

You Make the Call

What College Freshmen Need to Hear from their Youth Pastors

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It's the phone call at the bottom of your list.

You know you need to make it, but you've been putting it off.

On one hand, you feel a little guilty because you know it's probably important, but on the other hand, you're afraid of what you might learn. That fear keeps you a bit on edge when someone asks, "How are last year's grads doing at college this fall?" With a growing pit in your stomach, you fake a smile and answer, "Oh, great—they're digging into college life, and are starting to get involved in Christian community on campus and at a local church." But while you hope this might be true, you really have no idea.

You have a hunch that they might be having a tough time in their first semester. You have a hunch that making friends and finding community is probably a real struggle for them. You have a hunch that the temptations to get involved in the drinking and party scene are huge—especially for the kids who were more straight-laced in high school—and you're not entirely sure how firm they are standing.

But you haven't picked up the phone to see if you're right.

Recent research seems to be confirming your hunches. We at the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) have been conducting several coinciding studies that are all part of our College Transition Project. One of these studies was a qualitative research project involving in-depth interviews with former student leaders from various churches who were in their sophomore year of college at the time of the interviews. In two-hour face to face interviews, we asked them to reflect back on their freshman year and respond to a number of questions about the transition, their youth group, and how their youth group could have better prepared them for their transition. As it turns out, that phone call might be more important than you think.

1. Finding Friends First—and Fast

Students' biggest priority during the first two weeks of college is to establish friendships and figure out where they fit in. Across the board, the freshmen we interviewed indicated that these first two weeks are absolutely critical for creating a social life. The primary—and most accepted—way to do this in college is to engage in the party scene. All too quickly, partying becomes a regular part of the weekly routine for many freshmen.

Often, kids who come out of youth groups have been told over and over what "not to do." We're usually pretty good at giving them a list of temptations to avoid, but perhaps not as helpful in equipping students with healthier strategies for other real-life needs like finding friends. Our research affirms that the first few months of college can

be incredibly lonely for students who are away from family and life-long friends for the first time, and who may show up not knowing a single other person on campus. Desperate to begin to build new relationships, students go where those from their immediate living situation (roommate, floor-mates) go to find friends. The last thing they want is to be “left behind” on a weekend night. And once they’ve tried the party scene they feel hypocritical if they then add commitments to Christian groups, simply layering “Christian” onto their new identity. Others intentionally decide to shelve their faith and “do the college thing,” intending to pick faith up again later after they’ve enjoyed the party scene guilt-free for a while.

In *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*, sociologist Tim Clydesdale describes this freshman phenomenon as an “identity lockbox”. Students recognize that faith is “good for them” in some way as part of an adult lifestyle, but see it as something to put on hold in order to attend to the more immediate needs of their college lifestyle. Clydesdale recalls from his extensive research:

As one freshman put it, “I feel like God dropped me off at college and said, ‘I’ll be back to pick you up in four years’.” Note that this student, like many of his peers, planned to be picked up when he graduated—in the same place and by the same driver. It is not that his religious identity was unimportant (quite the contrary), only that he did not see its relevancy to his college education and campus experience. [1 \(#fn-1-a\)](#)

As youth workers we need to help kids form an integrated Christian identity that both sustains them across the friendship gap and helps them remember who they are if they fall prey to the common temptations of desperate friend-seeking behaviors. When we make that call to new freshmen, it’s important to remember that students probably don’t need the sermon about why they shouldn’t be drinking and having sex. We may have opportunity to call them to accountability, but their primary need is to be known and loved for who they are. We can be a voice who assures them of their identity in Christ and of God’s unchanging love, while also reminding them that their extended faith family can be a safe place to be real about the struggles they are facing.

2. Alcohol Rules...But it’s More about Friendship than Getting Buzzed

It’s no secret that most college environments embrace a huge party scene—often starting on Wednesday and ending with a Monday hangover. A 2007 study from Columbia University revealed that around seventy percent of all full-time college students in the U.S. drink, while half (3.8 of the 7.8 million) binge drink, abuse prescription drugs and/or abuse illegal drugs. [2 \(#fn-2-a\)](#) While many students obviously dive into a pit of experimentation with other drugs, alcohol remains the college student’s primary drug of choice. This seems to be true whether on the campus of a state or private school, large or small.

So why is alcohol so important to college freshmen, even those who were raised in the church and who were actively involved in youth groups in high school? And why do some students choose not to get involved in drinking?

As we discussed above, the primary reason students give for participating in the “party scene” is that it’s where “everyone” is. One student said, “I don’t think I’ve met many people who don’t drink here. I mean it’s not looked down upon if you don’t drink, but it’s really hard to meet people.” When freshmen first arrive on campus hungry for new friends, sometimes they don’t feel like they have other options.

The second reason students give for drinking excessively is related to the new-found freedom of being away from their parents for the first time. “It’s kind of like, ‘Wow, I can do whatever I want.’ At home, even with drinking, you always had to go home to your parents so you had to be a little careful.” Though many students drink first in high school, the difference is in the amount and frequency of alcohol consumption. Nearly all of the drinkers we interviewed talked about at least one night where they “did something stupid” and drank too much, ending up feeling pretty sick (and often regretful) afterwards.

One of the students stood out in her response to the alcohol question. She did not drink at all in high school, and was raised in a home that was very loving, open, and supportive of her. Her college roommate is also a Christian. Towards the end of the first semester, she and her roommate were really grappling with the drinking question, feeling like they weren’t able to hang out with their friends when they went off partying. She reflected,

I didn’t expect to drink in college...and that was true to a certain extent. But I noticed how entrenched alcohol is in the college culture. If I’m not going to drink, my options, my opportunities and the people I spend time with are very limited. It was a big deal at the beginning of the year, for both me and my roommate...and so after thinking a lot about it, we both came to the conclusion that if I don’t drink, I come across as ‘holier than thou’...and I don’t want that. This year I did consume alcohol, but I never pushed my limits... I wouldn’t know my friends as well if I hadn’t been with them at parties.

This was probably the most reflective response we heard from a student wrestling through the issue of drinking. And despite her thoughtful and difficult journey regarding alcohol, this student still hasn’t been able to tell her parents (or her youth pastor) about the decision she made.

As youth pastors, we need to better prepare students to think about the alternatives to alcohol available in college. We did hear from students who chose to avoid alcohol altogether and instead to get involved with campus Christian fellowship groups as a way to make friends. One way to help students find these alternatives is to have someone on your ministry team get in touch with college pastors and campus ministries where your students are heading to school (or where your freshmen already attend) and connect them with one another. [3 \(#fn-3-a\)](#)

3. Sustaining Faith and Identity in College

Underneath the frenzy of finding friends and taking risks, college freshmen still remember the faith that sustained them in high school—their youth-group faith that once seemed so real and vibrant. But often that faith is just a memory instead of a current reality. Many students we interviewed said they missed the “feeling of God,” which led them to ask whether or not God really exists at all. Many reflectively identified that they were on a downward spiral in their faith, which they thought was the result of their personal lack of effort, motivation, and fellowship with other believers.

Faith seems to be directly connected to freshmen participation in high-risk behaviors. From our longitudinal studies of college students who came out of high school youth groups, one noticeable and consistent trend has been that higher risk behaviors are correlated with lower faith integration, especially when it comes to the decision to drink alcohol.

Furthermore, those who did not drink in high school displayed a stronger increase in alcohol consumption than those who were already drinking. A similar trend emerged with sexual encounters—high school seniors who reported abstaining from sexual activity show a significant increase in sex across the transition to college. Taken

together, it seems that the greatest risk in the transition may be to the students who abstained from these risk behaviors in high school. And faith maturity is linked to these decisions: those with a deeper intrinsic faith (meaning their faith consists of an internalized set of beliefs more than a set of outward behaviors) and those who relate faith to their life choices more consistently are the students who also report less increase in risk behaviors.

In the midst of this scene, there are students who thrive spiritually at college. Though we are far from understanding the complex dynamics involved in sustaining a thriving faith through the freshman year, we have noticed a few consistent similarities among such students.

One of the comments we heard most often from thriving students was that church had been a part of their families' lives. As one student described, "I've grown up going to church. My parents always believed in God and had a relationship with God but it wasn't as dominant in our lives. During high school they both started going to church more and got really involved, and it was completely God who changed their lives..."

Another factor commonly evident in students who maintain vibrant faith is consistent, quality youth pastors and small group leaders. In fact, small group leaders were often noted as the individuals besides parents who have had the most impact on students' lives. Also consistently, these small group leaders remained in touch and involved in their lives across the college transition.

Why the Call is Critical

When we asked college freshmen to reflect back on their first year of college as well as their prior youth group experience, we asked them what they thought might have helped them in the transition. Two of the most consistent responses among students were that they wished someone from their high school youth group would have contacted them after they had entered college, and that they would have liked more practical training describing the college context and relevant issues they might face, along with discussion about the transition and how to make it easier. Many noted they would have liked to hear from college students or graduates to learn from their experiences. And when asked what they wish had been different about their high school youth group, the most common responses centered around wishing they had maintained contact with either friends or youth group leaders (or both) post-graduation.

So when you finish reading this article—or maybe right now—you might want to re-think the call at the bottom of your list. Maybe making the call right now could make a difference in the life of a student who's struggling to make sense of life and faith in the midst of their first semester.

Action Points: Helping You Make the Call

There's a lot you want to know about how that freshman is doing, but clearly you don't want to just jump in and ask a direct question like, "So how much have you been drinking?" Here are a few tips for getting into that conversation. Begin the conversation with general questions about how they're doing, then let the conversation move deeper:

- What's gone well for you since you graduated?
- What challenges have you encountered since arriving at college?
- How's your roommate? What's your floor/hall like?
- Who are your closest friends so far, and how did you meet?
- What do you usually do on the weekends?

You may want to note that you've heard from a lot of other freshmen about the amount of partying that goes on during the first year of college. Then ask, "What's that like at your school?" Again, if they don't start to talk about their own experience, you can ask, "What's it been like for you?"

You also want to know how your students are doing spiritually in college, but you're not sure how to get at that in a phone call. Here are a few suggestions for asking meaningful questions about college faith experiences:

- What has your spiritual journey been like so far at college?
- How have you found the spiritual scene on campus? What are the Christian groups like?
- What's it been like to look for a church?
- How have you felt about your connection with God this semester? How are you investing in your relationship with God? What's it been like to balance that with all of the other pressures and work of college?

This article was originally published at fulleryouthinstitute.org (<http://fulleryouthinstitute.org>) in October 2007.

1. Tim Clydesdale, "Abandoned, Pursued, or Safely Stowed?: The Religious Life of First Year Undergraduates" (Social Science Research Council Essay, 10/9/2006), 2. Article can be downloaded in PDF form at <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Clydesdale.pdf> (<http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Clydesdale.pdf>) This article summarizes the research in Clydesdale's book and draws upon additional research he has conducted since the book publication. [↩ \(#ref-1-a\)](#)
 2. Joseph A. Califano Jr., National Center of Addiction and Substance Abuse, "Wasting the Best and Brightest: Substance Abuse at America's Colleges and Universities" (Columbia University, 2007). [↩ \(#ref-2-a\)](#)
 3. One major effort being made toward connecting new Christians heading to college with other Christians is being championed by the Youth Transition Network. Incoming freshmen can check out <http://www.liveabove.com> (<http://www.liveabove.com>) for access to a number of resources, including help with finding potential Christian roommates. [↩ \(#ref-3-a\)](#)
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