

Embrace the Christian Grad School Experience

Why you should consider a faith-based school for your graduate education

By Dr. Shonna Crawford

Choices abound for the potential graduate student. For Christians, one primary question resounds among all those choices: Why should I attend a Christian graduate institution? Even students who have attended a Christian college ask this question. Some believe they already have a solid foundation in their faith and don't need to go to a Christian grad school.

So what advantages are there for those who want to advance their education at the graduate level under the tutelage of professors who teach from a biblical, Spirit-led perspective? On the other hand, if a secular graduate education might be a good option instead, what pros and cons does the Christian student need to consider? Ultimately, how does the future grad student make the best choice for this stage of life and career?

Adopting God's Plan

I still remember the classroom I was sitting in as an undergrad student at my Christian university when one of my favorite professors asked who was interested in pursuing a master's degree. I casually elbowed my friend, and we looked in awe at so many of our confident peers who knew an advanced degree was in their future. At that time in my life, I had my eyes set only on being the first in my family to graduate with a bachelor's degree.

Fast forward just two years, and I found myself enrolled in a master's program, learning under the same professor who had inquired about my interest in graduate school. Yes, I decided to pursue a master's degree at the same faith-based university where I earned my bachelor's. And today, this professor continues to impact my life and career as a strong Christian mentor and friend. I am thoroughly convinced Christian higher education is something of great value, not only at the undergraduate level but at the graduate level as well.

The reasons graduate students choose a school or program are often very different from those of under-graduate students. Life changes after college, and graduate students' needs reflect these changes.

Often graduate students find themselves balancing coursework with full-time employment. These students need programs that allow flexibility in scheduling. Some graduate students are motivated by the career change an advanced degree will bring. These students may be looking for a program with an accelerated track to complete their course work quickly. Still other graduate students work in fields where a master's degree is required for an entry-level position. With these and other logistical needs at the forefront, many prospective grad students may question their need for faith-based education as an adult learner.

I serve as chair of the academic department from which I earned both bachelor's and master's degrees. God's call and my university's appointment to this position are a testimony to the lasting impact of Christian higher education. Through the investment of Christ-centered professors and peers, I

grew into someone who was able to see myself through God's eyes, leaving behind my plan for my life and embracing the plan God had laid out for me. I would not be where I am today spiritually, academically and professionally without my experiences in a faith-based graduate program.

Enjoying God's Best

Christians who are prospective graduate students will want to consider four advantages to choosing a Christian graduate school.

First, professors at faith-based universities serve as Christian mentors not only in the classroom but also in a chosen field of study. This provides graduate students with unique opportunities to watch and learn as these professors demonstrate day to day what it looks like to be Spirit-led in a professional capacity. Many graduate programs might offer courses related to ethics, but the opportunity to see a mentor in action – solving problems, making decisions, working through issues, collaborating with other professionals and exploring texts and materials, all through the lens of a Christ-centered worldview – is invaluable. In other words, students see firsthand what it looks like to be a Christian dentist, a Christian educator, a Christian researcher or a Christian biologist. In my master's program, I learned as much in the classroom from my professors as I did outside it about what it means to be a Christ-like role model in my field and in many other facets of life.

Second, faith-based graduate programs provide opportunities for students to grow in their relationship with God in new ways. Developing a Christian worldview looks differing in a graduate school setting than in an undergraduate program. Spiritual development is bolstered through relationships with peers and professors in addition to the benefit of a Christian worldview in the curriculum.

The most profound opportunities for growing in faith are rooted in the foundation of graduate learning. The student develops academically from a focus on practice at the bachelor's level to a focus on theory at the graduate level. This also applies to our pursuit of Christ and impacts our spiritual growth. As theoretical understanding in a selected field of study grow, they flow into the personal and spiritual aspects of the student's life.

In other words, graduate students in faith-based universities have opportunities to develop spiritually through approaching academics in more complex ways. The thinking skills we develop in graduate school often impact the depth of our spiritual and personal lives as well. When we reflect on our beliefs regarding academic theories, we cannot help but bring who we are as Christians – our identity in Christ – into new realms of thinking. The Bible tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (see Rom. 12:2). This kind of transformational renewal is evident in many Christian graduate programs and profoundly impacts our faith for a lifetime.

Third, one of the best lessons I learned in a faith-based graduate program is the difference between climbing the ladder of success and servant leadership. Throughout graduate school at most Christian universities, there is – no doubt – a certain level of rigor in the classroom similar to that of grad study at most state universities. The standards are high. The demands on students' time leave them sweating as they run from project to project, often while managing full-time jobs, graduate assistantships and family responsibilities. However, in Christ-centered graduate programs, the drive behind the rigor is grounded in the notion that students must be equipped to serve God and people with

excellence. This is in direct opposition to the worldly notion of competition – working hard to get ahead of the person beside you striving for the same job, prestige or promotion.

In my graduate program, I learned that serving God through serving others must be our first priority. Consequently, we depend on God to show us favor in our chosen field of study and career path. James 4:10 says, “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” We can be confident that God’s way is the best way for making a difference in our world today. Many of our Christian universities are speaking this message loudly, from professors who lead by example to peers learning side by side as they pursue Christ and His kingdom. In a world that fosters unhealthy competition and a do-whatever-it-takes-to-get-ahead mentality, Christian graduate programs point us toward Christ and, in turn, toward loving and serving the people around us. After all, He tells us, “Whoever would be great among you, let him serve you” (Matt. 20:26b).

Fourth, although many private Christian institutions charge higher tuition costs than state schools at the undergraduate level, they are often more competitively priced at the graduate level. Therefore, students who elected to bypass Christian education at the undergraduate level due to cost might be surprised by the reasonable tuition costs at the graduate level. Christ-centered graduate schools may be more accessible than many prospective graduate students would assume. We all know cost is a huge factor dictating college decisions in the U.S. today, but I would propose that it is only one of many factors that should guide all prospective students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Christian education is worth the investment when your life’s cause is truly Christ.

God calls us to work in a variety of fields. He not only calls ministers to serve in churches, but He calls each of us to a vocation – or many of us to several vocations throughout our lives – to impact people in our world today. Pursuing His calling warrants positioning ourselves to be empowered by the Spirit academically, spiritually and emotionally. Faith-based graduate programs are undoubtedly worth the investment and consistently provide a greater value to graduate students’ lives and careers than secular programs.

Awaiting His Direction

Ultimately, future graduate students can make the best choice for graduate school through spending time in the presence of the Lord awaiting His direction. He may guide and direct students to pursue a program not readily available at a Christian university. In some cases, a secular school may make the most sense for a student for a variety of reasons. For instance, when I sensed God’s call to return to graduate school to work on my doctorate, the Lord directed me to a program of study only offered – in my region of the country – at a secular university. This school was the largest in my state and offered the doctoral program I felt the Lord had called me to pursue. So, after earning two degrees at a Christian university where my faith was built and encouraged, the doctoral program at this state university invigorated me academically and spiritually. I found interacting with my peers, who came from a variety of religious backgrounds, most interesting. And while the professors were never overly Christian as those I was accustomed to at the Christian university I attended, they supported and encouraged my faith and worldview while helping me consider multiple perspectives.

It seems there is no one-size-fits-all option for graduate students. Instead, there is a myriad of choices, from online to blended learning to seated programs offered in both Christian and secular universities all over the world. Prospective graduate students can be left feeling bewildered about

making the best choice. It is clearly most important for students to allow the Lord to lead and guide them to the graduate program that best fits their academic, spiritual and career goals. Ultimately, future grad students should choose a graduate program to empower them to continue becoming the Spirit-led servants of God they are designed to be.

Christian graduate programs have much to offer. The rigor and depth of knowledge are second to none. The faith-based teaching and learning environments serve as a catalyst for academic and spiritual growth. The relationships built with peers and professors impact God's vocational calling on graduate students' lives in unique ways. Choosing a Christian graduate school is certainly worth the investment!

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