

INSIGHTS

From an Insider

What Students and Parents Must Know About the REAL Cost of College

Roger Parrott, Ph.D.
President, Belhaven University

Serving as a college president for over 30 years, I've seen far too many Christian families make misinformed financial decisions about their university choice because they don't understand the real cost of college.

So I wrote this summary to tell you the inside story—because I care about you, and want you to have all the information you need to make the SINGLE MOST IMPORANT FINANCIAL DECISION OF YOUR LIFE.

Let's talk about money . . .

Christians don't like to talk about money, and that is appropriate—Hebrews 13 teaches us, "Don't love money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, 'I will never fail you. I will never abandon you.'" So we'd rather talk about things that matter most, instead of money.

However, when it comes to college, we need to have a frank talk about costs—because college is expensive.

Most families who consider a school look at tuition first, then guesstimate what they might be awarded in scholarships, and conclude the difference in those two numbers is the actual cost.

Tuition	\$30,000
<u>Scholarship</u>	<u>10,000</u>
Annual Cost	20,000
<u>Four Years</u>	<u>x 4</u>
Cost of College	\$80,000

But that could not be further from the truth! You're just getting started and need to drill deeper into the real cost of college.

Over the years, I've been heartbroken to see too many families miss the golden moment of Christian education—and what that can do in their students' lives—because they make a higher education decision based on guesses about money. But without understanding the real cost of college.

If you make a decision about Belhaven, or any other school, based on the calculation of tuition minus scholarships, you're making one of the most critical decisions of your life with wrong information.

Too often, in trying to save a few thousand dollars on the sticker price, students and families make uninformed financial decisions that cost them many times over what they're attempting to save.

So how do you figure the real cost of college? Let's look at all the factors that go into college costs:

College Expenses

Tuition Price
Room and Board
Books
Fees
Transportation

Source of Funds

University Scholarship
Residence Hall Scholarship
Church Matching Scholarship
Government Grants
Outside Scholarships
Government Loans
Expected Family Contribution (EFC)
Campus Jobs
Summer Savings
Gifts

Our expert financial aid team will walk with you through each of these components step-by-step, but I want to point out a few considerations that are especially important.

I know this is a long paper—but bear with me as I share all the financial insights I have gleaned from many years of service in higher education.

Money matters, the decision is important, and you deserve to know the truth about the REAL cost of college.

1. A scholarship is not the measure of a student's worth.

Schools give scholarships based on different factors. At Belhaven, we base our scholarships on (1) your academic ability, (2) your financial need, and (3) whether or not you're the type of student who is likely to gain the most value from a Christian education at Belhaven. Some schools give

scholarships for athletes (we do not) or for participating in specific activities like choir or band. Those scholarships are not measures of your value—schools simply give you less in "general" scholarship money in order to give you "merit" awards based on activities. This means you need to look at the whole package—and that picture emerges only after you've filed your federal aid forms.

2. The size of a scholarship does not answer the question of cost—but the bottom line does.

I've had students tell me they would rather go to XYZ school than Belhaven because they were awarded a scholarship bigger than what we could give them. The size of a scholarship is relative to the cost of attendance, so you may get \$15,000 from University A and only \$6,000 from University B, but if the cost of University A is \$6,000 more than University B, then you actually got a SMALLER scholarship, even though it seems like more money. Here's how the bottom line looks in both cases:

	<u>School A</u>	<u>School B</u>
Cost of Tuition / Room / Board	\$56,000	\$34,000
<u>Amount of Your Scholarship</u>	<u>15,000</u>	<u>6,000</u>
Real Cost of School	\$41,000	\$28,000

3. Be cautious of "tuition reset" schools.

It is becoming popular for some schools to "reset" their tuition by lowering it dramatically. This is often the signal that a school is in serious financial trouble. But more importantly, when they lower tuition, they lower scholarships by the same amount. As a result, students end up paying the same amount "out-of-pocket" even though the "sticker price" is much lower.

	<u>Before Reset</u>	<u>After Reset</u>
Cost of Tuition / Room / Board	\$56,000	\$46,000
<u>Amount of Your Scholarship</u>	<u>16,000</u>	<u>6,000</u>
Real Cost of School	\$40,000	\$40,000

4. Remember that location matters.

Many students come to Belhaven from California or New York because we're nearly half the price of schools in their region. For the price of a few plane tickets, they gain a huge cost savings. But we also have the advantage of being in a metropolitan area where stores, restaurants, and other services are abundant. If you go to school in a small town, those things cost more, plus you'll have to own a car. (We offer free bikes to students for getting around, if they want them.) You can save a great deal of money by not having a car at college—about half our students who live on campus don't have a car and thus save all the expenses that come with having one. Insurance, tag, gas, maintenance—these "hidden" costs of some colleges add up quickly, but are not necessary for the college experience at Belhaven.

5. There are two housing extremes of college living costs.

Big flagship state universities don't have enough housing. Consequently, you may get a room as a freshman, but you might be on your own after that. Others think it will cost less to live at home—and it will—but you still have to eat, drive, etc., so it's still not really "free." Plus, a significant part of higher education is learning to make it on your own, and that transition is much smoother from home, to university housing, THEN on to the world. It is tough out there on your own—Belhaven housing helps prepare the way at an affordable and "always available" rate.

6. Living costs have to be counted carefully.

Some students think it's cheaper to live off campus than in one of our residence halls or apartments. And if you're really frugal it can be. But don't forget to add in the cost of utilities, cable, internet, and other services included in on-campus living. With us, you have all that, as well as 24/7 security, ease of walking to class, prepared meals in the cafeteria (i.e., saving time grocery shopping and cooking), and reduced expenses associated with a car. A student might save \$1,000/semester living off campus, but is that worth what you miss living on campus? First-hand experience has taught me that students have better opportunities for gaining life-long friendships, getting involved, and engaging in a diverse range of ideas and activities if they live on campus.

7. Textbooks are expensive.

At most schools, college textbooks often cost \$500 to \$1,000 each semester. At Belhaven, our faculty are extremely conscious of cost, and work to pick less expensive books, use books that can be rented, and, where possible, assign free resources. In addition, at Belhaven we provide FREE TEXTBOOKS for your required courses in literature and math. Yale does that for high-need students—we do it for all students. Nobody else does that.

8. Watch out for additional fees—they add up!

Count the "fees" when you're looking at total cost—especially at state institutions. Public universities are likely to charge extra for parking, activities you may never attend, and tickets to games and concerts. In addition, special fees apply to specific classes you may want to take (and some of these fees are extremely high.) State schools continually raise fee prices in order to "keep tuition low" and make legislatures and taxpayers happy. To the school, it doesn't matter if money comes from tuition, fees, or room and board. The bottom line for them is this—money is money, no matter how it is charged to the student (fees, tuition, etc.). So public universities often bulk up high fees in order to keep more visible tuition prices lower. Be careful! At Belhaven, we do charge fees for some classes that are more expensive to offer—and that's fair, because those who gain the benefit also pay those higher costs. But all athletic games, arts events, theater productions, musical performances, visiting writer readings and workshops, scholarly symposiums, visiting lectures, and film screenings are free for students—including parking.

With all that said, please sit down with our financial aid team to get the full picture. They will walk with you through all the costs of a Belhaven education.

Still, I know the initial impression of “sticker price” at Belhaven can be intimidating.

Tuition	\$24,950
Room and Board	8,500
<u>Student Activity Fee</u>	<u>350</u>
Total “Sticker Price”	\$33,800

That’s a lot of money. But here’s how three freshmen students paid for their education this year. Each example is dependent on individual family financial situation—how much money the family makes annually, their assets, how many children they have in college, etc.

	<u>Freshman A</u>	<u>Freshman B</u>	<u>Freshman C</u>
BU Academic Scholarship	\$3,500	\$7,000	\$2,000
BU Arts Scholarship	0	0	1,500
Federal Grants	5,200	1,000	2,000
State Scholarship	500	0	2,000
BU Residence Hall Grant	3,500	3,500	3,500
BU Financial Need Grant	3,000	1,000	1,500
BU Church Matching Scholarship	500	1,000	1,000
<u>Outside Scholarships</u>	<u>2,000</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>500</u>
TOTAL SCHOLARSHIPS	\$18,200	\$13,500	\$14,000

With scholarships, the “sticker price” for these freshmen comes down significantly—from \$33,800 to \$15,600–\$20,300. That’s getting better, but still a lot of money—so how do they handle the rest?

First, students may borrow through the Direct Loan Program. There are two types of Direct Loans—subsidized and unsubsidized. The federal government pays the interest on subsidized loans while the student is enrolled at least half-time in college. On unsubsidized loans, the student either pays as you go along, or has the interest accrue and you start paying back that interest later.

Eligibility for these loans is based in part on the student’s expected family contribution and calculated financial need. To be eligible for a subsidized loan, the student must demonstrate financial aid need.

Families are not required to demonstrate financial aid need to be eligible for unsubsidized Direct Loans. In either case, the maximum amount a dependent undergraduate freshman may receive in direct loans is \$5,500—raised to \$6,500 for sophomores and \$7,500 the last two years.

So let's assume each freshman student borrows \$5,500 in each example as follows:

	<u>Freshman A</u>	<u>Freshman B</u>	<u>Freshman C</u>
Federal Subsidized Loan	\$3,500	\$1,500	\$0
Federal Unsubsidized Loan	2,000	4,000	5,500
TOTAL LOANS	5,500	5,500	5,500
Unmet Need	\$10,100	\$14,800	\$14,300

With loans, the balance due drops significantly: \$10,100 to \$14,800. We're getting there, but how are these students going to pay the remaining amount due so they can attend Belhaven?

The remaining amount due is often referred to as "out-of-pocket" expense. Many families pay this amount from a variety of sources, including savings, parent and alternative loans, gifts from family members, and summer savings from the student, to mention a few.

Some families also utilize payment plans (our Student Accounts Office will set this up for you) to fund all or a portion of the out-of-pocket. Payment plans allow the amount due to be spread over a period of months during the school year, typically ranging from 4-9 months for a semester plan, or even up to 12 months for an annual plan. Of course, the most desirable approach is to pay as much as possible of the out-of-pocket from current earnings and savings to reduce borrowing.

Let's admit it, there is no free ride in life, which makes summer savings critical for more reasons than money alone.

Students who invest in their own education with dollars they earn are more likely to take their education seriously and persist to graduation.

With this in mind, I highly recommend that students work during the summer to help pay a portion of the out-of-pocket. It is not uncommon for students to contribute between \$1,000 and \$3,500 from summer savings. This financial commitment on their part translates directly into a higher commitment to academic success.

So what about working during the school year?

Research shows that students who work a modest number of hours during the school year have a greater likelihood of succeeding in college.

No, I'm not talking about working 30 hours/week, but working 10-15 hours can help pay for books and incidentals during the school year. In addition, students who are approved for federal and campus-based work study can work during school breaks if they wish.

The “Inventory of College Finance” below will help you identify sources of funds from which you can pay for college:

✓ **Current Income**

Examine your monthly income and expenses. Are there opportunities to modify expenses so you can increase the amount you contribute toward the cost of education? Maybe you want a new car, but can that wait a year or two? If you really need a new car, can you purchase the less expensive model on your short list or buy used? The guiding principal is this—the more you can pay from current income, the less you have to borrow.

✓ **From Savings/Investments**

Do you have savings and investments that can be used? Estimate how much you can put toward paying for college each of the four years of enrollment.

✓ **Student Savings and Earning**

How much can the student contribute from savings and earnings? Even if you’ve started late, it is healthy for parents to help children make sure a portion of their earnings goes toward saving for college. This personal investment will teach life-long lessons about financial stewardship and responsibility.

✓ **Borrowing**

If you have to borrow, examine your options in terms of the cost of funds for various types of borrowing. Money borrowed to invest in education is a smart decision. And one that pays dividends for the rest of a student’s life.

✓ **Gifts**

If your child receives gifts from grandparents and other relatives for high school graduation, be sure a good portion of these gifts are saved for college. Help your student set a budget that includes both summer fun and the seasons of higher education for the long run.

All of these help reduce the final balance paid for college—but you may say, that’s all we have and we can’t afford any more. That’s where well-thought-out government loans can make a big difference. We can help you look at all the options when you’re ready to make a plan, so don’t feel like you have to figure it out on your own.

There are actually a number of ways to cover the out-of-pocket balance without overburdening your family.

1. Parent PLUS loans, or a number of other affordable payment options, can cover the full out-of-pocket costs. And many government loans offer deferred payments until your student graduates.

2. Belhaven’s work study program pays a competitive wage and offers on-campus employment with ease of scheduling. For example, a student might work 2 hours/day for a total of 10 hours/week. From that work, the student earns \$100/week, which adds up to \$3,200 per year!

Regarding campus jobs, did you know?

- Students can take advantage of federal student work study during “off weeks” in the academic year. This provides a great opportunity for students to earn extra cash during fall break, spring break, or the days leading up to Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.
- Students preregistered for the upcoming fall term can begin working in the weeks before fall term begins. Another source of “summer” income.

3. Interest-free payment plans spread out over 10–12 months can easily make your out-of-pocket expense affordable on a monthly basis for parents, grandparents, and students themselves.

So, let’s summarize how those three freshmen students above afforded an education at Belhaven (remember: Federal loan limits increase to \$6,500 for sophomores, and \$7,500 for juniors and seniors.)

	<u>Freshman A</u>	<u>Freshman B</u>	<u>Freshman C</u>
BU and Other Scholarships	\$18,200	\$13,500	\$14,000
Student Loans	5,500	5,500	5,500
Parent PLUS / Alternative Loans	3,000	8,000	7,800
Family Savings / Current Earnings	6,100	4,800	3,000
<u>Student Contribution / Savings</u>	<u>1,000</u>	<u>2,000</u>	<u>3,500</u>
TOTAL COLLEGE FUNDS	\$33,800	\$33,800	\$33,800
Monthly Out-of-Pocket (12 Month Plan)	\$508	\$400	\$250

I realize the monthly payment still may look like a lot of money, but these figures include coverage of housing and food for each student for 9 months out of the year! With this in mind, the monthly out-of-pocket starts to look very reasonable.

At this point, if you are planning to “save money” by going to a community college or state university, you should consider all other factors outlined below to make sure you are actually saving what you think you will be saving.

First, we’re happy to help you create an “apples-to-apples” comparison chart for Belhaven and other schools you’re considering. Let us help you map it out.

I remember one mother who made the most elaborate chart I’ve ever seen in order to prove Belhaven was less expensive than Ole Miss. She was my kind of shopper!

Also, keep in mind the above are examples—your particular experience will be dependent on your family circumstances and financial position. Our professional Financial Aid Team will help you understand (and maximize!) your award from Belhaven, including how our costs and financial aid compare with other schools you're considering.

In the end, whether Belhaven is the least expensive or the most expensive college you are considering, please remember that "lowest price" should not dictate your college decision. Another major factor is the "fit" between each student and their chosen university's academic offerings, job placement success, campus culture, and core values. Belhaven is superior in these regards.

Now that we have examined some financial plans that work, let's talk about some "cost saving" paths for college that usually don't work . . .

Because most families only make a college purchase one time (or at most a few times if they have more children), they develop "short-term" cost-saving plans that are not informed by "long-term" experience and the consequences of a "low-cost" front-end decision. Here are some short-term plans that often don't work:

1. "I don't want to take out loans for college."

Many families misunderstand the value of using college debt—especially loans that don't have to be paid back until you graduate. When making financial decisions about college, it is critical to understand the difference between "good debt" and "bad debt." Good debt is a loan in the present that is guaranteed to pay tremendous dividends in the future. Bad debt is borrowing for something that goes down in value.

If you take out a loan for a car, furniture, or computer, the value of what you bought begins to depreciate immediately—it is worth less after a year than when you bought it new. But if you take out a loan for a house or business, the value of the asset appreciates—it should be worth much more in the future than what you paid for it today.

Your education is the most valuable "appreciable asset" you'll ever own. College graduates make at least \$1,000,000 more each in their lifetimes than non-graduates. Spending more now (by borrowing) allows you to invest in a future that pays you back hundreds of times over.

On the other hand, skimping on your education now diminishes your value for the future. When used properly, college debt is "good debt"—an investment—because a quality education enables you to be financially successful and, even more importantly, to become the person God intends you to be.

In fact, research shows that 50% of evangelical students who attend a secular school lose their faith before they graduate. This loss of values, beliefs, and direction is a high price to pay in order to "save money."

I've had families tell me "we won't take out any loans because we want our child to graduate debt free." That is an admirable goal, but not necessarily the best strategy.

If you have the opportunity to borrow money now with delayed payment, at a low interest rate, to purchase an appreciating asset—why not pay it back later when you earn more? Plus, you get a tax deduction for student loan interest even if you don't itemize deductions.

If you are one of the few families that has *never borrowed for anything*—your house, business, car, an investment, or anything else, and this has been a pattern of your life—then no, don't take out a loan for college. You're rare, and stay the course of living completely debt free.

But if you have borrowed for those things, why draw a line about college debt when it comes to the most important investment you'll ever make? Shortchanging your future is not a good long-term savings plan.

I'm sure you hear stories of students stuck with enormous debt burdens for years after they graduate. But there are some important aspects of those stories you need to know:

- In many cases, those debt-burdened students have attended "for-profit" colleges (e.g. business, technical, and trade schools). Those schools are responsible for the majority of college loans in America. And those schools don't offer institutional scholarships, so they encourage students to take out maximum loans.
- Many students borrow much more than they need for the actual cost of school. Because the government allows students to borrow for living expenses, many students in America take loans up to twice the amount they actually need to pay for college.
- Some people earn multiple degrees without having a clear career plan—"professional student" is not a good career path. At Belhaven, our faculty and staff are committed to helping students graduate "on time" with clear plans for professional success.
- Credit card debt is a much bigger threat to college students than student loans. Cut those cards up if you're not paying the balance in full at the end of every month.
- If you develop a solid plan, you can pay off school debt in a fairly short period of time.

If, for example, you graduate from Belhaven with \$25,000 of debt and live carefully, you could pay off this loan in just 5 years. This assumes manageable payments above the minimum required by the government (\$115/week, \$6,000/year).

If you get a job making \$36,000 a year, setting aside \$6,000 is doable. A little pain earns you a lot of gain! And if you get a raise, and can pay an extra \$23/week, you could pay the loans off in 4 years, and save nearly \$1,000 in interest.

2. **“I will go to a Community College for the first 2 years and save money.”**

You could do that, and you might save some money, but it won't be as much as you think—and the cost to you academically could be very high.

Community colleges are “open-enrollment” schools, which means anyone can enroll. So, while in most cases you need a minimum ACT of 20 to be considered for acceptance at Belhaven, you'll be in class at community college with some students who scored 15 on the ACT. They are people God values, but they are not ready for college academic work. Consequently, faculty at community colleges structure classes for students at the low academic end, not for you.

You'll earn credit at a community college, but college is about learning, not just accumulating credits. **A good grade at community college does not guarantee that you have sharpened your academic understanding of important concepts that prepare you for success in life.** I've seen many students transfer to Belhaven from community colleges where they earned straight A's, only to have trouble passing our classes. There is little “iron-sharpening-iron” in your education if you go to a community college to save money.

In addition, many courses at a community college will not transfer as academic credit to a four-year school. Students with tons of community college hours in popular courses like first-aid, coaching, social skills, and other non-academic subjects will not be able to transfer those hours as progress toward a degree at any four-year college or university.

This means the community college “cost saving” route could be a waste of both time and money. *IF you are going to community college before coming to Belhaven, work with us while you're there. We'll help guide your academic plan so it will count when you're ready to transfer to Belhaven.*

On top of possible “wasted classes” at community college, students also use up their federal financial aid window. The government allows only 12 semesters of federal aid. If you go to a community college, and all of your credits don't transfer, your window for finishing a degree will be extremely tight. What you hoped to “save” could be lost when government aid runs out and you have to pay the entire balance of college cost out-of-pocket!

Another factor to consider is the drop-out rate—which is extremely high at community colleges. For every 10 students who enter community college, only 3 will graduate within three years. It doesn't help that the majority of classes at community colleges are taught by part-time instructors.

In contrast, at Belhaven you'll work with highly skilled faculty *who also act as your academic advisers* and who keep generous office hours every week to help you reach your academic goals. Our faculty are convinced God brought you to Belhaven, which means they see “pushing you to become your best” as both a responsibility to you and the Lord.

Along with the dramatic difference in academic quality, not one class at a community college is taught from the foundation of a biblical, Christian worldview. That alone is a significant price to pay in order to save some money on tuition dollars.

Athletes—let me share something with you. Athletically gifted students often go to community college thinking they will get more playing experience in order to receive a DI scholarship. It hurts me to see community college coaches lead players on by recommending that route, when coaches know the likelihood these athletes will make it to a DI program is very slim (otherwise, they would have recruited them as freshmen). These student-athletes not only don't get the scholarship at a big school (using up 2 years of their eligibility), but also never really get the team participation, meaningful lifetime friendships, and other benefits that come from playing college sports all four years on one team.

The hard reality is that the same top-flight athletes that attend community college to “get their grades up” are the same athletes who will most likely be recruited back to Division 1 programs. The other players will transfer to a D2 or D3 program, but will have by then lost ground academically based on the quality and type of courses they took.

A complete university education from one school provides a unified, uninterrupted experience as an undergraduate that you will never duplicate if you attend a community college for the first year or two. You might save some tuition dollars, but you lose part of your golden moment—all the ways a Christian college campus can transform your life.

3. “I will go to a public university because it costs less.”

Can I be blunt? No, it won't—in fact, it will probably cost more.

Yes, their tuition might be lower, but their fees will be higher, and their scholarships are likely to be much lower. And you still have to live somewhere and eat, no matter where you go to school.

But for the sake of discussion, let's assume it is much less expensive to pay tuition at a public state university. It often still doesn't add up to saving money because . . .

Only 19% of public university students are able to graduate in 4 years. The average time it takes to graduate is 5 years and 8 months. At big schools, classes fill up because they don't offer enough sections for the number of students enrolled.

It's bad enough that you'll be in a class of 250 students, but when you can't even sign up for classes you need because they are filled, your education slows down dramatically. And don't forget, most of your smaller core classes during the first two years at a public university will be taught by graduate students, not full-time, terminal-degree faculty (but they will be at Belhaven).

So let's do the math.

At Belhaven, you'll graduate in 4 years (unless you change majors several times.) If you go to a state university, you'll take about three semesters longer on average to graduate. That means you're paying tuition, fees, room and board, for an extra 18 months.

But more importantly, you're a year and a half late getting into the job market, so you've lost that much in earnings. This is something investment specialists call an "opportunity cost"—the benefits an individual loses when they choose one alternative over another.

Here is how that breaks down (let's assume the room/board expenses are about the same no matter where you go to school):

- For four years at Belhaven the tuition may be about \$35,000 higher than what you'd pay for those same four years at a State University.
- At the State U you'll pay for an extra 3 semesters of tuition totaling about \$15,000 if you're eligible for in-state tuition.
- Because it will take you an additional 18 months to graduate from a State U than if you went to Belhaven, you'll lose \$52,000 in income if your first job pays \$35,000 a year. And you'll be paying more room/board during this time without income to offset it.

Not counting room/board, attending Belhaven would save you at least \$32,000 over the real cost of attending a state university—even with in-state tuition. Plus, you'll have a year and half on the career ladder before the state university graduates even show up for their first day of work.

Think you'll finish faster than most students at a public university? Then let's do the numbers with you attending a state school, but taking only one year longer than you would at Belhaven, and the State U still ends up being \$15,000 more expensive over a five-year period.

If you come to Belhaven, you don't get to buy student-priced tickets to SEC football games while attending Belhaven instead of the state university, but you can buy a lot of their regular-priced tickets for what you'll be saving!

4. "If God wants me at Belhaven, the Lord will show me by providing the money."

That's what the last section was all about—God HAS provided a cost-saving and affordable way for you to enroll at Belhaven. But, let's get past dollars and talk about the biblical values you're embracing.

First, Amen to what you're saying! God DOES always provide a way. He has never failed me, and His timing is always just right.

But does that mean the only way to know you're supposed to attend a Christian university is if the Lord somehow provides an unexpected source of income? That is probably not how you lead the rest of your life following Christ, so why should a college decision be different from everything else?

For example, we don't buy the least expensive car on the lot (and one with significant mechanical issues!) just because God doesn't provide a discount that makes the quality car we really need as affordable as the least expensive, broken one we don't need. It's the same with putting a new roof on our home, carefully choosing a contractor, hiring an electrician, and finding a trusted mechanic—the quality of the final product matters! Similarly, we need to be careful when we weigh options between a Christ-centered university and a secular educational institution—getting what we pay for when we pay the least may not lead to getting what we need, or want.

If we're not careful, we can fall into several skewed lines of reasoning:

"I'll go to a Christian university if it is both better and cheaper. But if it's not cheaper, then a secular school will do just fine because I'll be saving money?" I say it in love, my friends, but that's not seeking God's best.

"If God wants me at Belhaven, I'll get enough scholarships so that it won't cost more than a state university or community college." Reread the sections above to see the actual costs of those two paths—Belhaven won't cost you more in the long run, and, in fact, will probably cost much less.

"The campus ministry at a public university will make up for choosing the least expensive, secular option." Please note again what research shows—50% of evangelical students who attend a secular school lose their faith before they graduate! The peer-pressure pulling students toward the negative side is enormous on most campuses. The quality of life and faith must be considered in the gain-and-loss cost analysis when choosing between a Christian university and other seemingly less expensive options.

At a public university or community college there is NOT ONE COURSE taught from a biblical worldview. EVERY course at Belhaven is taught from the foundation of our Christian faith.

In understanding the financial ramification of making big decisions, I like how Tim Keller—the founding pastor of Redeemer Church in New York City—tells the story of deciding to plant that church years ago.

Here is a good account of what happened:

When Tim Keller first came to Manhattan to start Redeemer Presbyterian Church, people constantly asked him, "Are you sure God has called you to start this church in New York City?" His answer was always, "No."

Then he'd explain:

I think God did. I see an opportunity. I don't see anybody else taking the opportunity. I feel an obligation to come. I think it's a good idea. I think God is calling me.

But I can't be absolutely sure. I can be sure that I must not lie; it's in the Bible. I can be sure that I must not bow down to idols; it's in the Bible.

I'm sure of a lot of things that are God's will. But as far as I know, I won't be sure that I'm called to plant a church until it happens.

When people persisted, saying, "Didn't you have a peace about it?" he'd reply:

No, it was too hard of a decision. It was too scary.

*But I know this: **guidance is as much something God does as it is something He gives.***

Therefore, I knew by selling my house, moving up here, and signing a 3-year lease that, if I failed to plant a church, God was preparing me for something I couldn't envision.

In other words, we stand in God's guidance. God directs even if we can't see it. The only omniscient one in the universe always works in our lives and hearts, making us into the kind of people who walk according to His ways.

It is in trusting God and seeking His Kingdom that we find true freedom in our decision-making.

In considering Belhaven, or making any key decision in life, we're going to miss out on the best God has for us if we only follow God's way when He provides an easy path with money on the table up front.

Those who have done significant things for the Lord rarely had an easy path, and often their path demanded financial stretching.

I don't think studying at Belhaven, where you will grow and learn in a vibrant Christ-centered environment, will be a financial risk. But even if it does cost you more, God will provide benefits and rewards (tangible and intangible) throughout your life that honor this decision to put Him first in your college choice.

A few years ago at Belhaven, we had two sisters attending who were from the Midwest. Their parents were farmers, and finances are always tight if you're in family farming.

Both young women worked campus jobs, spent their money carefully, and took out loans. Their parents made sacrifices as well. Every evening, the father and mother walked through their fields praying for their crops to grow so they could pay their school bill because their daughters loved being at Belhaven University.

Both sisters graduated in four years, paid their school bills along the way, found great careers, and ended up with manageable student loans. Most importantly, both of those young women are deeply grounded Christians filled with passion to serve the Lord and find God's best for their lives.

That's priceless!

Well, if you've read all the way through this paper—thanks! That's a lot of material. But this decision is too important for me to skimp on details and not to shoot straight.

This is how I see it after serving as a university president for over 30 years. Too many times I've seen the heartbreak of not getting this decision right, so I wanted to write this to help you. I pray it gives you a framework for thinking about the real costs of college.

One last example might help to put everything in perspective:

Right now I want you to think of a car you'd like to buy that you could afford. (Really do this, because this example is not theoretical.) Have a specific car and a price in mind?

Okay, here's the kicker . . .

Now imagine that the car you have in mind is the ONLY car you'll have for the rest of your life. You don't get another one. The investment you make right now is what you have to live with for the rest of your life.

Would you buy the same car?

Or maybe one of higher quality? One that will last longer? One that might force you to spend more now—or even borrow more now— but one that would be worth it because you'll have it forever?

Here is the point—you're going to have what you invest in your education for the rest of your life. It is worth it financially to stretch now in order to get the lifetime benefit of a Belhaven education.

It is a tough decision—I'm praying for you as you count ALL the costs.

This paper has focused on the financial side of a college choice decision. If you're interested, a few years ago I wrote another paper detailing the bigger questions of college choice.

Let me give you a thumbnail summary of my concerns in that paper, and if you want to read more, the entire article is printed at the end of this letter.

COLLEGE CHOICE
Caring Christians Making Careless Decisions

The intense competition for recruiting university students has masked the reality of ever-worsening, diluted and polluted values in higher education. The unfortunate result of not knowing the real story is that far too many smart Christians have been duped into making dumb college decisions.

Students and families are fooled by name-brand marketing campaigns, as well as the glamour of campus amenities and prestige rankings. Or, too often, Christian families buy the naïve assumption that any school will do, as long as you attend a good Bible study or church near-by.

I'm deeply concerned that smart Christian families are being swayed to follow culture's value of higher education—**Size, Sports, Status, and Sizzle**—rather than the Godly criteria that would help students find the school that best matches their needs. In contrast, at Belhaven University, our focus is **Character, Curriculum, Caring, and Christ**.

The Lord created you with all the gifts you need to become a person who fulfills the wonderful purpose God has for you. We need to work together to bring those gifts to their full potential.

At this most strategic decision point in your path, I'm praying the Lord will put you in a place where all the best God has put into you can bloom and grow.

Belhaven University is a wonderful place for so many students. Maybe you should be here?



Roger Parrott

President

President@Belhaven.edu

P.S. Once you've been accepted to Belhaven, you're always part of our family. So even if you determine you won't enroll here now, you're always part of us, and we welcome you to come back home should the Lord send you back our direction—maybe for your masters or doctorate?

At Belhaven "we're-all-in" with you for this college journey. You'll find here a remarkable faculty and staff who treasure you as a child of God. We believe in you—or we wouldn't have accepted you. So now, and always, Belhaven is "your Haven."



ARTICLE REFERENCED IN MY LETTER

College Choice *Essential Questions for Christians*

DR. ROGER PARROTT, PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY

I've been blessed with a unique vantage point from which to view nearly every secret about university life and administration. I'm a third generation college president who has served in the corner office for twenty-two years. In fact, if you stop by my office, you'll see the desk where I work was my grandfather's desk when he was a president back in the 1940s.

So when it comes to understanding universities, and especially how we go about persuading high school students to attend our institutions, I know the process inside-and-out. As they say, I know how the sausage is made—and sometimes it is not pretty.

During the last decade, the competition for students has convinced some very smart Christians to make dumb college decisions. They are fooled by name-brand marketing campaigns, as well as the glamor of campus amenities and prestige rankings. Or, too often, Christian families buy the assumption that any school will do, as long as you attend a good Bible study near by.

I'm deeply concerned that smart Christian families are being swayed to follow culture's value of higher education—Size, Sports, Status, and Sizzle—rather than the Godly criteria that would help students find the school that best matches their needs.

As someone who knows the industry of higher education from the inside, I often share with students and families a fresh perspective to consider as they work through this critical decision of college choice.

I believe many families are making one of the most important decisions of their lives based on inappropriate criteria. And if for no other reason than the investment of time and money (not to mention, how it will shape nearly every other outcome of a graduate's life), families need to be equipped with the right standards to help them choose the school that fits them best. The typical criteria of college selection are highly inadequate for making a well-informed decision:

- A. Most families reference *US News* rankings, but don't realize those scores are skewed in favor of the type of institutions the editors attended.
- B. All students study the quality of academic programs, but forget to examine as carefully the character of the individual who does the teaching.

- C. Some parents urge students to consider enrolling where they attended a quarter-century ago, but don't realize that while the university campus may look the same on the outside, the worldview in the classroom has dramatically shifted.
- D. Too many students make their decision (research tells us) within seven minutes after they get out of the car for a campus tour, thus, deciding on the appearance of the campus.
- E. Many students desire to attend college with high school friends, not realizing that university life will be so dramatically different that a whole new crop of friends are more likely to become their focus.
- F. Often families base this decision on money. And while that is an important factor, this critical juncture of life is too important to be guided only by the prospect of saving money. At the same time, higher tuition does not assure quality.

I'd recommend that prospective students and families move beyond these misleading criteria and probe the schools under consideration by asking two key questions that will reveal the mission and ethos of any university:

Two Key Questions for College Choice (1) *Are these people I would want to be like?*

Education is not indoctrination, so universities don't turn out cookie-cutter students—but they do tend to mostly come out flavored the same. During the most impressionable phase of life, the many years immersed in the culture of a campus will frame the worldview of students, and will shape their path and priorities.

Great buildings and pretty flowers may be featured on the prospective student campus tour, but the meaningful evaluation of the campus comes in asking the question, "Are these people I would want to be like?" For good or for bad, you will tend to become like the people of that campus because the warp-and-woof of the educational process is the defining—and then refining—that occurs in the interaction between faculty and students.

Reading the mission statement of a university won't tell you much about the place because these pronouncements all sound high and lofty, but understanding the people will tell you everything. A school's embraced mission is not revealed in a document, but in how that mission is lived out as faculty teach students, coaches respond under pressure, and how students are guided to set their priorities.

At every university you will find some wonderful people who are worthy role models. But in American higher education today, they have become a minority while the collectively skewed values of the dominating majority have imposed an unhealthy culture on most campuses. Consider these trends of deteriorating values across higher education as illustrated in these statistics from the revealing book, "The Five Year Party" by Craig Brandon.

- In 1961 university students spent 24 hours studying each week. Today, studying has dropped to 8 hours weekly.
- The cost of college athletics has sky-rocketed and the tuition hikes carry many of those additional costs. Duke spends \$20,405 for each member of the golf team (plus scholarships), and the average salary of an SEC softball coach is now over \$250,000.
- Senior professors in Ivy League universities now take sabbaticals every third year rather than every seventh. Last year, 20 of Harvard's 48 history professors were on leave.
- Binge drinking dominates the culture of most universities where 44% of students are classified as binge drinkers. Few Friday classes are offered because the campus party starts Thursday evening.
- The majority of students take six years to complete their four-year curriculum.
- "Professors strike an implicit bargain with their students: we will give you light workloads and inflated grades so long as you leave us alone to do our research." – *The Economist*
- Only 10% of students say they are "totally engaged" in the educational process, while 40% report being "totally disengaged."

At the schools you are considering, talk to the faculty, staff, and students. Probe until you understand their priorities, values, and aspirations—you'll tend to become like them, so use them as a mirror to see how you fit.

(2) What does the university require of every student?

The fall semester after the 9/11 attacks, the University of North Carolina implemented a significant academic policy—they required all freshmen to study the Quran. I believe that to understand our world, and to share the message of Christ's love, we must understand other religions, so I agree we all need a better understanding of Islam (although I feel assured required reading of the Bible is never likely to be recommended by the UNC faculty).

As a university insider, when I saw that announcement my immediate question was, "How many committee meetings did it take to get that passed?" I know the process of a campus, and I assure you it required layers of meetings to make this decision.

Because university students are very busy—every academic major, sport, club, and art has many requirements—the institution, as a whole, can require only a limited number of activities of all students. So what a university requires of all students reveals what they value most. And knowing what they require of every student—what they value—will be the most accurate description of the school.

At Belhaven we have four requirements of all students—and these reveal what we value most for our students.

A. We value gifts. We require a freshman course called Mosaic, which is designed to help students identify their gifts and understand how to best use their gifts while studying at Belhaven and as a life-long pattern. We believe God has uniquely gifted every student, and our responsibility as educators is to help them discover those gifts and build on their strengths.

I believe one of the problems of education is that we spend too much energy trying to make up for the weaknesses of our students rather than building on their strengths. God didn't give us gifts for them to be minimized. So, at Belhaven we get every freshmen started by taking the time and resources to help them identify and understand their gifts and develop a pattern of life that will utilize their strengths.

B. We value a biblical worldview. We require a one-of-a-kind general core curriculum that helps students understand how big ideas and trends have developed through the ages and how our Christian worldview stands distinctive. Our "Worldview Curriculum" is built around a two-year history course covering the full span of civilization. Synched with this history course are survey courses in literature, philosophy, art/music appreciation, and Christian thought. Through this curriculum students can see how the pieces of big ideas fit together as worldviews have progressed through the centuries.

At a practical level, in the same weeks our students study the history of the Renaissance, they also read the philosophers and literature of that period, study the art and music of the Renaissance, and understand how Christian theology and the Church developed during this time. This Worldview curriculum serves as the foundation of all our academic programs, and furthermore, we assure that worldview perspectives are built into every academic major at Belhaven.

C. We value worship. We require all students to attend chapel once a week because we believe that all teaching of truth must be built on a foundation of God's Truth. The purpose of Chapel is to bring together the entire campus in a shared spiritually enriching hour that allows us collectively to be challenged to explore the depths of God's Truth and love.

In the same way we require students to study the truth of physical science, the arts, and literature, there is no contradiction in requiring students to study God's Truth. As the study of chemistry cannot be completed from a textbook alone, the study of God's Truth also needs a "laboratory" for experiencing and understanding, for it is not enough to study the Bible without having exposure to the worship of God and an opportunity to understand the relationship offered to us in Christ.

D. We value family. Belhaven is one of only two schools in America that require a course in marriage and family for graduation. "Kingdom Life and Work" is a course that examines practical biblical teaching to help students balance their career with responsibilities at home.

No matter how successful our graduates may become in their profession, they won't be happy without the proper balance of a happy home life. If our graduates are to be prepared for the breadth of God's calling in their lives as women and men of faith, they must value their families more than they do their paycheck.

By examining what we require of all students, you can clearly understand the heart of Belhaven University—we value gifts, a biblical worldview, worship, and family.

Take that same question, "What do you require of all students," to any institution, and you'll understand what they value. And if they don't have any requirements for all students, that too, speaks volumes about the emptiness of their institutional core.

The Bottom Line

I have awarded nearly 10,000 diplomas during my years as a university president. And every one of those students has a story—and every story is unique. I can't guarantee how students will come out, because, after all, the real test of a University's effectiveness isn't understood until they return for their 50-year reunion when we see how they have stood up to the tests of life.

But I do know some research-based facts that drive home the immensity of the decision families are making about which university to attend:

- Of the Christian high school students who choose a public institution, at the end of their college career, 52% will no longer identify themselves as born-again nor will have attended any religious service in the prior twelve months.

- The more conservative a student's background, the larger the decline in religious commitment if the student attends a non-Christian college.
- Three-fourths of university students say they are "searching for purpose/meaning in life" and an equal number expect their school to help them develop emotionally and spiritually.
- Students almost always reflect the values of the faculty of the school they attend.*

Those are the facts. I believe Christian families need to weigh those realities before making their decision about which school to attend.

Our Purposeful Stewardship of Belhaven's Mission

As I've watched the oil leak tragedy in the Gulf unfold, I am convinced that the long-term negative impact of this oil crisis in the Gulf is not going to be the oil that was spilled—but it's the chemical dilutants that have been added to our waters that could have a toxic impact far beyond the damage from the oil.

Scientists are now predicting that when an oil mess is diluted like this, it enables the most dangerous portions of the oil to get embedded in the environment for a very long time.

That is analogous to what has happened to many universities who were founded on Christian ideals. Their waters were once clear and pristine. But when they got attacked for their faith and the waters got polluted, instead of just cleaning up the mess, they started to dilute their message so that the attacks would be more tolerable and easier to manage.

And in diluting to deal with the pollution, rather than cleaning up and protecting what they treasure, the damage from the attackers became embedded and changed their environment forever.

From Harvard and Yale a century ago, to a host of modern examples, schools have slowly diluted their Christian worldview in order to counter attacks to their biblical message. Or, a handful of fundamentalist schools have simply created their own waters that are cut off from the rest of the environment, so that their self-made lake can be kept artificially clean.

At Belhaven University, God has allowed us to serve in the world but not be of the world—understanding and reaching the culture without running from it. And we have done so only because we have been careful stewards of teaching an unchanging biblical worldview.

We have a diverse student body from a variety of Church backgrounds and some with no spiritual foundation at all. Our greatest strength as a university is found in majoring in the majors of faith:

- The uniqueness of Christ as the only way to the Father
- The justification by faith alone
- The authority and inerrancy of Scripture
- The transforming power of the Holy Spirit
- The reality of eternal life to come.

Like the pillars beside our fountain that symbolize Belhaven University, these timeless pillars of faith are the immovable center of our campus.

But coupled with this, we also are committed to a spirit of Christian grace that respects varying priorities within the array of evangelical thought and worship expression. So while being deeply committed to the majors of faith, we are also committed to a culture of grace when it comes to welcoming the breadth of God's people when there are differences among us in the minors of the Christian life.

Like the fountain next to our pillars, we have a spirit of grace that allows the water to move freely—within preset limits—so that students can discover the fullness of the Christian life, ask the hard questions of faith, and learn to appreciate those who come out of different traditions of the evangelical Church.

In what matters most in faith, we don't budge—in diversity of expression we are accepting. Most Christian schools cannot do this, and Belhaven's unique outlook is a mission to be cherished. And this is a mission that allows us to cherish every student.

Because of this stewardship of an unchanging biblical worldview and our balance to include the breadth of God's people, Belhaven University is a treasure among Christian higher education.

- We teach our students that God's Truth is absolute.
- We help them understand that the beliefs by which they live matter.
- We enable students to see God's sovereignty in every arena of life.
- We ground every aspect of our curriculum and campus activity in biblical principles.

This is Reformed Higher Education at Its Finest.

We are not a nominal Christian university with a wholesome campus lifestyle, whose only integration of faith in the classroom or on the athletic field is to have a short prayer at the beginning of each session and then to teach from the mainstream of secular thought.

Instead, everything we do has a depth of biblical understanding and activity that prepares our students with a Christ-centered worldview that will enable them to stand up to the tests of life, rather than flounder in their faith as soon as they independently confront the culture.

There is no calling more important, no asset of this University to be more highly cherished, and no greater responsibility to hold than to teach an unwavering biblical worldview and to be purposeful stewards of that mission.

The Best Question I've Ever Been Asked

When prospective students are considering Belhaven University, we tell them exactly who we are and where we stand. If other institutions were as forthcoming, I believe we wouldn't have so many smart Christians making dumb decisions, because they would understand exactly what they are getting into when they select a university.

As I visit with prospective students, at the end of the conversation I usually say to them, "If God leads you to Belhaven University, we'd love to work with you." Although I'm quick to add, "But if God doesn't want you here, don't you dare come here. All that matters is that you are exactly where God wants you to be."

I can say that confidently because we are convinced that God has handpicked every student attending Belhaven University. And because they are a gift to us from God, we are purposeful stewards of every single one of them.

Throughout the years, I've done scores of Q&A sessions with prospective and current student groups, and have heard about every question you could imagine—to the point I can nearly always anticipate the questions. But last fall I hosted the group of student Resident Assistants for breakfast as I do every year. And after sharing some of the plans for the year, I gave them an opportunity to ask questions about anything they wanted to talk about.

That morning I had a question I've never been asked—but I think it is the most important question students are most wanting answered by the university to which they entrust their future. The question wasn't the normal inquiry about buildings, programs, costs, procedures, parking, or food service—it was simply, "Do you love us?"

Yes, we really do love our students, and I see that love lived out in thousands of ways across our campus. To genuinely love our students takes courage from the faculty and staff because loving students through the growth process of these years will often be a messy and jagged line of progress. But it is just the way Jesus taught that ministry should be.

Often I pray for prospective students and their families as they are working through this difficult college choice decision because it is such a complex and weighty decision. To make it worse, they are too often given misleading information and base their decision on the wrong criteria.

I don't pray that all prospective students will all come to Belhaven—we don't have room for all of them. Rather, I pray that each one will clearly understand God's choice for his or her life, because the cost of making the wrong choice is far too high. ■

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