



Helping Seniors Finish Strong

by Ben Burns

“I’ve gone to church my whole life, and my spirituality has always been an influence in my life. As I went away to college, I didn’t consider my faith in Christ an important part of who I was, and consequently, I didn’t care that I was continuing to turn my back on God. I turned to my friends in my dorm to find my identity, and got into drinking, drugs, and sexual immorality.”

You hear stories like this every year. And every time you hear about one of your students not walking with Christ in college, you feel sad and disappointed. You entrust yourself to the Lord—knowing you did what you could—but it still bugs you. You went into youth ministry not just to see kids come to Christ, but to continue walking with Him well past their high school years. You wonder how it happens that someone who was doing so well in your ministry could make such a big flop in college. You even wonder if you could have done something more to help them make the transition.

College Students Bail on Church

Making the transition into college is tough. According to a 2000 report (“Third Millennium Teens”) by the Barna Research Group, “more than seven out of ten teens are engaged in some church-related effort in a typical week. When asked to estimate the likelihood that they will continue to participate in church life once they are living on their own, levels dip precipitously, to

only about one out of every three teens. Placed in context, that stands as the lowest level of expected participation among teens recorded by Barna Research in more than a decade.”

Helping your seniors make the transition into college is not easy. They are extremely busy. And if they do show up to your events, they often have that “just try to teach me something” attitude that comes with being 17, and at the top of the food chain. But sometimes not getting your seniors ready really *is* your issue. Seniors may drift to the edge of your radar screen for this simple reason: they’re not strategic. You know they’re not coming back next year and if you’re honest, you want to spend your limited time with students who will respond to your influence.

Another reason seniors aren’t better prepared for college is that you struggle with not finishing well. When that middle-schooler or high school freshman comes to faith in Christ it rekindles every emotion you ever had when you first felt led to work with youth. You are intentional with them at events, you encourage their growth in the Word, and you coach them through some tricky times as they progress through high school. But when their senior year comes around, you feel them pulling away from you and your first reaction is to do the same. You tell yourself that you’ll try to do one thing relationally with them before they graduate, but it usually doesn’t happen because you’re both “too busy.” You start great, but finishing well with a student is more complicated.

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Strategic Planning
Youth ministry must accomplish long-range biblical goals.

Paul's Grad Plan: Four Principles

So what is your plan to finish well with your seniors this year? How will you send them off to walk with Christ in a new temptation-rich environment called college? When Paul was making his final address to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:17-38, he accomplished four things with them in his short visit on the beach that would also greatly help your seniors get ready for college. If you just took one full day out of your schedule and gave to your seniors what Paul gave to the Ephesian elders, you'd greatly improve their ability to make a healthy transition into college.

Reminisce.

First, Paul *blessed* the Ephesians by reminiscing about their time together. You have invested a lot of yourself into your seniors' hearts. Some of them have been with you for six years! Talk about the great times you've had together on retreats, mission projects and Bible studies. Break out the pictures and videos and re-live the fun times. Tell them how you have seen them grow in Christ, tell them how much they mean to you and tell them how much you believe in them and their future. Your verbal investment into your seniors

make themselves available. You're not just graduating seniors—you're sending missionaries.

Caution

Third, Paul *warned* the elders about the spiritual dangers that lie ahead of them after he would leave. College is a very tricky place. Loneliness, freedom from parents and pastors, stress from academic and social pressures, and the innate drive to try new things at their age set the stage for some powerful temptations—even at a Christian college. They are walking into an arena where alcohol abuse, sexual experimentation, Internet pornography, and – especially in a secular environment – criticism of God's Word are championed by "enlightened professors" and peers who want to live-it-up, now that Mom and Dad aren't around. And they are entering this environment without the support of an established Christian community they trust like yours.

Launch

Lastly, Paul committed the elders to the Lord and His Word, then released them to do His ministry. He said goodbye and formally closed the chapter on their time together. It's been said that "last

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will deeply shape how they see themselves and how they fit into Jesus' kingdom.

Encourage

Next, Paul *challenged* the elders to "keep watch over" themselves. You are probably telling your seniors they need to get plugged into Christian fellowship in college, but are you helping them find it? Starting over is extremely hard and lonely. You can help them by getting a list of churches or Christian groups on their campus for them to visit. You can also help them assess what *kind* of group fits their personality. An excellent resource is www.linczone.com, which will connect them to nine different national collegiate ministries.

Paul also told the elders to "shepherd the church of God." Give your seniors a vision for how God is using college students to change lives. College freshmen all across America are leading Bible studies and having great conversations about Christ on their dorm floors. God will use them mightily in college if they will just

words are lasting words" and Paul knew the power of saying goodbye in a formal way to those under his charge. That's exactly what your seniors need. They need to be released by you, the significant spiritual role model in their adolescent life. Don't let them just trickle away from your ministry because you were both "too busy." This is your legacy! Finish your time with them well.

During the blur of the final months of your students' senior year, trust the Lord that He can use you to still make a difference in their lives. Work hard to be intentional with them to the very end. Like an arrow well chosen and aimed on its target, release them well! 



Before starting Campus Crusade for Christ's College Prep Seminars (www.collegeprep.org), Ben Burns ministered to college students for 14 years at the University of Washington and at Lewis and Clark College. Ben has a M.A. in Exegetical Theology from Western Seminary and lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife Janet and three children.