



Help Our Youth Choose Their Colleges

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Parents and congregational leader should take a more active role in helping their youth choose a church college. It is impossible not to influence the college choice decision; to say nothing communicates that the decision makes no difference to the church or to families, and the silence is, in itself, a major influence.

Influencing our youth in their choice of college is justified for the following reasons:

- studies show that parents are by far the strongest influences for their children;
- no adolescent is experienced enough to choose from more than 3,200 post-secondary institutions in the United States and Canada;
- there is a strong correlation between college attendance and later participation in the church.

One research project indicates that college students (both in church colleges and in other institutions) ranked parents as the number one influence for their decision of where to attend college. Campus visits ranked second, friends third and college admissions personnel fourth. Friends in the church influenced students to enroll in church colleges while friends outside of church influenced peers to enroll in other institutions. That parents are the strongest influences in the choice of college is confirmed by several studies, including those by Don Hossler of Indiana University and Vivian Seltzer of the University of Pennsylvania.

What criteria do youth use to select a college? Perceived academic prestige ranks high for some students. Following a girlfriend or boyfriend is a priority for some prospects. Campus appearance plays a major role. There is no question that major universities with successful athletic teams are attractive to our youth, even though athletic success has nothing to do with academic quality.

Nice trees: The colleges of Mennonite Church USA are academically strong by any objective criteria. Choosing a college to follow a friend, while understandable from the perspective of a young adult, seems shortsighted from the viewpoint of an older adult.

Our colleges know that attractive campuses are important for marketing the institution, but having nice trees hardly affects the educational process directly. Church colleges simply cannot compete with the daily and weekly presence of large universities in the popular media.

Parents and church leaders should actively counteract these influences, which are so strong with our youth. A study of more than 3,000 adults in more than 100 Mennonite congregations showed that 81 percent of those who attended a Mennonite college remained in a Mennonite congregation as an adult. The overall numbers indicate that a high percentage of noncollege attenders have become inactive in the church. This should be sobering to any parent or church leader.

The correlation between college attendance and later church participation begs other questions. Can church colleges take total credit for these results? Certainly not. As faculty and administrators we know that we do our best work with those students who come with positive family and congregational experiences prior to the college years.

Denominational affiliation: Is it important to have our children choose participation in a Mennonite congregation? Some will argue that denominational affiliation is unimportant. It is more important to me that our children choose the Christian faith, but I believe every Christian chooses a theological tradition. So-called "generic" Christianity carries theological presuppositions that are as influential as any denominational perspective.

What about those who want academic programs not available in our church colleges? With few exceptions, general education credits from the first two years will transfer to other institutions. Parents and church leaders, if not the youth themselves, should value the courses available only at church colleges (even if the credits do not transfer). In addition, the lifelong relationships formed at church colleges are cited by alumni as one of the greatest benefits of their experience.

Elementary years: National research indicates that the college choice decision begins in the elementary years. Young children are, or are not, predisposed toward college by several factors: whether or not their parents attended college, their academic ability, proximity to colleges and universities, the influence of older family members. By early high school, most youth can name a set of five or six colleges under consideration. A majority of them will ultimately select one institution from that smaller set. The obvious implication from this research is that if parents and church leaders want to influence the decision, they need to begin when the child is young.

Practical suggestions for influencing the decision toward church colleges include the following:

- visit campuses with families or church groups;
- discuss one's own college experiences and relationships;
- purchase church college shirts, hat and other paraphernalia;

- gather information and do not make judgments without accurate data;
- support congregational student aid plans.

My experience and research indicates that many adults in the church care about this issue but do not know how to change the reality that their youth are making these life-changing decisions with too little guidance. Some are afraid their children will rebel. But that ignores our children's desire to know what we think. Some adults choose to make decisions about financial matters without having the facts. Unless a student actually applies for financial aid, one simply cannot know what the net cost is for attendance. Too many congregational members are concerned that we should financially support all our college students, no matter where they attend. The fact is that we do support those who attend public institutions when we pay taxes. Whether or not denominational identity is important is a decision every individual has to make, but it has a huge impact on the future of the church.

I have invested much of my adult life in the cause of Mennonite education because of the impact church schools had on my life (I also attended a Big Ten university for three years to study pharmacy) and on those of our four children and a son-in-law. Encouraging a greater percentage of our youth to attend church schools (at any level) is not about the financial health of our institutions; it is about nothing less than the future of the church.