

My Soulful College Quest

By Whitney Doe

As a young, spiritually oriented prospective college student, identifying a college that promises to foster my spiritual growth has been an extraordinary challenge. Based upon the information provided in the mountains of magazines, books, and ranking lists readily available to prospective students today, I could easily have a list of twenty schools if I were to choose my future college on the basis of their party scene, social opportunities, or dorm configurations. However, when I visit a campus, browse informational web-sites, or flip through *Princeton Review's Top 300 Guide*, the aspects I am looking for in a future college are harder to find. There are certainly plenty of elaborate systems for rating almost every aspect of a school, yet there seems to be no resource that grades the soul of a campus.

I was raised outside of Boston in a Christian home and in the Episcopal Church, but like a lot of kids, never truly gave any thought to the words I spoke on Sunday mornings. In my household, it was simply expected that at 8 o'clock, my sister and I would be up and dressed in our Sunday finest. By middle school, I went through a period where I held on-going conversations with my parents about why I felt there was no God—with most of my evidence pointing to the fact that Sunday morning came too early and my teenage brain wanted sleep rather than worship. During these years I morphed into that mean popular girl and spent a lot of time focusing on the material aspects of life. I knew that I was missing something, but I wasn't yet ready to realize it was God.

During eighth grade, my best friend, a freshman in high school at the time, became more deeply involved in her Christian faith. I thought she was crazy, and gave her much grief for her new outlook. For months she tried to rope me into going with her to Young-Life, an inter-denominational, Christian youth organization that ministers to high school kids around the world. I kept turning down her invitations and making up excuses of prior engagements, until she threatened me with "If you don't show up, then a really hot senior football player will come and get you...and that would be embarrassing." I, of course, couldn't risk humiliation in front of upperclassmen, and begrudgingly agreed to accompany her.

That night I was amazed by the authentic, genuine, kind people I met, as well as the fun I had. Throughout the next year I spent many early mornings at Young-Life Bible studies and going to Young-Life events, moving closer and closer to a more comprehensive understanding of what it meant to be a Christian and how it could change my life. I finally came full circle at Young-Life camp the summer after my freshmen year and knew that this relationship with God would fundamentally shape my individual purpose for the rest of my life. I continue to think of spirituality as a connection with God and with all creation. Spirituality informs my choices about how I move through each day and the choices I make. Do I gossip in the lunch room or do I eat with that freshman kid who is all alone? Do I follow my dream to work with children in Ghana or head to a sunny beach with my family?

I see college as a time to further my life of faith. I want to learn not only academically, but I want to be challenged spiritually. I want to live in a community where I can be supported, but also where I can be questioned. I need to be in a place where I can be confronted by people with vastly different beliefs, but where I also can be held accountable by others with like minded faith.

Looking at colleges as a spiritual quest adds a new level of challenges to an already difficult task. Finding a place that offers vibrant opportunities of fellowship as well as opportunities to minister is easier said than done. Visiting campuses and reading reviews just doesn't illustrate what really goes on behind closed doors and definitely doesn't provide valuable insights into the spiritual atmosphere of a campus. There are plenty of resources that judge a school's athletics, academics, party scene, campus safety, and even dining hall fare. But, when it comes to spiritual life, there are very few ways to evaluate a campus.

In the last few months, as I have begun to immerse myself in the college process. I have had to discover ways to unravel the mystery behind the true atmosphere of a university, and discern for myself what the tangible aspects are of a campus that I value most. I have discovered that communicating with students is the best way to get a feel for what daily life looks like. Contacting members of national organizations such as Campus Crusaders or Fellowship of Christian Athletes, has allowed me to hear opinions from people leading groups of faith within their school. I have been impressed with the honesty most of these students have shared and the insights they have provided. Emails have come back from the majority of students I've contacted with responses such as: *"Hey Whitney! It is awesome to hear that you are seeking to make a major decision in your life based on your faith. The question about X's spiritual culture is pretty broad, however I will try my best to give a sufficient response..."* And, *"My school has every spiritual group you can imagine. I've found the most soulful connections, however, through the smaller prayer groups. All in all you'll find kids who live for their weekend parties and then there are those who are on a spiritual path."* I have also sent out e-mails to chaplains, local churches, and

chapels on campus. I've been urged to "call me with more questions" or "stop by and visit my office when you're on campus."

The internet has also allowed me to look at the web-sites of many of the school's religious organizations, and in some cases they have helped me to better understand the wide array of opportunities available on particular campuses. I have also allowed myself to be open to other's opinions, and have been surprised by the amount of information the immediate people around me have. I've asked friends who are already in college what the "feel" of a particular place is and can usually discern from their reply if they've found a place to further their exploration of faith.

My interest in the spiritual feel of a college or university is based upon a desire to pursue religious studies as a major. I am not only looking for personal fellowship, but a school that houses a department of theology that doesn't hold any specific agenda. I've poured through materials, both printed and online, that speak to any theological slant a department might have. I'm interested in a nonsectarian Religion Department with a diverse faculty. One school of particular interest had a Religion Department comprised completely of white men. An email to the department administrator assured me that "a woman of color was joining the department this spring."

For me, the past three years of high school have been a challenge. At a time when most of my peers have advantaged themselves of newfound freedoms, I was learning how to live a deeper more spiritual life. Granted, I have plugged into a great group of supportive people, but everyday as I walk through the halls of high school, I feel somewhat different from most of my peers. By attempting to uphold a certain moral code, I find it difficult at times to relate to those classmates who fail to self-reflect or enrich their lives through spiritual engagement. Ideally, college would be a time where I could immerse myself within a learning environment where the lifestyle I embrace wouldn't be so readily looked down upon.

As a Sophomore I had the privilege of studying with a Harvard Divinity School legend. The class I took, *Jesus and the History of the Gospels*, allowed me to dive into the history of the New Testament and separate myth from history. I wrote theological, historical research papers and even though I was the only high school student, felt able to contribute to class discussions. This course ignited my interest in the historical adaptations of the Gospels but even more importantly, it assured me that I truly do love to learn in an environment that's alive with classmates eager for knowledge rather than being force to fill another requirement.

Last summer I spent a month living on the campus of an Ivy League school taking classes in Anthropology and experiencing a mock example of college life. I was shocked by the emptiness of the day to day rhythm and the apparent lack of

morals of my peers when presented with month of independence. Not only did I get a better sense about my college preferences, such as urban versus rural, or big versus small, but I also realized how important it is for me to be around people of faith.

Applying to colleges can be a degrading process. It appears that your personality is quickly stripped away as your identity is reduced to SAT scores, GPA, athletic records, and short paragraphs of canned responses. There is a cultural pressure to be accepted to socially elite universities and produce Ivy League bumper stickers for the back of your parent's mini-van. The whole process can feel like a never ending nightmare in which you are forced to sell yourself not on morals or character, but tangible achievements. Not only are you trying to determine if a school would be a good fit for you, but also the likelihood of that school accepting you. The process has much room for heartbreak, frustration, and confusion.

I understand the rigors of college admissions these days. It's pretty easy to tap into the toxic fear and dread swirling through the media as well as most any conversation with fellow juniors or even worse—their parents. But, I find that the schools that evaluate applicants on more than just a quantitative rubric appear to have a more soulful approach to admissions and ultimately may create a more balanced student body.

Last weekend my mom and I visited a college that seemed a possible match. While I've been disappointed with some of my previous visits to various campuses, I was extremely impressed by this university as a whole; especially the opportunities it provided in religious life. With 90% of the students living on campus, the school really felt like a community. The Academic Dean was a Philosophy Major in college and spoke with a genuine care and love for students. There were active fellowship groups, interdenominational activities as well as a central church on campus and a research center that explores faith and culture. The President of this nonsectarian school has been quoted as saying what a spiritual generation mine is. Given that my demographic is the most studied and yet, I feel, the least understood, this fellow got my attention. After visiting this school, I am assured that there really are colleges across the country that care about cultivating a spiritual climate.

I have only a few months until my first round of applications are due. It is a scary time, walking through this threshold of change, and being responsible for making some of the first real decisions of my life. I am confident that God has the perfect college in store for me—that there is a place where my spirit will soar and my faith will thrive. Yet sometimes, I wish God would get a move on showing me where that place lies.

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