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Ultimate Guide to Faith-Based Colleges: Christian Schools

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Could attending a Christian college be right for you? (Maybe!) Are all Christian schools the same? (Definitely not.)

We explore these questions and more as we dive into Christian faith-based colleges, with a little help from our friend and pastor-in-the-making Kenna Ledbetter, who earned her Bachelor of Arts in biblical studies at the faith-based Azusa Pacific University (APU) and is now pursuing her Master of Arts in pastoral studies at Azusa Pacific Seminary.

Across America, religious institutions of higher education offer students like Ledbetter the opportunity to expand their minds while deepening their faith. Keep reading to find out what it really means to attend a Christian faith-based school.

What Are the Different Types of Christian Colleges?

The phrase "Christian college" serves as an umbrella term for quite a few different types of institutions. Three major differentiators should be considered when deciding on the Christian college that's best for you.

1. Historically Religious vs. Faith-Based

In America's early days, many colleges were founded by religious orders, so practical teachings were inherently intertwined with religious doctrine. Today, however, many of those historic institutions have evolved to offer a more secularized curriculum and community, while religious faith has largely diminished as a cornerstone of the student experience. Examples of these historically religious colleges include Harvard University and Yale University. As well-rounded schools, these types may offer religious services through a chaplain's office and/or campus organizations, but religion does not play a fundamental role in academics or campus life.

On the other hand, faith-based colleges integrate religion into every aspect of the student experience. While some faith-based schools require more religious participation than others, they all expect students to actively explore the institution's religion and to deeply consider their faith in relation to both academics and their personal lives. This is the type of Christian college we'll be referring to throughout this guide.

2. Traditional University vs. Bible College vs. Seminary vs. Bible University (whew!)

Traditional faith-based universities offer a broad selection of undergraduate and graduate degree programs, such as your typical liberal art and science programs. All courses integrate faith-based perspectives, but not all courses are religious in subject. That means you can earn anything from a biology degree to an MBA, with God as part of your academic journey.

Bible colleges are different. They're typically four-year institutions that offer a narrower Biblical undergraduate education through courses that focus directly on the Bible and theology. These schools are geared toward students who wish to pursue careers that require extensive knowledge of Christian teachings and the Bible, such as missionary work or ministerial work.

Seminaries are like Bible colleges, but rather than offering undergraduate Biblical degrees, they offer graduate degrees, which further prepare students to become church leaders, such as ministers, pastors, priests, etc. These specialized programs are sometimes integrated with Bible colleges, creating a complete *Bible university*.

Any Christian college you attend will subscribe to its own preferred flavor of Christianity (including non-denominational and interdenominational). You'll find everything from Catholic to Baptist, from Protestant to Mennonite. Knowing which Christian belief system your prospective school adheres to is important when making sure you choose the right school for you.

Myths About Faith-Based Christian Colleges

When you've never been to a Christian college, it's easy to make false assumptions about the experience, so here we're busting four myths about faith-based colleges.

Myth 1: They only offer religious majors.

Not always! While religious majors may be the only choices at some faith-based colleges (like Bible colleges and seminaries), that doesn't mean you can't attend a college with more secular majors as well. As explained above, traditional faith-based universities offer a wide range of undergraduate majors, such as business, education, healthcare, art, computers, and more. Many also offer stellar graduate programs in similar fields. Can I get an amen?

Myth 2: You have to practice the college's religion to attend.

While some (but certainly not all) faith-based colleges do require students to discuss their faith when applying and then to participate in religious services while attending, it's rare for students to have to jump through religious hoops to prove they belong at a Christian college. Furthermore, faith-based Christian colleges often have more diverse student bodies than their religious affiliation might suggest. Many of the schools on our list of top 10 Christian colleges have students who practice a range of religions or who don't practice at all. True, you may feel out of place if you're one of only a few students who isn't practicing, but if that doesn't bother you, no one will stop you.

Myth 3: The people are dull and uptight.

They're really not. Just the way people at Christian churches come from all walks of life, whether wild or boring, so do they attend Christian colleges. So if you're looking to meet your new bestie Crazy Carrie or you want to enjoy a cold one with Laidback Larry, no worries, they'll be there for you.

Myth 4: Your degree won't impress.

Actually, some of the top universities in the nation are faith-based, offering degree programs that are *sure* to impress employers. The University of Notre Dame, for example, is known as one of the absolute best colleges in the country (and it ranks number one on our top 10 list of Christian colleges). Myth busted!

How can you make sure you're choosing the best Christian college for your personality, beliefs, and goals? Include these factors in your decision-making process.

1. Your reason(s) for wanting to attend a Christian college

Why are you *really* thinking about attending a Christian college? Do you want to become a minister? Great! Maybe you should look into seminary programs. Are you simply hoping to attend a nice church while living on campus? Then maybe a traditional university with on-campus chapel is what you need.

Or maybe you're not all that interested in the religious aspect; you're just hoping for a safer, quieter college experience by attending a Christian school. While that may not be guaranteed at every Christian college (due to diversity and such), there are certain Christian colleges that tend to have safer communities thanks to their moral expectations. Corban University, for example, is a faith-based Christian college that made our top 10 list of safest college campuses in the Ultimate Guide to College Campus Safety.

2. Accreditation and/or religious affiliation

Keep it legit. Regional accreditation is a must-have for degree-granting institutions. If you're looking at a Christian college that isn't accredited by a U.S. regional accrediting agency, look for a different one.

In addition to standard regional accreditation, you can make sure you'll get a quality faith-based education by attending a school with Christian accreditations and/or affiliations with Christian academic organizations, of which there are several. Many of the schools on our top 10 list of faith-based Christian colleges are members of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU), for example. The CCCU is an international association of 180 Christian higher education institutions. Members benefit from the CCCU's programs designed to bolster Christian education around the world.

3. Quality of academics

Although strengthening your faith during college may be important, you're also going there to learn and ultimately earn a degree (or certificate, or what have you.) With that in mind, make sure to choose a faith-based school that will challenge you and prepare you for a better future. You can confirm that a school offers quality academics by looking at its rankings, checking its acceptance rate, retention rate, and graduation rate, and evaluating its faculty and departmental resources, particularly for the major(s) you want to pursue.

4. Political leanings and policies

Are you liberal or conservative? Should your school lean the same way? Should your campus community be accepting of LGBT students? Should students be required to adhere to an honor code? These political issues are important to consider when selecting a college.

"I didn't grow up in the church so I mostly got 'churched' while going to APU," said Ledbetter. "[And] I loved how much the school opened my eyes regarding so many diverse issues. The School of Practical Theology in undergrad REALLY helped me to see how my faith has been used to hurt other groups, and helped me to learn to ask questions rather than feel the need to have all of the answers. This is irreplaceable."

5. Rules and strictness

Some schools, like Messiah College (number nine on our top 10 list of faith-based Christian colleges), require students to adhere to a strict honor code. Others don't. "Dry" colleges prohibit drinking. Others don't mind if students of legal age kick back with a drink. Some colleges require students to attend religious services on the regular. Others don't. How much authority are you looking for?

6. Religious affiliation/denomination and beliefs

Just as Christian churches teach according to various denominations, so do Christian colleges. You can find them all — Baptist, Episcopalian, Jesuit, Catholic, Lutheran, and so on, or even inter/non-denominational. You may want to choose a college whose teachings coincide with your own beliefs.

7. Availability of on-campus religious services

This is especially important to consider for students who will be moving away from home and attending college out of town. Not only will you be leaving the house you call home, you'll be leaving the church you call home as well. The transition may be easier and more comforting if you have access to religious services right at your new home on-campus. Not all faith-based colleges guarantee religious services though, so be sure to find out if the schools you're considering will give you a new place for regular fellowship with your Christian brothers and sisters.

8. Percentage of practicing students

If you can find out how many students at a faith-based school actively practice Christianity, that stat may clue you into the type of experience you'll get if you attend. A college whose majority of students do practice Christianity can offer you more like-minded peers to make friends with compared to a college with a lower percentage of practicing students. On the other hand, a college with a lower percentage of practicing students may offer you a more well-rounded experience, exposing you to a diverse student body and different ways of thinking.

Pros & Cons of Faith-Based Christian Colleges over Traditional Schools

Getting into a college that espouses your same Christian beliefs may answer your prayers, but that doesn't mean you won't experience drawbacks if you attend. Review the following pros and cons of attending a faith-based college to prepare yourself for the reality and not just the dream.

Pros:

- **Strengthen your faith** and broaden your walk with God. At a Christian college, your faith is equally important as your academic education.
- Make like-minded Christian friends. It could be a challenge to find Christian friends to bond with at a secular school. Attending a Christian college eliminates that challenge from the friend-making equation.
- Learn faith-based concepts from current experts in your field. Although Christianity is rooted in the timeless Bible, the world around us, of course, changes and demands up-to-date perspectives on modern issues. A seminary student, for example, who aspires to become a pastor may benefit from hearing an expert's faith-based perspective on modern technology. What does God think of Facebook? How can you serve God best while working your side job? Questions such as these find answers at a faith-based Christian college.
- Avoid needing to defend or hide your beliefs in an unsupportive environment. "It is nice to get to pray in classes," said Ledbetter. "That adds a completely different element to the environment in the classroom." For another example, while a secular college may not think twice about asking students to attend an event on a Sunday morning, a Christian college might expect you to be attending religious services and not schedule conflicting events.
- **Enjoy small class sizes,** as Christian colleges tend to be smaller than average. You'll get more one-on-one time with instructors and an overall more personalized experience.
- Attend religious services on campus. Many Christian colleges have an on-campus chapel/church. Getting to church on Sunday mornings will never be easier!
- Show employers your dedication to Christian values through the college on your resume. This is especially beneficial when applying to jobs at faith-based organizations or businesses, such as a church, a non-profit, or a Christian-owned company.
- **Participate in good clean fun** through on-campus events and organizations that hold your same values. If you don't want to be pressured to drink alcohol, for example, then attending a "dry" Christian college where alcohol is prohibited can make that easier.

Cons:

- Non-believers will likely struggle, especially those who believe in the separation of religion and education. A faith-based Christian college assumes that its students want an education that includes faith-based perspectives. If you're not prepared to discuss religion regularly in your studies, a faith-based college probably isn't right for you.
- **Tuition and fees may be higher**, because Christian colleges are typically private. Even if you choose one within your home state, you won't benefit from government subsidies afforded to public institutions. "For students looking to study in another field other than the realm of Christian

degrees specifically, I would recommend a school that isn't Christian because of the cost of tuition," said Ledbetter.

- **Discrimination may arise.** Almost all Christian colleges are private, so they have a lot of legal leeway when it comes to deciding who is and is not welcome. If a professor decides to come out as gay, for example, and the university he works at doesn't approve, he could be ousted without question.
- Your degree may be judged differently. By graduating from a Christian college, you will have a resume that reveals your beliefs from the get-go. And legal or not, discrimination in hiring happens. There's no denying that people who don't share your beliefs may not want to work with you. Furthermore, employers who are unfamiliar with Christian colleges may think your alma mater isn't as academically reputable as a secular institution. These are risks you take on if you graduate from a Christian college, particularly if the college's name reveals its religious affiliation, like San Diego Christian College.

Top 10 Christian Faith-Based Colleges in America

Here they are! The following four-year universities made our top 10 list of Christian colleges thanks to their top-quality academics and their focus on the Christian faith. Academics were assessed according to each school's most recently reported student: faculty ratio, acceptance rate, retention rate, graduation rate (within a reasonable time of 3-6 years), and outstanding factors (such as the near-zero cost of tuition offered by college number 10, College of the Ozarks).

All ten of these universities are private not-for-profit institutions located in the United States that at least offer bachelor's degrees and are dedicated to enriching their student's lives through a Christian faith-based education. Graduate from one of these Christ-centered superstar institutions and you'll come away with both a mind and a diploma to change the world for Jesus.

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2017

Rank	School	Location	Orientation
1	University of Notre Dame	Notre Dame/IN	Roman Catholic
2	Taylor University	Upland/IN	Non-denominational

3	Wheaton College	Wheaton/IL	Interdenominational
4	Pepperdine University	Malibu/CA	Restorationist
5	Baylor University	Waco/TX	Baptist
6	Bethel University	St Paul/MN	Baptist
7	Whitworth University	Spokane/WA	Presbyterian
8	Calvin College	Grand Rapids/MI	Calvinist/Reformed
9	Messiah College	Mechanicsburg/PA	Interdenominational
10	College of the Ozarks	Point Lookout/MO	Presbyterian

1. University of Notre Dame (Roman Catholic)



University of Notre Dame by Phil Roeder @

Famous for its (historically) elite football program, the University of Notre Dame is equally famous for its academics. This picturesque institution in Indiana was founded in 1842 by the Congregation of the Holy Cross, and as God would have it, those infamous Fighting Irish are still known today as mighty smart Catholics. Notre Dame makes the Catholic faith a core aspect of its culture and academics. If you're looking to study from a faith-based perspective at the best of the best (highest retention and graduation rates on this list), and you can pass muster (second lowest acceptance rate after College of the Ozarks), this is your school.

Mission Statement

[Summation:] "A Catholic university draws its basic inspiration from Jesus Christ as the source of wisdom and from the conviction that in him all things can be brought to their completion. As a

Catholic university, Notre Dame wishes to contribute to this educational mission."

Key Facts

Acceptance Rate: 19%

Freshmen Retention Rate: 98%

Graduation Rate: 96%

Student:Faculty Ratio: 10:1

2017-18 Tuition & Fees: \$51,505

Religious programs galore encourage Notre Dame students to explore their faith and give back to the community. The Notre Dame Vision "Mentors-in-Faith" program, for example, allows undergraduate students to become ministry leaders for local high school students. Notre Dame is also globally known as a top research university, enjoying one of the most robust spending budgets in the United States and an impressive group of various research centers, like the Center for Philosophy of Religion. All types of majors are offered, both traditional and religious, including a Master of Divinity and a Master of Sacred Music program.

2. Taylor University (Non-denominational)



Faith is

ubiquitous at Taylor University, an evangelical Christian college in Upland, Indiana. The school was founded in 1846 by the Methodist Church, making it one of the oldest evangelical Christian colleges in the United States. Today, by endeavoring always to build up a Christ-centered community, Taylor offers students a challenging education coupled with support from believers wherever they go on campus. This commitment is encouraged in students and staff by the "Life Together Covenant," which outlines the university's expectations for every member of the campus community.

Mission Statement

"The mission of Taylor University is to develop servant leaders marked with a passion to minister Christ's redemptive love and truth to a world in need."

Key Facts

• Acceptance Rate: 85%

• Freshmen Retention Rate: 88%

Graduation Rate: 74%

Student:Faculty Ratio: 13:1

• 2017-18 Tuition & Fees: \$32,885

Taylor University is well-connected in the world of Christian higher education. The school is one of 13 members of the Christian College Consortium, and a member of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU), the Christian Center for Urban Studies, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Indiana Network for Higher Educational Ministries. Upholding the standards of excellence represented by these organizations, Taylor not only maintains outstanding academics through over 60 majors, it puts discipleship at the forefront of education and provides rich Christian fellowship on campus. Although attendance is not required of students, chapel services are held three times per week, and residence halls host Bible studies. Students also have access to a variety of missionary programs, including both local and study abroad opportunities.

3. Wheaton College – Illinois (Interdenominational)



Wheaton College by DiscoverDuPage @

Wheaton College is a Christian liberal arts school where rigorous courses, required residency, and community participation are considered integral to a full college experience. Located in Wheaton, Illinois, this four-year college sits on the same property as its comparably distinguished sister school, the Wheaton College Graduate School which focuses on theology and ministry. Offering top-notch Christian academics, the college has produced an impressive list of well-known alumni, including evangelist Billy Graham, former CEO of John Deere Robert Lane, and former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert.

Mission Statement

"Wheaton College serves Jesus Christ and advances His Kingdom through excellence in liberal arts and graduate programs that educate the whole person to build the church and benefit society worldwide."

Key Facts

Acceptance Rate: 71%

Freshmen Retention Rate: 95%

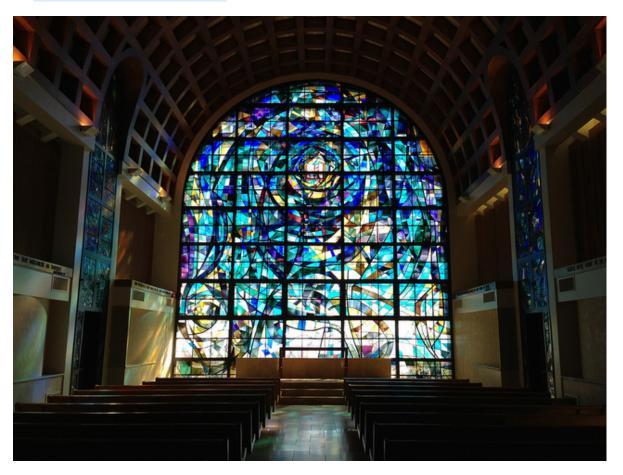
Graduation Rate: 89%

Student:Faculty Ratio: 12:1

• 2017-18 Tuition & Fees: \$34,050

Students at Wheaton College are required to live in campus housing, thereby creating a strong community built around extracurricular activities and attending chapel. Religious programs include worship, small groups, and the Office of Christian Outreach, which partners with outside organizations to connect students with their surrounding community and encourage them to give back. As for academics, students have access to impressive study abroad programs, as well as the Billy Graham Center, which houses several museums and plays host to most of the school's Bible and theology classes.

4. Pepperdine University (Restorationist)



Pepperdine University Chapel by Matt McGee ©

Nestled in the Santa Monica Mountains of Malibu, California, Pepperdine University is coveted for its gorgeous scenery and inspiring locale. Pepperdine also holds dear to its Christ-guided courses and all-around top-quality academics, making it a hard school to get into and well worth it once you do. Architectural eye candy is a sweet bonus. Pepperdine's Stauffer Chapel sits near the Pacific Ocean awing visitors with its elegant gardens and gleaming stained glass windows reminiscent of European cathedrals.

Building on its already superb academic programs, Pepperdine announced that coming in fall 2017 are two new fully online graduate programs. The School of Law is set to launch an online Master of

Legal Studies (MLS) degree and the Graduate School of Education and Psychology will similarly introduce several online psych degrees.

Mission Statement

"Pepperdine is a Christian university committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and Christian values, where students are strengthened for lives of purpose, service, and leadership."

Key Facts

• Acceptance Rate: 38%

• Freshmen Retention Rate: 93%

Graduation Rate: 84%

Student:Faculty Ratio: 13:1

• 2017-18 Tuition & Fees: \$51,992

This top-notch university follows the teachings of the Church of Christ, focusing on New Testament beliefs. Every semester students are required to attend at least 14 "spiritual events," and for the duration of their time at Pepperdine, they must take a minimum of three religious courses. The school also offers spiritual advisors, Christian seminars and counseling, and sustainability initiatives, among other religious programs. Particularly outstanding are the on-campus Center for Women Leadership, as well as The Diane and Guilford Glazer Institute for Jewish Studies, which organizes academic programs that explore the connections between Christianity and Judaism.

5. Baylor University (Baptist)



Baylor University by Mark Bonica ©

Academic excellence goes hand-in-hand with a rich Christian culture at Baylor University. This prominent research institution in Waco, Texas (and NCAA basketball powerhouse) was chartered by the Republic of Texas in 1845, and today it stands as the largest Baptist university in the world. While Baylor maintains its Baptist traditions, the university really encourages students to explore their beliefs and boasts a diverse student population, representing religions from Buddhism and Islam to Jehovah's Witness and Atheism.

Mission Statement

"The mission of Baylor University is to educate men and women for worldwide leadership and service by integrating academic excellence and Christian commitment within a caring community."

Key Facts

Acceptance Rate: 44%

• Freshmen Retention Rate: 88%

Graduation Rate: 73%

Student:Faculty Ratio: 15:1

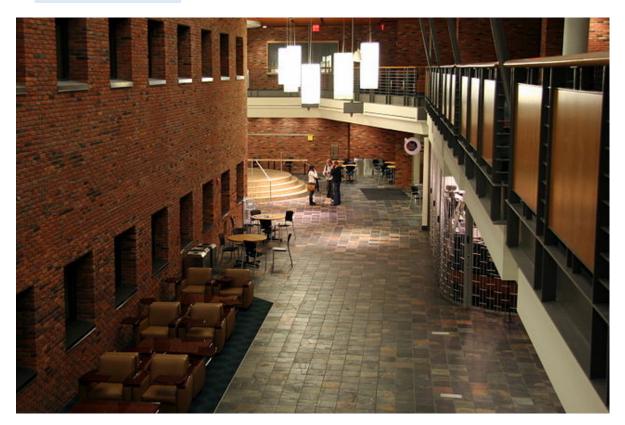
2017-18 Tuition & Fees: \$44,040

Baylor is known for its religious research. In 2004, the university launched The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (ISR), leading to groundbreaking scientific work on religious beliefs.

Volunteerism is also huge. A volunteer program called Steppin' Out takes place one day each

semester, encouraging all students to volunteer their time. About 12,000 hours of service are recorded each semester. Students can also get involved in missionary work through Baylor's study/serve abroad program called Urban Missions.

6. Bethel University (Baptist)



Bethel University by Jonathunder ©

If distance learning is your thing, this could be the school for you. Bethel University of Minnesota is the only college on this list that offers fully online bachelor's degree programs, in addition to its oncampus undergrad and graduate degree programs. The school is easy to get into and it's one of the most affordable on the list, while still managing to offer small class sizes and high-quality academics. Bethel particularly stands out for its seminary program. Among the 15 largest accredited seminaries in the United States, Bethel Seminary is available in two locations — the main campus in St. Paul, Minnesota and a second seminary campus in San Diego. Bethel even offers a fully online seminary.

Mission Statement

"Boldly informed and motivated by the Christian faith, Bethel University educates and energizes men and women for excellence in leadership, scholarship, and service. We prepare graduates to serve in strategic capacities to renew minds, live out biblical truth, transform culture, and advance the gospel."

Key Facts

Acceptance Rate: 95%

Freshmen Retention Rate: 84%

• Graduation Rate: 74%

Student:Faculty Ratio: 12:1

2017-18 Tuition & Fees: \$36,210

Bethel is one of 13 members of the Christian College Consortium and accordingly, the university encourages its students to become ever better citizens of God's kingdom. A "Campus Ministries" team is tasked with creating a strong community that supports students in every aspect of life. Many different religious services are offered, including three mornings of chapel each week, Sunday night worship, and prayer events. Bethel also organizes evangelical spring break trips.

7. Whitworth University (Presbyterian)



Whitworth University by Scott Ellison @

Situated among pine trees in residential Spokane, Washington, the red brick buildings of Whitworth University have long been filled with intellectual and spiritual explorers. This Christian liberal arts college offers a variety of bachelor's and master's degree programs (more than 60) and boasts an impressive average student:faculty ratio of 11:1. Whitworth is also a member of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, as well as the Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities. It's known as one of the best institutions in the western United States, and it rightfully ranks in our top 10 for honoring God while delivering first-class academics.

Mission Statement ^

"...Since 1890, Whitworth has provided its diverse student body an education of mind and heart, equipping its graduates to honor God, follow Christ, and serve humanity. This mission is carried out by a community of Christian scholars committed to excellent teaching and to the integration of faith and learning."

Key Facts

• Acceptance Rate: 62%

• Freshmen Retention Rate: 85%

• Graduation Rate: 75%

Student:Faculty Ratio: 11:1

• 2017-18 Tuition & Fees: \$42,186

One of the most telling religious programs at Whitworth is the online prayer guide. Called "On Bended Knee," the guide fosters community and time with God by publishing weekly prayer requests from people and programs on campus. Requests are accompanied by scripture and thanks to God for his blessings upon the school. Additionally outstanding is Whitworth's Dornsife Center for Community Engagement, which helps students forge relationships with local non-profit organizations. Whitworth also offers audio recordings of sermons, small groups, weekly worship nights, and religious clubs.

8. Calvin College (Calvinist/Reformed)



Calvin College by Rememberdef cow @

Well-tied to its namesake, Calvin College is named after *the* John Calvin, that 1500s pastor and theologian who was instrumental in the development of Calvinism. The same Christian belief system serves as the basis for Calvin College's modern Protestant/Reformationist teachings today. This liberal arts college was founded in 1876 in Grand Rapids, Michigan and is now a proud member of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Academics at Calvin are rigorous, designed to prepare the Christian student to answer their calling. Alumni who might attest to that include Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of the Department of Education under President Trump and former chair of the Republican Party of Michigan.

Mission Statement

"Calvin College equips students to think deeply, to act justly, and to live wholeheartedly as Christ's agents of renewal in the world."

Key Facts

Acceptance Rate: 74%

• Freshmen Retention Rate: 87%

Graduation Rate: 73%

• Student:Faculty Ratio: 13:1

2017-18 Tuition & Fees: \$33,100

The culture at Calvin is centered around nurturing Christian minds to change the world. Programs include chapel services, dorm worship, Bible studies, and opportunities to serve in the community. Calvin is particularly notable for its mentorship programs. For example, the residence hall leadership program called "Be a Barnabas" allows students to become Christian role models to their floormates by planning worship time and Bible studies, and helping fellow students strengthen their walk with God.

9. Messiah College (Interdenominational)



Messiah College by Badagnani 🕾

Arguably the most conservative institution on this list, Messiah College is perfect for the conscientious student who wants structure, a morally strong environment, no-nonsense Christian fellowship, and a well-respected degree to boot. Located in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, this four-year college was founded in 1909 by the Brethren in Christ Church, and it stays true to its roots by drawing on Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan teachings. Students and staff are expected to stay true as well, required to sign a Community Covenant outlining Messiah's requirements regarding beliefs and behavior.

Mission Statement

"Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society."