

Appendix

Thinking Your Way through College: For Christian Students in a Secular University

In this book I have dealt with issues that are relevant to any thinking Christian out of the university or it - faculty or student. I want now to discuss ways students can think Christianly as they do their academic work. If you are a student, I would like to address you directly. Think of me as a kindly professorial uncle (fathers have little authority these days).

If you want to make your time in college worthwhile - an experience of genuine education in which you are deliberately trying to think God's thoughts after him - give these suggestions some thought. Then put into practice the ones that apply most to you.

Get an Education

1. To be educated is to have at least a passing acquaintance with a broad range of ideas. So take as many general humanities courses as you can squeeze into your academic program. Or take an extra year at it. If you are planning to be an engineer, or a doctor, or an accountant, enroll in art history, surveys of English or world literature, music appreciation, philosophy. If you are majoring in the humanities, take a few science courses even if they are not required. I especially recommend literature courses for social science majors, for I believe that at least as much can be learned about who we are as human beings from literature as from the social sciences.
2. Take advantage of the fact that books of all types are available to you regardless of your chosen specialty. Annie Dillard once asked her Chinese interpreter about getting a book from a public library in China:

"What if you were an engineer and wanted to borrow a book of literature?"

To my astonishment Song Hua burst into laughter. He doubled over as if kicked, he gasped for breath, he hugged his ribs and stamped his foot. I looked down the back of his neck. Gradually his head rose again; his face was splintered with hilarity. He gave me a sidelong "oh, you card" look, and said, as clearly as he could, "But you couldn't . . . if you were an engineer . . . get to read . . . a book of literature!" And off he rolled again into squalls of laughter.

3. Take the tough courses in everything. Avoid the one you can sleep through.
4. Choose courses that match. If you are a history major, when you study eighteenth-century Europe, enroll in eighteenth-century English literature. And vice versa. You can write papers that will both integrate your learning and dazzle your professors.
5. Take courses in "the philosophy of" your subject; find out what intellectual presuppositions undergird your profession. Courses like literary criticism, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of education examine the foundations of thought in these respective disciplines. They are often not required in an undergraduate program. But take them as an upper-class student anyway. They will raise the questions you should be asking of your studies, even if the answers examined are not Christian.

Roll with the Punches

6. Don't be afraid of unusual ideas that challenge your own views. And don't be afraid of challenges to Christianity. So what if your professor finds out you are a Christian and thinks you must be a "fascist-authoritarian type"? You know better. The intellectual underpinning of the Christian faith is as strong if not stronger than that of the alternatives. You may not understand this as you first face individual challenges, but you will as you scramble for answers.

7. Speak up in class. Ask questions that make both you and your professor think. Intellectual sparring will help rid you of bad thinking and will strengthen your mental muscles. You will have more of a mind with which to worship God.

Seek Community

8. Find others in your classes who are Christians. Get together with them to share your academic concerns in the context of Christian community. In your InterVarsity chapter of college Christian fellowship, form subgroups to (1) discuss the challenges you face in the classroom, (2) deal with the implications of your studies for your Christian faith and your Christian faith for your discipline, (3) pray specifically for each other, your professors and classmates.
9. Sponsor lectures by local and visiting faculty and professionals on the relationship between their discipline or profession and the Christian faith. Listen to those who have been wrestling with these issues and have the wisdom that comes from experience.
10. If your university has a Christian study center nearby, like the Center for Christian Study near the University of Virginia or the MacKenzie Center near the University of Oregon, take some courses in religion, theology or Bible. Often, too, Christian professors from your secular university will offer at the center special courses integrating Christian faith and their academic discipline. These can be priceless.
11. Whether or not your course work takes a Christian perspective into account, develop on your own a solid understanding of the Christian world-view. This book is just a start. Move on to books like Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*; Charles Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University*; David Gill, *The Opening of the Christian Mind*; Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* and *Recovering the Christian Mind*; and Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Loving God with All Your Mind*. See the bibliography at the end of this book for details of publication and further suggestions.

Study Worldviewishly

12. Ask world-view questions of your textbooks and your professor. For example, in psychology, ask: What does Skinner (or Freud, or Maslow or Piaget) think it means to be human? What distinguishes people from other forms of life? What are our basic problems as human beings? How can they be solved? Compare the answers you get to the way you respond as a Christian.
13. Read books and articles by Christian professionals in the fields you are studying. Thirty years ago when I was an undergraduate, few Christians were doing serious academic work as Christians. Today there are hosts of Christians in most academic fields, some at the very top of their professions. Find out who these are in your areas of specialization. Read their work. Attend professional meetings and meet them personally. They will be delighted to encourage you and at least send you away with arms sagging from a heavy bibliography. See the suggestions in the bibliography of this book for places to start.
14. Join the professional organization of Christians in your academic field and attend their local or national meetings. The American Scientific Affiliation, for example, has been serving Christians in both natural and human sciences for some forty years. Its journal alone, *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (formerly the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*), is worth the dues of the organization, which are reduced for students anyway. Other organizations are listed in the bibliography of this book.
15. Write papers integrating your understanding as a Christian with what you are learning in your courses. Don't write to evangelize your professors, but to express your growing understanding of how your faith relates to your academic work.
16. When professors seem especially helpful, talk with them after class. Meet with them in their office or over a cup of coffee in the union. Find out how the things they teach and think are lived out in their own lives. You may develop a rapport that will allow you to let them know your goals and aspirations as a Christian.

17. If you find yourself getting in over your head, seek Christian friends and share your questions with them and your pastor or InterVarsity staff worker. Lots of Christians have sunk before they swam. But when they finally surfaced, they have swum longer and further than those who just let professors ferry them across the academic waters.

Don't Worry about Grades

18. Don't worry about grades. Be in college for an education. Grades might help you get your first job. An education will help you keep it. More important, with an education from a Christian perspective you will know why you are working in the first place. Therefore, choose your profession or the direction of your postgraduate life with kingdom values in mind.

The Special Demands on Christian Students

If these eighteen suggestions seem overwhelming, you have caught on to the fact that being a Christian student is very demanding - more demanding than just being a student. To succeed in college, a mere student has only to do well in the terms laid down by the university - its faculty and administration. To succeed as a Christian student, you have to do all that plus consider the whole enterprise from a Christian perspective. You have to develop not just an educated mind but an educated Christian mind.

For this reason you may find it impossible to get your normal college education in just four years. So? Take five or six.

In fact, I recommend taking a year or two just to study the Christian faith in relation to your intended profession. A number of Christian colleges and graduate schools have programs designed to link secular education and the marketplace. Two outstanding ones are New College Berkeley (California) and Regent College (Vancouver, B.C.). A year or two spent in directly studying the Christian faith in relation to the surrounding culture will make a major difference in your effectiveness as a Christian in the ordinary working or academic worlds.