

Five Degrees Of A Downturn

Amid economic and cultural uncertainty, Christian higher education is taking on a new meaning at these growing schools



What do you get when you combine two unemployed parents, a family with no college graduates and one student with a high school diploma who's determined to get a university degree? You get Taylor Acthley, whose dream of becoming the first member of her family to finish college is coming true. The 20-year-old junior at Lee University in Cleveland, Tenn., is three-quarters of the way to getting her bachelor's degree in anthropology.

Despite her family's current economic challenges, Acthley made it her No. 1 priority to find a school that integrated her education with her faith. She knew a Christian college or university would cost more—faith-based institutions on average are more expensive than state-funded programs—but she also knew Lee had an intangible element that would make it the best place for her to accomplish her dream.

"I needed something to be a part of," Acthley says. "I needed people who were going to keep me accountable, to keep me moving so I could finish. I went in knowing I could meet my goal."

It was also important for her to have a family atmosphere at college. At Lee, as with most Christian institutions, she found an environment where her faith and values would be affirmed.

"What sold me on the idea is that everyone knows each other,"

she says. "It feels like a family. And that's what I needed—I needed a family."

Since stepping on campus, Acthley has frequently turned to her professors, guidance counselors and peers for advice and encouragement, and is grateful they share her desire to live like Christ.

Her choice to attend a Christian university despite the higher price tag isn't uncommon. In fact, it's becoming a noticable trend today on Christian campuses nationwide, to the surprise of many. Despite widespread belt-tightening that's resulted in rising tuition and dwindling financial aid, many Christian schools are experiencing substantial growth. And though some of the following schools have intentionally pursued higher enrollment numbers, all have found that their greatest selling point in a time of uncertainty is offering a biblically based education.

Regent University

"It's a long investment, a deep investment," says **Regent University** President Carlos Campo of the choice people make to get a Christian-based education. "When parents and students are making that investment they're looking more at other options and saying, 'I don't know that I want to go to a school that doesn't honor my faith tradition.'"

While the economy has languished the last two years, Regent has grown an impressive 22 percent. Campo says the graduate and undergraduate programs have shown growth, but he especially highlights the rise of the school's online ventures. In 2009 Regent's undergraduate online program was named the second best in the nation by the Online Education Database. As secular online schools experience declining enrollment, Campo says Regent's combination of faith and education has catapulted the school into a new arena where it has thrived.

He also attributes this rapid growth to the school's willingness to venture into new markets. Regent helps military officers take online courses through its Yellow Ribbon Program. Campo, who is also chair of the Alliance for Hispanic Christian Education, says Regent is also reaching out to the mostly untapped Hispanic market. He believes Christian university's traditional demographic—young white females—is quickly changing.

"Christian colleges and universities, especially over the last few years, have really been determined to represent the kingdom of God more fully," he says.

Southeastern University

✖ Farther south, in Lakeland, Fla., **Southeastern University** also reports growth in a majority of the school's major sectors. Roy H. Rowland IV, vice president of enrollment management for the Assemblies of God-affiliated university, says the school has grown in its adult-education and online-degree programs. (At press time, he couldn't confirm whether Southeastern's undergraduate enrollment had increased or decreased.)

Rowland says it's increasingly difficult to garner students' attention as they search for a university, yet the school's online degree programs have proved successful.

"The reality about an economy like this is that people aren't just going to quit their jobs and come out to Southeastern in Lakeland, Fla., to have a chance to study here," he says. "This is a technology world, an electronic marketplace. We're doing everything we can to enhance the classroom forum virtually."

Rowland adds that even though students may not meet their classmates or professors in a virtual classroom, they are still able to gain an education that is intertwined with their Christian worldview.

“The faith integration is within the classroom, so a lot of the discussion matters may stem off of that,” he says. Faculty often use Christian-based case studies to stimulate discussions, and students are given opportunity to weigh in with their own faith-based worldviews.

Wheaton College



The growth continues in the Midwest, at **Wheaton College** in suburban Chicago, where Director of Undergraduate Admissions Shawn Leftwich affirms there has been a rise in enrollment and retention rates. Leftwich says administrators were shocked to see that Wheaton’s already high retention rate of 94 percent had increased to 96 percent of students returning to the school in the last year.

“Obviously we feel very affirmed that folks would continue to make that sacrifice when it comes to finances and still continue to enroll at Wheaton, but I think they are really getting their money’s worth, and I think people realize ... that they’re getting a great education at a great value,” he says.

Leftwich also notes that while Wheaton hasn’t adopted new techniques to grow its enrollment, the school has been intentional about keeping up with social media trends, using Facebook and Twitter to reach out to students on a more individual basis.

Oral Roberts University

 **Oral Roberts University** (ORU) is seeing similar growth, though with a unique twist. Nancy Brainard, vice president for enrollment management, understands how difficult it can be for students—and their parents—to make the decision to attend a private school.

“I know that it is a commitment on the part of these families and one that requires sacrifice,” she says. To that degree, Brainard says many ORU students rely heavily on government aid

programs and participate in various scholarships to sustain themselves in school.

Yet she also believes that the university attracts students with an internal drive that surpasses financial hurdles and economic worries.

“At ORU we are blessed with a student body that is focused on getting to a place where they’re doing something in life that is bigger than themselves,” she says. “That call, that drive, that’s a kingdom call.”

To nurture such a desire to change the world, ORU doesn’t only focus on study-abroad classes. Brainard says most students see their surrounding neighborhoods as ripe for the harvest of souls, which makes their classroom education even more applicable. Because ORU incorporates faith into secular fields, they are naturally able to mesh their budding careers with their belief system.

“They are not just learning about business, they are learning about ethics and integrity in business from a perspective that is kingdom-oriented and -based—and that is valuable to them,” Brainard says.

Lee University

Back at **Lee University**, a soft economy hasn’t held the school back. It recently wrapped up a \$35 million campaign in which more dorms were built on campus and money was added to the student scholarship fund. Its endowment fund increased by 20 percent last year, and the school is ranked among the top 100 in the nation by *U.S. News and World*.

“We haven’t seen a downturn or a leveling off. To the contrary, we continue to grow,” says Jerome Hammond, vice president for university relations. Higher education is one of the last things parents want to cut from their budgets, he adds.



“I think higher education for American families is very close to that list of things they regard as a must-have,” Hammond says. “Because we’re obviously talking about the future, are we going to forgo investing in the future of our children? I think higher ed is one of the last places that people cut.”

The strategy at Lee has been to focus on helping at-risk students complete their schooling. Predictive modeling is used to assess which students might be at a high risk of dropping out. They are targeted when they arrive on campus, and the school provides them with tutors, guidance counselors or financial aid.

Hammond insists that the economy, finances and even social media all are factors in the growth of Christian colleges, but he says the real challenge for Christian colleges goes deeper than maintaining enrollment: “The challenge of Christian higher ed is to maintain relevance in the academic realm. You don’t have to compromise academic strength, and you also don’t have to compromise your Christ-centered lifestyle to go to a university.”

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