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Book Review

REVIEWED BY CINDY NIGHTINGALE

What parent doesn't want the best education for their children? What teacher doesn't desire that his students graduate and keep growing, learning, maturing, and leading? What American adult, and many in foreign countries, doesn't think that a Harvard education is one of the most desirable? For many parents and teachers who have sweat blood establishing classical Christian schools to educate their children, the next step into college can be a puzzling one. Though convinced that classical Christian education at the preparatory level is essential, isn't choosing a university simply a matter of narrowing it down with a few key questions? For instance: "What does the student want to study and which colleges have good reputations in that field? Which of those are geographically and financially accessible to our family?" That's all there is to it. Right?

Virtually all of the college websites and most of the other college guidebooks will give lots of facts and figures (many of them irrelevant) and trumpet the schools' strengths and desirable aspects. Some tell you how to write a stand-out essay or where to find the dollars to pay for it all, meanwhile assuming that choosing a college is the easy part. But, like all the education leading up to this point, ideas have consequences. *Choosing the Right College*, on the other hand, assumes that the choice of school is the most important and therefore, the most difficult, decision students and their parents will have to make. It comes at the problem with the realization that information provided by the college itself or funded by the college will likely compromise the ob-

jectivity. But an even bigger problem is the guide's definition of "good education." Is the essence of a "good education" one that prepares the student to land a high-paying job, or introduces them into the circles of power and prestige? Perhaps it is one which exposes them to "diversity" and marginalized cultures or teaches them critical thinking skills. Maybe it's an education in which the *student* designs the

entire course of study or is it one which focuses on technology to prepare them for the modern world?

If any mix of the above is your goal for

Choosing the Right College 2005 *The Whole Truth about America's Top Schools*

edited by Jeremy Beer

ISI Books, 2004, 1000 pages, \$28

higher education, this book is not for you. But, if you dream of an education that is more noble and less utilitarian, you've found a treasure. Christian colleges are among those profiled and the writers are quick to point out when they suspect there may be some mission drift in progress. This guide does review 125 schools, but more importantly it gives you questions to ask, things to observe on a campus visit, and trends to consider when you contemplate *any* school of higher learning, not just those listed. (These questions are also available online: www.collegeguide.org)

Choosing the Right College describes itself thus:

In selecting the 125 schools to be profiled in this guide, we have been careful to include those institutions generally considered to be "America's top schools." Thus, we have included the top forty most selective national universities and the top thirty-five most selective liberal arts colleges according to...rankings...by U.S. News & World Report. We have chosen fifty more schools... We think that many of these schools have adhered im-

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Book Review

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pressively to the unfashionable concept of liberal education...and wanted to be sure to commend them...

The guide then goes on to profile each institution in "Academic Life," "Political Atmosphere," and "Student Life." Because the book is independently researched, the information comes from school literature and web sites, magazine and newspaper articles and interviews with administrators, professors, and students.

Generally, in the Academic Life section, the researchers are looking for a true core curriculum. They try to determine the best departments and the best professors (and which courses and departments to avoid), the quality of teaching and student advising, and how bad grade inflation is. If a core curriculum is not in place, can the disciplined student choose from courses that are offered to provide a core curriculum for himself? In a highlighted box, the guide shows eight specific courses which together would provide a makeshift substitute for a true integrated core. If available, the courses cover these areas:

1. Classical literature (in translation)
2. Ancient philosophy
3. The Bible
4. Christian thought before 1500
5. Modern political theory
6. Shakespeare
7. U.S. History before 1865
8. 19th century European intellectual history

(The rationale behind this list is available

in a book, *A Student's Guide to the Core Curriculum* and can be downloaded for free at: www.collegeguide.org)

The Political Atmosphere section examines the degree of political correctness observed in course offerings, professors and student activities. If there have been any recent controversies or scandals, they are discussed in this section.

In the Student Life section you'll learn about what it's like to be a student at that school. There is a discussion of housing issues such as coed dorms and bathrooms, whether housing is guaranteed for four years, would a student want to live there anyway? You can also get a sense of how kids spend their time outside the classroom, the amount of crime on and around campus, and how much athletics shape the atmosphere and any tradition unique to the school.

Finally, with cautious trepidation, there are statistics about each school such as total enrollment, cost, SAT midrange scores of admitted students, percent of applicants accepted, graduation rate, etc. These can be badly distorted, of course, but they also can be quite helpful to assess whether your student's ability is a good match for a particular school.

If you've been concerned that when your student graduates from a classical Christian school she will be "...all dressed up with no where to go," this college guide will help. You will have the tools you need to assess colleges and universities whether or not they are profiled in this guide.

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