

By Palmer Muntz and Dan Crabtree



**PALMER MUNTZ**, director of admissions at Oregon Institute of Technology (OR), has worked in admission since 1984, previously serving at Corban College (OR) and Asbury College (KY). He was on the board of directors of the North American Coalition for Christian Admissions Professionals from 1996 to 1999. He is the president of the Pacific Northwest Association for College Admission Counseling.



**DAN CRABTREE** has been Wheaton Academy's (IL) college counselor for six years. He previously worked in college admission for 20 years, including 12 as director of admissions at Wheaton College (IL), and served as president of the North American Coalition for Christian Admissions Professionals from 1998 to 2000.

# All Together Different:

## The World of Christian Higher Education

In October of 2003, a guidance counselor posted the following note to NACAC's e-list:

"I have a high school junior, top five percent of class (honors, but not AP classes; PSATs from soph year 169/78th percentile), who wants a religious college with a Protestant affiliation. His historical background is Baptist, but his family is now active in an interdenominational church. He plans on becoming a minister. He is also a pilot and is looking for a college that will be near an airfield."

High school and independent counselors often encounter college-bound students who are Christians or who wish to study in a Christian environment. In the situation described above, the student knows what he is looking for—a Christian college—but his counselor isn't quite sure how to help him. In other cases, it may be the counselor who recognizes that a faith-based college could be a good choice for a particular student, but the student himself may not be aware of this sector of higher education.

The intent of this article is to help familiarize counselors with Christian colleges. By being familiar with these colleges, counselors can help their students of faith better facilitate a successful college search.

### Looking for a Good Fit

Counselors often advise their students to consider such factors as major, size and location as they look for colleges that may be a good fit. While students often change their majors, matters of personal faith are far less transient. For students with deep religious convictions, their faith influences the way they look at life and may impact virtually everything they do. Therefore, as these students seek the right fit, it is reasonable that they may want a college that respects the things they find most important, that takes seriously the things they take seriously.

A recent report from the Higher Education Research Institute (2005) noted that today's students have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. Nearly half of the surveyed freshmen—about one-quarter of whom consider themselves "born-again Christians"—want colleges to encourage their personal expression of spirituality.

Unfortunately, "religion has continuously become marginalized, even trivialized, in the culture of the academic mainstream," according to David Claerbaut (2004, p.29). Several studies have shown consistent evidence of declines in students' religious affiliation and orientation during college. However, Henderson found that, "On the other hand, church-related colleges have shown a positive impact on religiosity measures" (2003, p.162). In particular, attending a member institution of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) may help students strengthen their religious commitments (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

With such a high percentage of students expressing high spiritual interest while many colleges do little to encourage spirituality, counselors need to have an awareness of the nation's faith-based colleges and universities. According to a 2003 report from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, there are about 4,200 degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States, of which 2,500 are private institutions. Of these private schools, about 900 are identified as "religiously-affiliated" based on their historical relationships or self descriptions. These 900 are not all cut from the same cloth.

### Not All The Same

In *Quality with Soul*, Robert Benne (2001) breaks church-related colleges into four types:

- Orthodox
- Critical-Mass
- Intentionally Pluralist
- Accidentally Pluralist

There is a major divide between the first two types and the latter two, according to Benne. Colleges in the Orthodox and Critical-Mass categories have a Christian vision as their “organizing paradigm” while the Pluralist schools are built on secular sources. While both the Critical Mass and Orthodox schools are distinguished by having a significant number of adherents from their faith tradition, Orthodox institutions generally share several additional characteristics, such as offering an “unabashed invitation for fellow believers to [join] an intentionally Christian enterprise,” a religious perspective that affects all courses of study and significant financial support from the sponsoring religious group (p. 49–50). Most of the Christian colleges referenced in this article fall into Benne’s Orthodox group.

Well over 230,000 students currently attend the roughly 200 evangelical Christian liberal arts colleges and Bible colleges in North America. However, while about 65,000 new students each year choose Christian higher education, studies have found that there may be another 250,000 high school seniors who might find a good fit in a Christian college setting, but who are not giving faith-based institutions serious consideration or may not even be aware that such options exists.

Keller (1988) says there are four essential characteristics of Christian colleges and their graduates:

- The Bible is central to campus life, academic and otherwise
- There is an appreciation for “the quasi-sacredness of each person” (p.117)
- There is a sense of community and fellowship
- The “importance of social change” is recognized (p.119).

Christian colleges share several distinctions. First, there is shared commitment to the integration of faith, learning and living, with an intentional emphasis on development of the “whole person.” Students are challenged both intellectually and spiritually, encouraged to grow not only academically, but also in their faith. Outsiders sometimes speculate that this dual emphasis compromises academic freedom. However, like other colleges, most Christian colleges utilize the tenure system and permit faculty members to speak without restraint.

Antonio Chiareli (2002) notes that, “everyone is someone’s disciple” (p.241). Many educators maintain that every institution, teacher and classroom have a particular perspective on learning and life. What differentiates Christian colleges, they say, is that Christian colleges are more transparent with regard to the predominant viewpoint on campus. In fact, some Christian college professors who have also taught at secular institutions say that they enjoy greater academic freedom on the Christian college campus, where they are not constrained from discussing faith issues (McMurtrie, 2002).

Related to this idea of holistic education is character development. Christian colleges, as a general rule, are deliberate in seeking to help students develop strong character traits, such as integrity, reliability, honesty, responsibility, and honor. This is

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accomplished through programs facilitated by Student Affairs in the residence halls, service projects, regular chapel services, intramural sports, and more. If one word can distinguish most Christian colleges in this regard, it is “intentional.” They are very conscious of the developmental stages of traditional-aged collegians and seek to thoughtfully help them work through the decisions they face.

Finally, what most clearly distinguishes these evangelical Christian colleges from all other types of colleges and universities is that they hire only committed Christian faculty. All full-time faculty and administrators have established a personal affiliation with Jesus Christ. Many use the terms “born again,” “believer” or “Christ-follower” to describe this relationship. While there may be differences of opinion within Christian higher education as a whole—and within any given college—on countless academic, social, scientific, theological, and political subjects, its faith commitment provides a common ground.

### **A Diverse World of Christian Colleges**

From that common ground—the integration of faith, living and learning—springs a diverse world of colleges and universities. Some people mistakenly think of all Christian colleges as “Bible colleges.” While there are a number of Bible colleges—such as Philadelphia Biblical University (PA) and Chicago’s venerable Moody Bible Institute (IL)—most Christian institutions nowadays are liberal arts colleges. The Bible colleges focus



primarily on theological majors and preparation for ministry-related careers, with an appropriate smattering of the liberal arts. Meanwhile, Christian liberal arts schools across the nation, while generally offering an assortment of Bible classes, provide a vast variety of majors while integrating faith-related issues into the curriculum.

While many people are familiar with some of the more fundamentalist institutions such as Bob Jones University (SC), the liberal arts colleges that this article deals with are regionally accredited. Some Bible colleges also bear regional accreditation and most are nationally accredited by the Association for Biblical Higher Education, a federally-approved accrediting body.

The Christian college of today tends to be much more balanced than its predecessors three or four decades ago. Diversity exists regarding approaches to rules, regulations and community norms.

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With character development an intentional focal point of Christian higher education, most, if not all, Christian colleges will have more conservative lifestyle expectations than their secular counterparts. However, Christian institutions are not all alike.

### THREE CHRISTIAN COLLEGE DISTINCTIONS

- Integration of faith, learning and living
- Character development
- Christian faculty

Some prohibit drinking; others do not. Most provide single-sex residence halls, while many also have apartment complexes, theme houses, and residence halls that are coed by floor or wing. Many have dress codes of some type, but generally these rules relate more to modesty rather than being highly prescriptive. In any case, today's Christian colleges usually are much more moderate and tolerant than the stereotypes some people hold.

Christian colleges come in many historical and theological flavors. There are nondenominational and interdenominational schools (those not affiliated with any particular church group), such as Gordon College (MA), Bryan College (TN) and Westmont College (CA). Other colleges carry the stamp of a particular denomination or group, but even those schools that bear a denominational seal are open to students from other faith traditions and often to non-Christians interested in studying in a faith-centered environment.

Christian colleges can be found across North America (and, to a limited extent, around the globe). Some are located in urban settings, such as Azusa Pacific University (CA) in the Los Angeles area, Dallas Baptist University (TX) and Seattle Pacific University (WA). Many are in smaller cities and the suburbs—Calvin College (MI) in Grand Rapids and Wheaton College (IL) in Chicago's suburbs come to mind—while a number are in small communities. Northwest Nazarene University (ID) is near Boise and Alaska Bible College (AK) is tucked away in isolated Glenallen. Most students are able to find a Christian college located in the type of area they prefer and the "right" distance from home.

With regard to the question of academic quality, Christian colleges in general have established themselves as credible, competitive options within the world of higher education. Once relegated to the fringes, they now are well represented in rankings of smaller institutions. For instance, despite the fact that Christian colleges form only a small fraction of higher education as a whole, a number are top ten schools in the 2006 *U.S. News & World Report* "Comprehensive Colleges" and "Master's Universities" lists. Christian colleges are also found in guides such as the Princeton Review's *The Best 357 Colleges*, Kaplan's *Unofficial, Unbiased Guide to the 331 Most Interesting Colleges* and *The National Review College Guide: America's Top Liberal Arts Schools*.

Christian liberal arts colleges prepare students for a wide variety of professional pursuits, but Bible colleges may fly under the radar of many people due to their narrower academic focus.

However, this same focus—most Bible college students are interested in ministry vocations—often brings a different type of academic challenge that students may find stretches them to their limits. While Bible college students usually have some general knowledge of Bible history and theological issues, their studies—which, as mentioned earlier, also encompass a good sampling of the liberal arts—may delve much deeper than their experience has prepared them for. We have seen students who, after transferring from nationally known universities into Bible colleges, quickly state that their Bible and theology classes tested them in ways they had not seen before.

What type of student chooses a Christian college? As you might expect, Christian colleges attract students from a variety of backgrounds—with regard to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and so on—and have an assortment of interests. Students also come from a multiplicity of faith traditions. They weigh college choices in much the same way as other students, considering factors such as academic quality, social life, career and graduate school preparation, and opportunities for personal growth. While most Christian institutions are not “open admission” in their standards, and a few are highly selective, it is possible for any student seeking a Christian college to find a good academic fit.

Financial concerns, naturally, play a significant role in the college choice process for many students. The practices of most Christian colleges mirror those of their secular private counterparts with regard to financial aid. Christian college endowments tend to be relatively small. While they often are not able to meet the full need of their financial aid applicants, this is offset somewhat by the fact that, on average, Christian colleges and universities cost less than other private institutions. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities says that the average amount for tuition and fees at their member institutions in 2005–2006 was \$16,632 (Clark). This was about \$4,600 less than the national average of \$21,235 for all private colleges and universities reported by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Bible colleges generally have even lower tuition, due to the more specialized nature of their offerings. There does appear to be a real commitment on the part of most Christian colleges to access and affordability.

A number of organizations and other resources can help students explore options in Christian higher education. The North American Coalition for Christian Admissions Professionals (NACCAP) is comprised of Christian high school guidance counselors and admission personnel from almost 200 Christian high schools, liberal arts colleges and universities, Bible colleges and graduate schools. In many ways, NACCAP is similar to NACAC, as its membership includes both high schools and colleges, it holds an annual conference and it has a Statement of Principles of Good Practice. NACCAP sponsors National Christian College Fairs each fall in over 90 cities all across the United States. More information on NACCAP and the college fair circuit is available at [www.naccap.org](http://www.naccap.org).

More than 100 Christian liberal arts institutions are members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities in Washington, DC, founded in 1976. The Council’s Web site is [www.cccu.org](http://www.cccu.org). The Web site for the Bible college accrediting body, the Association for Biblical Higher Education, is <http://abhe.gospelcom.net>. Based in Orlando, FL, the ABHE accredits approximately 90 institutions in North America.

While the Web sites for NACCAP, the CCCU and the ABHE all include information on their member schools, the Christian-CollegeMentor site ([www.christiancollegementor.com](http://www.christiancollegementor.com)) offers a searchable database with information on most Christian colleges. In addition, Peterson’s has published *Choose a Christian College* (2000), a guide to CCCU member schools.

Christian colleges are “all together different.” They hold many things in common with each other, while still maintaining individual distinctions and personalities. They share a number of traits with the rest of higher education as well, but have characteristics that obviously set them apart. They are not the right choice for every student or even, for that matter, most students. However, for those who seek or might benefit from a faith-based academic environment, from a highly personalized education, from a campus that affirms their evangelical religious traditions, Christian liberal arts or Bible colleges may be an ideal fit.

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## A SAMPLING OF CHRISTIAN COLLEGE ALUMNI

While some Christian college graduates go on to careers in ministry or theological studies, most pursue other vocations. The following is a small sampling of Christian college alumni:

- Sam Emerick, Asbury College (KY) class of '38, was the first president of Habitat for Humanity.
- Lewis Jackson, Indiana Wesleyan University (IN) class of '39, was the director of the World War II flying squadron known as the Tuskegee Airmen. He later served as president of Central State University in Ohio.
- Elizabeth Spencer, Belhaven College (MS) class of '43, authored "The Light in the Piazza," which was published in *The New Yorker* in 1960 and in 1962 became an MGM movie starring Olivia de Havilland and George Hamilton. More recently, it was adapted into a Broadway musical, garnering six Tony Awards in 2005.
- Bryan Clay, Azusa Pacific University (CA) class of '02, won the Silver Medal in the decathlon at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece, recording the fourth-best tally in Olympic history.
- In 2004, John Thune, Biola University (CA) class of '83, defeated Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle in the South Dakota race for the U.S. Senate.
- After suffering an intracranial brain hemorrhage and partial hearing loss, Joyce Bender, Geneva College (PA) class of '75, launched a company that places computer experts—most of whom are people with disabilities—for on-site work with clients. For her years of service to professionals with disabilities, Bender was honored by President Clinton with the 1999 President's Award, the nation's highest award for achievement in furthering the employment and empowerment of people with disabilities.
- Bob Keesee, Milligan College (TN) class of '78, founded Raincatchers, Inc. to address the water crisis in Haiti through the design of innovative rainwater collection systems.
- Francis Gary Powers, Milligan College (TN) class of '50, achieved international notoriety when his U2 spy plane was shot down on May 1, 1960, while he was conducting a reconnaissance mission over the former Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War. Powers was recruited for the U2 program by the CIA in 1956.
- In November 2003, Kathy Nimmer, Trinity Christian College (IL) class of '91, became the first blind teacher teaching in a regular high school classroom to earn national board certification, the highest rank that teachers can achieve.
- Ron Guderian, Prairie Bible College of Alberta, Canada, class of '64, a clinical pathologist and researcher in Quito, Ecuador, was one of the first doctors to successfully treat snake and insect bites using the electric current of a stun gun.
- In 2005, Harry Hutt, Roberts Wesleyan College (NY) class of '65, was named the Executive Vice President for Corporate Sales and Marketing by the National Hockey League's Tampa Bay Lightning. He formerly was Senior Vice President of Marketing Operations for the NBA's Portland Trail Blazers and the NFL's Seattle Seahawks.
- Nick Bogner, Seattle Pacific University (WA) class of '00, an electrical engineer at Bynon Avionics, headed the team that built the Electronic Flight Information System that provided critical state-of-the-art back-up for the cockpit instrumentation in SpaceShipOne, the first private-venture craft to leave the earth's atmosphere and enter space.
- Susan Lamont, Trinity Christian College (IL) class of '75, is the distinguished professor of animal science at Iowa State University (IA), where she has an active research laboratory studying molecular genetics in poultry, with a special focus on health aspects.
- Peggy Fowler, George Fox University (OR), class of '73, is the chief executive officer and president of Portland General Electric. In December 2005, she was recognized by *Portland Business Journal* as the Most Admired CEO in Oregon.
- Elizabeth Middleton, Vanguard University (CA) class of '01, was honored by the Queen of England in 2003 for her work with abandoned children in China.
- Todd Komarnicki, Wheaton College (IL) class of '87, is a motion picture writer and produced *Elf*, which grossed \$173 million in the U.S. alone.
- Erin Buescher, The Master's College (CA) class of '01, was drafted by the Minnesota Lynx in the second round (23rd overall) of the 2001 WNBA Draft. Buescher, a 6'2" guard, has played for the Lynx and the Charlotte Sting, as well as the Sacramento Monarchs when they won the 2005 WNBA Championship.
- Marilyn Birch, Houghton College (NY) class of '44, was a noted eye surgeon in Sierra Leone. In 1961, she was awarded the Sierra Leone Independence Medal on the occasion of the nation's independence, supervised the design of a new, enlarged Kamakwie Hospital and was honored in person by Queen Elizabeth II, who designated her a citizen of the British Empire.

### Books written by Christian college alumni include:

- *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren, California Baptist University (CA) class of '77
- *Speaker* by Dennis Hastert, Wheaton College (IL) class of '64
- *When Mother was Eleven Foot Four: A Christmas Memory* by Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, Vanguard University (CA) class of '75
- *Face to Face: The Changing State of Racism across America* by James Waller, Asbury College (KY) class of '88
- *Rumors of Indiscretion* by Lawrence Nelson, Evangel University (MO) class of '66
- *Rhinos Who Surf* by Julie Mammano, Biola University (CA) class of '84
- *Let's Roll* by Ken Abraham, Asbury College (KY) class of '73, and Lisa Beamer, Wheaton College (IL) class of '91
- *Affirmative Action in the Independent College: A Practical Planning Model* by Eugene Habecker, Taylor University (IN) class of '68
- *19th Century Plains Indian Dresses* by Susan Jennys, Grace College (IN) class of '84