

How to Help Students Find College Community that Counts

Derek Melleby

One of my favorite questions to ask current college students or recently graduated college students is this: *what was the best piece of advice you were given before going to college?* Here's a response I received a few weeks ago at a picnic. Between bites of nachos, the student said: "My youth pastor told me to be intentional about finding Christian community. He was so emphatic about it that I remember frantically walking around campus asking everyone I met if they knew about any Christian groups on campus. One of the first people I talked to was a Christian and she's one of my best friends today. Together we were able to find a group and get connected to a church." This story reminds us of two things we all need to know about students transitioning to college.

First, the first two weeks of college are critical. Nationally, 25 percent of students do not return to the same school for their sophomore year. On a recent trip to Ohio State University, I learned that OSU has been able to reduce that number to 3-4 percent. OSU has learned that students transition better and remain at OSU longer if they find good, supportive community quickly. In the past, there were only two prominent scenarios for incoming students at OSU. Some students would look to the party scene to find friends. While this did provide community, it often wasn't the most beneficial. Other students would fall through the cracks, not really getting involved on campus during the week and going home on the weekends. OSU responded by pouring more funding and energy into first-year programs. Helping students find a place to belong has made all the difference in the world in their retention rates.

Second, the opening story reminds us that Christians need to intentionally seek out Christian community on campus. Kara Powell of the Fuller Youth Institute estimates that 40 percent of Christian students do not get connected to Christian community while in college. During the first few weeks of college, students are bombarded with different activities to fill their schedules. Everything is new: people, buildings, class, and meal times. Many students are navigating these daily activities on their own for the first time. It's easy to drop worship and Bible study from an already hectic schedule.

So, what can be done to help students make wise decisions in how they spend their time and who they spend it with? Are there any steps that can be taken by youth workers and parents to assist in this transition? What follows are five suggestions.

First, teach the value and importance of community to the life of faith. Too often the Gospel is only presented as an individual choice, dealing with one's individual relationship with God. While there is certainly a need for all people to individually respond to the Gospel, a life of faith requires community. In fact, coming to faith in Christ is a process of changing one's communal identity. Community is not something added onto the Gospel, but it is central to our understanding of what takes place at conversion. We are now identified with a new people group: the people the God. There is no Christian faith apart from the community of faith. Do young people in your life and ministry know why community is so important to following Jesus? Does the Gospel you preach and teach have a natural tendency to lead people into deeper community life?

Second, make sure students know what Christian community is available for them where they are going to school. In my travels presenting the seminar *Make College Count: Preparing for the College Transition*, I am always surprised by the number of students and

parents who are not familiar with the college ministry organizations that are on most campuses today. Don't assume that all students and parents have heard of national organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity Fellowship, Navigators, and the Coalition for Christian Outreach. Let students know that these groups are available to help them find friends and grow in faith.

Third, help students make connections to Christian community before they arrive on campus. This is a simple step many parents and youth workers often neglect. As you learn where students will be going to college, take a proactive approach by contacting campus ministries and churches in those areas. Start by asking others in your congregation who might be familiar with the community in which the college is located. Next, browse the college's Web site to see what is offered on campus. Note: "Spiritual life/growth" opportunities are often listed under "student activities," "religious life" or "student life." You also can check out this Web site: www.liveabove.com. Here you will be able to plug in the name of the college and see a list of selected college ministry options for students along with contact information. Send e-mails and make phone calls. Get in touch with campus ministers and pastors in the area. Consider using a night at youth group to help college bound students make these important connections.

Fourth, host a panel discussion featuring current college students from your church. College-bound students benefit greatly from hearing stories of others who have gone before them. Bring in current college students for a discussion about making the transition. Be sure to ask good questions about how they were or were not able to get connected to Christian community.

Fifth, be sure to check in on college students during their first two weeks on campus. Students' schedules will be hectic the first few weeks of college. Not only will they be in new environments trying to juggle new responsibilities, but they will be trying to fit in and make friends. Even if, deep down, they desire to be involved in Christian community, it can easily get pushed to the back burner. You can play a key role by calling students the first week of school. Ask how they are doing, see if there is anything you can do for them, and remind them, perhaps subtly, to seek out Christian groups on campus. A simple phone call can make all the difference in the world.

The transition to college is not easy. It's especially not easy for those who want to honor God during these critical years. Thankfully, the Christian faith is not meant to be lived alone, but is to be supported by other brothers and sisters in Christ. Pray diligently that the transitioning students you know and love will build solid friendships and connect to the larger Body of Christ.

Derek Melleby is the Director of the College Transition Initiative, author of Make College Count: A Faithful Guide to Life and Learning (Baker Books, 2011) and co-author of The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness: A Guide for Students (Brazos Press, 2007).



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