

the other side of graduation

Preparing Students for the Road Ahead

By Chris Renzelman



Strategic Planning

Youth ministry must accomplish long-range biblical goals. Therefore, to sustain an intentional, long-term ministry to youth and youth workers we seek to avoid superficial programs that are ends in themselves.

Close to 2.9 million high school seniors will graduate this spring.¹ Eighty-five percent of them plan to attend college. A small fraction – 4% – plan only to work, 6% expect to join the military, and 4% are unsure or have other adventures in mind.²

Often in youth ministry, we are consumed with present responsibilities and miss a window of opportunity with our seniors. The pattern of students dropping out of church typically starts when they earn their driver's licenses, but becomes most visible with seniors. Many youth workers, although frustrated by the disappearing act, tolerate it and end up with a "soft focus" on seniors.

It is vital that we aggressively take on this challenge rather than just tolerate it. Recent national surveys show this loss to be in the hundreds of thousands of students. The Southern Baptist Council on Family Life reported that 88 % of children reared in evangelical homes leave church at the age of 18, never to return.³

To counter this negative trend, we must give attention to what we do for our *seniors before they graduate*. We can also continue to help students *after they leave our ministries*. Here are some ideas of what is being done:

Senior Year: Before They Leave

- Some organize a "seniors-only" class in the fall; others start one in January.
- Senior trips are quite common; some have a mission emphasis. Other groups discuss transition issues while celebrating at Six Flags, etc.
- In some rural communities, seniors are given responsibility to run the youth ministry.
- Groups with strong college-age ministries have allowed seniors to begin attending the college group prior to graduation. Some have a "transition retreat," celebrating their past with the high school group and welcoming the future with the college ministry.

- College prep retreats or seminars have provided great value for both parents and teens. Two sources that can help you are www.collegeprep.org and www.collegetransitiongroup.com.

- College tours are popular, here's some options: 1) A virtual tour can be taken on most campus websites. Start with www.christiancollegementor.com or www.christianconnector.com. 2) College Fairs annually make nationwide tours; check www.gospelcom.net/naccap/fairs/ or www.nacac.com/fairs.html. 3) Most colleges have preview days; contact colleges for details.

- 4) Self-designed multi-campus tours. Road trips are always fun with seniors and juniors who are thinking ahead. Minimize the costs by asking the colleges to feed and/or house your students. If help doesn't come through the college, local college ministries often will help as they might benefit in the future from new relational connections.

- Several invite graduates from previous years back for a visit or a panel discussion.

- Churches or local Networks sponsor special services of recognition, such as a baccalaureate service, organized by the school or teams of parents and students working together. Some churches dedicate part or entire services toward their graduates.

- Graduation gifts of various kinds, such as books, Bibles, CDs, etc. Your local book store has ideas or check out www.GRAD2005.com to see a favorite choice of many youth leaders (note the free copy). A student's music & media collection goes with them to college.

Beyond High School

Youth workers need to do everything possible to strengthen parent-teen relationships. Youth pastors and lay workers will be here today, but probably gone tomorrow. I recently told a college youth ministry class, "Both of my daughters called me today, one to say "hi" and the other with a question.

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To my knowledge they didn't call the youth pastor; they called their dad."

Most vocational youth pastors have a short "life-touch window" with students. Parents have a longer window; we need to help them *interact with* rather than *react to* their teens. Youth workers who help parents and students communicate better at home will be preparing them for the road ahead. There is great value in surrounding a teen with caring adults who share the same – or stronger – values than those held by their parents. But they should never replace the parents' role and responsibility as their children move toward adulthood.

Another way caring adults can invest in graduates is through "prayer and care packages." Churches have done this with success, often delegating this to volunteers. One church has a multi-paneled display, with each page dedicated to a graduate. A picture and map shows their current location, description of what they are doing, and how to pray for them. Students featured have said, "It's nice not to be forgotten."

Caring peer relationships are a big part of healthy development. These ideas might help students with relationship-building during this important transition time.

1) College Walk (www.collegewalk.com) provides transition resources, as well as a way to locate and notify campus ministries that students are coming their way. Most youth workers will tell their graduates to plug into a good church and/or college ministry. Many college ministries make a special effort to reach out to incoming freshman. Collegewalk.com connects both interests.

2) Another successful method is to physically go on campus and assist students to make connections with individuals and ministries that will serve their needs best. A new ministry, Ministry Edge (www.ministryedge.com) uses technology to help students build relationships for what comes next, beginning while they are still in high school.

3) The most important relationship is a graduate's personal one with the Lord. Once students leave your ministry, you can still encourage their growth with excellent online resources sent as "things to think about" e-mails or a newsletter. Look at www.probe.org, www.boundless.org, www.solidsounds.org, www.backtothebible.org and www.ivyjungle.org for some suggested content.

The Hourglass

An hourglass can illustrate our passage through life. The *top* of the glass is birth and the *bottom* represents death; the *squeeze* in the middle is adolescence. Most students are gathered together in the middle/junior high and senior high years. Couple that reality with the issues going on in their adolescent world, and you have a very strategic window of time to be touching lives. They are dealing with new relationships, academics, developing sexuality, independence, vocational decisions, and more; all of them bring change and stress in the lives of adolescents and their parents.

What a wonderful time to be a discipler, coach or mentor, helping shape these formative lives! That's a huge part of what our ministry involves, as 1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV) says: "*We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*"

The impact of our opportunity is often determined by a good baton pass from the top half of the hourglass – the pre-junior high time – to the lower end after high school. We can radically improve dropout percentages with strategically-planned ministry, at both of these transition times, helping students stay strong in the journey ahead.

The *three pillars* of the hourglass can represent Knowledge/Wisdom, Relationships and Character. Working together, they give support, stability and strength throughout life's journey. Youth workers and others can have a strategic role in forming each of these pillars.

President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" initiative should be a great incentive for us in youth ministry. Whenever you hear that phrase, be mindful of our biblical mission in Luke 15:4-7:

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"

With all the labor, love and spiritual investments we make through our ministries during these adolescent years, it would be a shame to lose it all because we drop the baton! 🔄



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¹ National Center for Educational Statistics: http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/proj2012/ch_3.asp.

² A Gallup Youth Survey asked teens about their life goals and career aspirations, and specifically inquired about their plans after high school. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/content/login.aspx?ci=10318>.

³ Southern Baptist Convention, Council on Family Life, report to their 2002 Annual Meeting: http://www.exodusmandate.org/art_christian-education-resolution-sbc.htm.