerned individuals to insure that these goals are met--a concerted effort by faculty and staff is dedicated to witness this "integration of faith and learning", where faith really "meets the road".

### **The secular student's motives for selecting a Christian college**

The following are just a few of the reasons why a student might elect to attend a Christian college for reasons other than "to obtain a Christian education".

- 1) Lack of information: This is the student who selects a college by the "yellow page" technique. The same student probably read little of the information provided to applying students. The student is usually a "3:3:3" or possibly "1:3:3" and often doesn't realize conflicts in standards until personally confronted with them.
- 2) Proximity: The student who uses this, as a basis of selection is similar in most respects to number one.
- 3) Family or peer pressure: Just about any category of student can be subjected to outside pressures. If the pressures are applied in the hope of changing a "3:3:3" or "1:3:3" into a "1:1:1" or other conservative profile, without a corresponding desire for such reforms on the part of the individual, serious conflicts are likely to ensue.
- 4) Subliminal curiosity: This may be just another way of saying that the Holy Spirit has been directing a student to attend a certain Christian college. Obviously there are no categories safe from His suggestion! This student is searching for answers, which the Christian college can (hopefully) provide.

5) Admission policies: With the decline of enrollment found among certain Christian colleges, admission policies have often reflected lowered academic standards of admission, with the sole purpose of increasing the applicant pool. This can indeed attract a student who hasn't met the requirement for acceptance into the public university 04 choice. The student who searches for a college on this basis isn't likely to have any strong educational desires other than to develop a career potential.

6) Academic excellence: There are many Christian schools which are known for their academic excellence-remember the Christian roots of Harvard and Yale, for instance. Within Christian colleges of today there is a tendency to develop this aspect of the institution to the maximum with the intent of attracting greater numbers of students. This, as purely academic concept, is admirable. However if, in the process, the institution neglects to integrate faith into the learning process, it will likely lose its identity as a Christian college. It may take time but the result is quite predictable.

7) Personal attention: In that many Christian colleges are relative, small, the applicant may expect to obtain a greater degree of personal attention as a student than would be possible at a larger public college. This is a factor, which can attract students from all mindsets.

8) Spiritual atmosphere or religion courses: Some studies would suggest that this isn't the primary consideration for many Christian students in electing to attend a Christian college. In fact, the primary reasons are to be found in the first part of this list. Perhaps a student with a secular mindset will find little reason to attend a college with a spiritual atmosphere other than the hope that it will provide retreat from the cacophony of the secular college campus.

### **The Christian College's motives for accepting a secular student**

1) Open admission policy: This is the "mission school" philosophy, where the college is to convert the world "firsthand". All mindsets are accepted.

2) Liberal admission policy: Any student who appears compliant and is able to pay cash is accepted. Financial considerations are often the primary motivations for accepting the secular student such as when the student enrollment has suffered considerably. The concept is that the tuition that the secular student pays can be used to keep the school solvent, thus permitting the Christian student to attend without a major tuition increase. The mission emphasis has little credibility in light of the institution's self-serving selective practices. It would appear the students are needed to help balance the budget.

3) Redemptive attitude: This college, for example, will accept a known troublemaker due to the fact that he was once a church member and the parents now expect the school to induce a "reformation". Fortunately the Lord can bless this motive, but inherent risks are easily seen.

4) Outside pressures: Hopefully not too common, although known to exist. Here is where pressure is placed upon the administration, by individuals in places of authority, to accept (or reaccept) a student who would not normally qualify for admission due to discipline problems.

5) Balanced perspective: This institution has as its primary goal the development or maintenance of a distinctly Christian atmosphere for integration of faith and learning, and will only consider the merits of the first three motives in light of this goal. Financial or outside pressures are not allowed to play a major role in admission policies, and time and effort is put into planning to assure the quality of the spiritual life of the institution and, hopefully, that of the individual student.

This is not intended as a comprehensive list as other motives are certainly possible. However, most admission policies are based upon similar motives, although couched somewhat differently.

### **The secular student's exposure to Christian education**

The following is an outline of specific avenues through which a secular student can obtain exposure to, Christian education. Each will be discussed in the text to follow:

#### Required or unavoidable contact

- 1) Religion classes
- 2) Chapel
- 3) Devotionals during class periods
- 4) Faith and learning "integrated" classes

#### Optional areas of contact

- 1) Campus (or other) church involvement
- 2) Bible study fellowship groups
- 3) Mission experiences
- 4) Fellowship at Christian social activities
- 5) Group fellowship in Christian homes (faculty, staff and students)
- 6) Individual fellowship with Christian faculty or staff members
- 7) Individual fellowship with Christian students
- 8) Christian "sponsors"

### **Religion classes**

Too often religion classes are taught as if they were just another history class. If any area of Christian education needs integration of faith and learning it is here. The secular students, in particular, must feel a need for religion before the specifics of religion can assume any real meaning to them. They must learn to appreciate Christ and what He did does and will do for them before they can desire to follow Him. All lower

level religion classes should be designed to strengthen the student's faith. The use of a Christian geologist to present a Christian perspective on the history of the earth is one way to integrate faith and learning. Why should only the earth science students have such an exposure?

### **Chapel**

The tendency in an increasing large number of schools is to reduce the requirements for chapel attendance, usually in response to student protest. Studies have shown that this has been one of the primary causes as to why some of the now secular institutions began to lose their identity. Our colleges would do well to learn from the past in this regard. Without a policy of required attendance many secular students would never attend chapel. Granted, in some situations that might not be any major loss. However, the chapel service can become the unifying event for the whole campus. If the faculty and staff, along with the students, are given the opportunity to attend well-planned, relevant chapel services, with all three groups given the opportunity to participate in the planning of a number of the services, the secular student will likely come away with increased interest. If, on the other hand, the programs are poorly planned and are not attended by faculty, maybe chapel should be scrapped. If it isn't important enough for the faculty to attend the students have a point!

### **Devotionals**

In view of the fact that a large percentage of students have never formed a habit of daily study and prayer, and that many colleges accept non-Christian students, it seems appropriate that a short devotional thought be shared, along with a brief prayer, at the first class of the day. The devotionals might have a unifying theme, e.g. one verse each day from the 23rd Psalm, along with a brief commentary, or the students can be asked to

sign up for a chance to present a devotional thought of their own. To add variety to the prayer an occasional conversational style prayer is suggested. Some faculty may feel very comfortable beginning each class with prayer while others may feel such a practice is redundant. Beginning a religion class with prayer can never be out of order whereas a devotional may or may not be redundant in nature. Some flexibility in this regard would seem appropriate.

### **Faith and learning "integrated" classes**

Many so-called "secular" classes such as biology or history lend themselves to a method of teaching referred to as "integration of faith and learning". The teacher uses practical examples with spiritual significance or draws reference to biblical meaning during lectures dealing with non-religious subjects. This is similar to the techniques used by Jesus when he taught His object lessons. Some subjects, e.g. typing or algebra require considerably more and more creative effort to accomplish this type of integrated teaching. A teacher should not feel guilty if he or she is unable to demonstrate the same degree of "integration" as the teacher in some other class where it is a more "natural" process to integrate faith and learning. Such teachers should take courage in what they have accomplished and seek to improve upon their own ideas while keeping abreast of new concepts as they are introduced.

### **Campus church involvement**

If a college is composed of mostly Christian students who are not afraid to get involved, not having a campus oriented church and instead, asking the students to become involved in the surrounding churches may have merit. In those institutions which do have a considerable number of either non-Christians or those of a secular mindset, a church on or near campus, with an earnest desire to provide nurture and support for the

students, becomes a necessity. Just being there isn't enough--it must provide attractive "avenues" to its doorsteps. Many secular students are hungry for the type of fellowship such a church can provide.

### **Bible Study Fellowship Groups**

Small discussion groups composed of a combination of faculty and student members can be one of the most rewarding experiences a student or faculty member can have. Staff members should also be invited to join such groups. The time and place of the meetings should be varied to provide a number of "slots" for participation. The format can vary from a rather formal study of a book of the Bible to one where each member is invited to lead out in a study or share a lesson from an outline (many topics are available at Christian bookstores). After a few weeks you will get to know your students on a very personal basis, which will make Christian teaching more meaningful to you and Christian education more exciting for the students. It is also a place where some very much needed support can be provided to each of the group's members. Prayer should become an integral part of any such group. Make the prayers specific! You may be surprised to find that God still does answer prayers! Be certain that the members are given an opportunity to share experiences of answered prayer!

### **Mission experiences**

Providing an outreach program for college students doesn't necessarily come easily. The campus may be in an isolated or a rather affluent area, where it may mean organizing a trip across a state line or border or finding ways to provide goods or materials to a distant area that is in need. Most campuses are within a short driving distance to poor neighborhoods where meals are direly needed, to say nothing of a need

for help with household repairs or yard work. One college has organized, volunteers crews, which paint the homes of needy families within the community, with the total number of, homes approaching 100! Many elderly people have no one to turn to. Open the eyes of the students to what Christian service is all about.

### **Group fellowship at Christian social activities**

Invite students to attend the various Christian social functions in the area, taking them with you when appropriate. Don't miss an opportunity to suggest or plan such functions with the students in mind. Students are sometimes an independent "lot" and may not always be excited by what is planned so you may have a few disappointments. Don't let such an experience get you down! The students will likely respond more readily your invitation when they have become acquainted with you by means one of the other methods of exposure.

### **Group fellowship in Christian homes**

One of the most pleasant ways to spend an afternoon is to invite a class over for lunch and fellowship (if the class is too large to accommodate it all at one time divide the class into groups). You might like to ask them bring a friend or a spouse. Have them share with the group, in an informal manner, a little about themselves, and why they chose their "major" what they feel the college could do to make their time more pleasant as another approach, invite a group over to play games and eat popcorn and homemade ice cream on a Saturday night. There are still students out there who appreciate the simple things in life! Don't feel you have to have an organized Bible Study each time you're together as a group. Hopefully God can show through you an example of a Christian home environment that is a message in itself.

### **Individual fellowship with Christian faculty or staff members**

You may be able to come across as being a genuine "saint" to your peers, and may even have the respect of your students in general, but if you can't find the time to meet the needs of a student when he needs you, you will have to do a lot of personal remedial work to regain your credibility with that student. More importantly, his concept of what a Christian is may suffer until you do. Be as available to your students as you can, and when he or she has a question or a problem--try to be available then. You may not have a better opportunity to minister to the needs of the student!

### **Individual fellowship with Christian students**

Some of the most powerful influences upon young people are their peers. Christian students must become aware of their own potential to reach their fellow students with their own personal witness. Often sincere Christian students will avoid the more secular students (especially the non-Christians) for reasons of insecurity or even an inferiority complex (they may not know how to act around members of another faith, due to a very sheltered upbringing). Rest assured, the other students do not interpret their actions that way. This is an area that we, as educators, need to help each other (many of us have grown up with similar feelings) and to encourage our students to reach out in Christian fellowship to these students. Remember how you feel when you are in a strange environment!

### **Christian "Sponsors"**

Each Christian college community has among the faculty, staff or other family units an often "untapped" source of student support, not because of lack of interest, but rather, due to lack of recruitment, organization and delegation. Those involved in

recruitment and/or admissions, in conceal with alumni or auxiliary groups, can organize "sponsors" for each new or incoming student. The intent is to provide moral support and encouragement to students when they need it most, such as when they are arriving in town and don't know where to look for housing, or where to shop for the best bargains or ethnic foods. Other critical times are holiday weekends when the student is a long way from home and feeling lonely, or is discouraged and doesn't want to let his or her guard down around a fellow student. Just an occasional home-cooked meal or knowing someone cares is all that's needed to help keep a student's spirits up.

The organizing group needs to develop guidelines and provide some type of training session(s) for first-time sponsors, and to maintain ongoing contact with the participants so that students are not "lost in the cracks". Most importantly, the students should not have any reason to doubt that Christians really are caring individuals.

### **The Spiritual Life Committee**

Perhaps the highest priority of a Christian college should be to develop and maintain an atmosphere conducive to a full spiritual life for its students, faculty and staff. In many institutions it is assumed that this responsibility of the department of religion; however, the primary emphasis, here, is often in areas such as theology, biblical languages history or professional ministry, rather than personal ministry to the students (or faculty and staff) of the institution.

The Spiritual Life Committee, composed of a balance of faculty (which may or may not include faculty from the department of religion), students and staff, can help set the tone of the school's religious activities, including attitudes towards chapel attendance, participation at spiritual retreats, social activities and outreach ministries. Its primary focus is upon the present spiritual condition of the whole school family--is it

strong and growing or is it in need of special nurture? The committee's responsibility is to provide positive suggestions for improving and maintaining a high quality spiritual life on campus and to work with the administration in nurturing such an environment.

### **A Challenge!**

The following is a suggested method whereby a concerned individual or group within a college (or a school within a university) can focus on the spiritual needs of its community and to begin a plan for recovery and growth.

1. Recognize the needs of the institution (personally or as a group)
  - a) Make a tentative list (be specific)
  - b) Prioritize the above needs
  
2. Establish the needed support (pray for cooperation)
  - a) Obtain administrative support (start at the top)  
(If the administrative support is not what you believe it should be, it may be necessary to gather support from (b) or (c) before asking for the support of the administration)
  - b) Form a committee of concerned individuals which includes faculty, staff and students (e. g. a Spiritual Life Committee)
  - c) Lobby for student support (be above board!)
  
3. Develop meaningful recommendations
  - a) Consider the needs of all concerned
  - b) Determine which items should be nonnegotiable
  - c) Ask for student feedback
  - d) Reevaluate with the students' concerns in mind
  - e) Finalize recommendations and methods of implementation

4. "Shepherd" the recommendations through the appropriate committees
  - a) Be present and prepared to defend the recommendations
  - b) Don't give up if the first attempt fails. Review the recommendations and modify them if necessary. Strengthen support by way of increased communication among concerned faculty, staff and students. Resubmit the recommendations as needed.
  
5. "Follow through" with the implementation of the recommendations once they have been passed by committee action. Here is where the "real" work will begin. Involve the members of your original committee and other new "disciples". Don't try to do it all yourself!

### **Conclusion**

If we as individuals remain content to complain about the decline in the spiritual emphasis of our institutions, or are satisfied when we have voiced our disapproval in "high places", we can be assured of continued contentment--we will continue to have reason to complain and disapprove. We must not be content to merely identify the weaknesses of our system. As individuals (or institutions) we cannot afford to offer only passive resistance against the lure of secularism. We must, prayerfully, become assertive and attempt to recover lost ground and to enhance the spiritual atmosphere of our campuses. To stand still is to loose ground.

Ministry to the secular students on our campuses should not be left to an uncertain process of osmosis. It should not be left to "the other person" or even the administration. We must, individually and collectively recognize that **all** of our students are in need of spiritual guidance and support, and that these needs vary with each student's background. We must recognize what these varying needs are and provide opportunities whereby we can minister to the needs of all students, including the "secular" student.

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