

# GAME PLAN

PRACTICAL WISDOM FOR THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

nic gibson and syler thomas

foreword by scot mcknight

author of *The Jesus Creed for Students*



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*To all the students to whom we have ministered:  
sharing our lives with you has made us the pastors we are today.*

*And to our own children: Abigail, Rachel Claire, and Jude Gibson;  
and Kaila, Ellie, Foster, and Grace Thomas. Our greatest desire is that you might know  
the God of all knowledge and wisdom.*

*Game Plan: Practical Wisdom for the College Experience*

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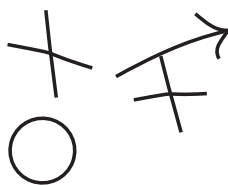
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## FOREWORD

Recently I was staring into the faces of about ten high school students, each contemplating life in college, when a young pastor asked me this: What would you tell these students about how to keep their faith when they go off to college? Having taught college students for nearly two decades, and having seen some of them make a wreck of their faith as a result of bad choices, the question probed one of the deepest questions I ponder as a professor. *How does a young man or young woman sustain faith in the turbulence of transition from home to college and beyond?*

There are, of course, no easy answers. What that transition reveals is that faith is often sustained, however unknown to the ones who have faith, by a family, by a group of friends, and by a schedule that permits less freedom and more predictable (and controlled) behaviors. But when the college student wakes up on Day One in college at least these elements of life have been radically changed: mom and dad are not there to guide, friends are mostly (or totally) in other schools, a schedule is now completely free—which means one can stay up and out all night long, one can choose to sleep in and one can choose with whom one sleeps and what one eats and drinks, and how much of any of the aforementioned items. That's when faith matters even more. Why? Because now faith is solely, or at least much more, the choice of the fresh college student. And that choice is not easy. Church was often connected to friends, and without friends at the church it's harder to go and harder to participate; and getting up is harder because a routine schedule, mostly shaped by mom and dad, is interrupted.

You are on your own, and what you do is your choice. Choose wisely.

That is why this book by Nic Gibson and Syler Thomas is so important. I would advise you to take *Game Plan: Practical Wisdom for the College Experience* with you to college. I would recommend you

find a quiet place for the first two or three weeks to read one chapter in a setting, and ask yourself these basic questions: Is this true of me? Are these the situations I'm facing? How am I doing? What does my faith mean to me today? Nic and Syler have touched on the real topics and real questions that will invade your life the minute you set foot on campus. Now I'd like to raise that recommendation one notch: find a wise friend with whom you can read and discuss the topics of *Game Plan*. Live this book together for a month.

What you do in that first month or two may well have a big impact on what kind of college experience you have and, not to be too dramatic, what happens in the rest of your life. What happens in college doesn't stay in college; it shapes where you go and what you become.

Scot McKnight

North Park University



We the authors first met each other on a bright and brisk autumn Saturday morning at a church-league flag football game in front of a local middle school. Our friendship grew as we began ministering to high school students together, but also as we continued to play football, softball, and (our favorite) pick-up basketball. We also both tended to exhibit a great deal of competitiveness in our different athletic endeavors. Even though we knew that winning or losing whatever game we were playing didn't matter in the grand scheme of things, we both felt passionately that playing a game to win is what makes it worth playing. And in order to win a game, you have to have a game plan.

Similarly, being successful at college doesn't happen by accident. Having a well thought-out game plan is crucial to a college experience filled with joy and not regret. It is no secret that college carries incredible opportunities for growth, along with significant potential for your faith to suffer. The key to all that follows, which also happens to be one of the great themes in the Bible, is wisdom. It is not without some honesty that universities label first-year students "fresh" and second-year students "sophomore," a term meaning a foolish person under the delusion that he is wise.

This book was then written out of this conviction and out of our other intense passion. Our conviction is that the college experience requires wisdom. Our passion is to see our own students, and the students of other schools and churches, thrive in faith and grow in wisdom in college: to see you emerge from college with your faith not only intact, but at the center of your life. Our hope is that the Game Plan that follows will be a part of helping this to happen.

We've also asked some friends of ours to share their own stories after every other chapter. Our hope is that their stories will provide some real-life experiences to reinforce what we share.

Thank you to all the students who have helped us write this book. Those who have put its teaching into practice have given us even greater comfort. Besides our families, you are the great work of our lives, and our boast in the day Christ returns.

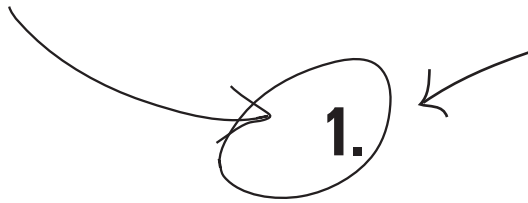
Special thanks to Paul Soupiset and Wendy Woodnick, who were invaluable in publishing earlier versions of this material.

Thanks also to the many nonstudent editors who read these chapters and offered their input, especially our wives, Alexi and Heidi.

Finally, you may disagree with some of our conclusions. Feel free. Use this book as a springboard for a discussion with your friends. The exchange of ideas, and not just the downloading of them, is where you learn the most. In fact, we have tried our best to keep the chapters short so that you will do more thinking for yourself, not less.

To God be the glory, now and forever.





# SURVIVING A SECULAR SCHOOL

I remember sitting with my good friend and kayaking mentor, Guy Rocker, and looking down forty-five feet into what is called Rocket Ride Rapid on New York's Black River. As is common in white water kayaking, we had pulled out above the rapid and were scouting out the dangers of this obstacle, carefully choosing a course of action. For the veteran paddlers this was a cakewalk, but for a beginner like me this was a deceptively hazardous rapid because of three converging dangers.

The first was a twenty-five-foot drop that, though it looked fun, could also easily leave you bottom side up. Then after the drop, the river doglegs left, creating a huge eddy on the right, making the river flow hard against a huge rock wall and then jut off to the left. Last, Guy said that under that rock wall, just below the surface of the water, was a large chamber that had been carved out over time by the river.

Over the years certain rafters and paddlers had gotten trapped in it when the river was high, and only some had made it out. Guy warned me as we went to our boats, "I know you've done harder rapids, but take this one very seriously. If you do what I told you, you'll be fine."

Things went fine on that and all the other rapids that day, and by 3:00 p.m., I had paddled the hardest river I have ever done. More than that, though, I had learned valuable lessons about the water and, specifically, I had learned how multiplying dangers can make rapids look exciting, but can also make them deadly.

This is the best way I can try to prepare you for the college ride. Many students reading this book will be going to secular colleges. By “secular” I mean an institution that is either totally indifferent to and often antagonistic to the gospel of Jesus Christ, or a school that has sufficiently drifted from Christian roots so that what remains of those roots is often more harmful than good.

In secular schools there is a convergence of three dangers to faith that we need to take a minute to scout out from “above,” and then carefully plan a course of action intended to avoid the dangers, yet still enjoy the ride and conquer the rapid. As you are making your way through college, you have the opportunity not only to survive, but also thrive if you have a spiritual plan of action (a Game Plan, if you will) and if you execute that plan with some discipline. Let me also point out that these dangers are present to some degree in Christian colleges as well, so even those headed to a Christian school would do well to read on.

### ***Three converging dangers***

The transition between high school and college is a tremendous change for most students in at least three ways:

First, you now have almost unlimited freedom. There are no curfews. There are no homework police. There are no bed times, or even recommended bed times. You can do whatever you want, whenever you want, and there is no accountability about anything short of National Guard intervention. This freedom can make you a well-disciplined and fun adult, but it can also shipwreck your faith and ruin your college experience.

Second, added to this freedom is the reality that you are leaving the Christian community you have been a part of in high school. Hopefully, in high school you were close enough with some other

believers, your parents, and your youth pastor that they could get in your face about God and help you grow. In college it is common for you to walk into your dorm room, watch your parents leave, and come to the realization that no human you know back home is going to know what happens here unless you tell them. There is no accountability. Zero. This complete freedom with no accountability is an opportunity as well as a danger.

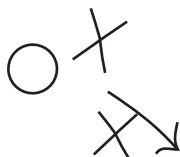
The third danger is the assault on the mind and heart that comes from anti-Christian ideologies. Concerning the mind, wading through the intellectual nonsense of many modern philosophies in every contemporary department can be incredibly confusing for anyone, but is all the more difficult for intellectual beginners.<sup>1</sup> It is an insufferable maze of muddled logic made more depressing by the countless casualties of faith publicized by certain antagonistic professors or students. And don't be fooled that this is only the case if you major in philosophy, and will not assail you in, say, the English department, or even chemistry or business. The prevailing secular philosophies of relativism and pluralism permeate all departments—especially departments of literature, business, and religion.

Your Christian worldview will be either openly confronted or blatantly ignored as irrelevant in almost every course. It is common, if you open your mouth to defend your view, to be treated as a naïve backcountry redneck, one of the last remaining fossils of a bygone age of “ignorant fundamentalist enthusiasm.” To the person unaware of this coming trial, it can be overwhelming—even to the death of faith.

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1. It should go without saying, but it is important to understand that an “intellectual beginner” is what you are in your undergraduate studies. For some this will be hard to accept, but it is a very important point to concede. Accepting that you are an intellectual novice will help you interact with your professors more humbly. It will also keep you from believing that if you cannot solve a theological or biblical difficulty, you need to throw away your faith to be intellectually honest. To do so is merely pride, since most undergraduates do not have the academic skills yet to work through many intellectual difficulties related to Christian faith. Being humble concerning these problems will get you communicating with a trusted spiritual mentor.

Parallel to this assault on the Christian mind is an equally strong assault on your heart. This assault is the hedonism of college culture. Hedonism is the belief that your own personal self-gratification is the highest good. 1 Peter 4:1–5 says:



Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

I remember thinking it strange in my early years as a Christian that Paul, as well as Peter, would talk so much about drunkenness and sexual promiscuity of many kinds, including orgies. Then I went to college. During my first semester I put this Scripture above my desk as a constant reminder. Pornography is everywhere, from your roommate's trunk, to the community bathroom stalls, to

movies playing in the lounge right outside your door. At many schools there are simply no sexual boundaries. None. You'll see what I mean. Students often drown themselves in a fountain of various pleasures available at every turn. You will have to face this temptation of hedonism, too.

Although any one of these dangers may be manageable to the sincere Christ follower, added together they can wear down even the brightest mind and most passionate heart.

### ***The multiplied danger to biblical faith***

Picture it. You arrive at your dorm or apartment, unpack your things, and watch your sweet but blubbing parents begin to make the trip home. In the next two weeks, people clearly more intellectually accomplished than your high school teachers and youth pastor make the following arguments:

1. You are certainly not the creative, loving art of a personal, purposeful God, but the impersonal result of matter plus chance plus time in a random, pitiless universe.
2. The Bible is religiously untrustworthy, and to think it can be "simply" or "literally" interpreted is quite naïve. The Bible, like all great religious texts, is only the religious expression of ancient people, is hardly relevant, and is certainly not authoritative.
3. There is no single true "Truth," only perception and experience. To say there is any truth or absolute morality is arrogant and intolerant (insert a very morally disappointed facial expression here), and to say that your "experience" with Jesus is somehow "The" religious experience is unthinkable small-minded.

How does one respond to this? Paul, the painfully realistic apostle, said it best. He conceded that if the above was true then, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

The meaningless world of many contemporary philosophies spirals us into a world where all that is left is sensation and belonging. All we have left is the escape to pleasurable sensations that can easily be found in alcohol, illicit substances, and casual sexual recreation.

So you have the institutional promotion of this meaningless worldview, and you are invited by your peers to look for meaning in diversions, intimacy, and belonging. Now add to that a complete lack of any accountability. Your pastor isn’t there to help you with these intellectual struggles. You have no one with a common commitment to follow Jesus through the intellectual wasteland, and you don’t even have to leave your dorm’s floor to partake in sensual opportunities. Before you know it, social freedom has become spiritual loneliness, and very few have a heart and mind strong enough to weather this storm alone. Do you see the problem?

### ***Charting a course***

So we’ve taken a tiny glance at three converging dangers to faith in Christ at a secular school. I hope you can feel the obstacles that will be presented to your faith in such a way that you are motivated to prepare for them. This can be a dangerous time, and your life in God hangs in the balance. This is a season of your life that you should anticipate with great excitement, but also with serious thought regarding its successful navigation, especially as it relates to God. Lose Him and you have lost all. In light of this, I offer the following three courses of action.

First is the establishment of regular and meaningful times of Bible reading and prayer (“quiet times”). There is no substitute for this universal Christian need, and as a pastor I can say it is one of the two clearest determining factors to long-term growth and health in a person’s faith. Yet I have heard countless people tell me, “I just can’t read the Bible.” You must overcome obstacles and excuses with creativity and discipline. Do you have AD/HD? So do I. Are you dyslexic? Get the Bible in digital audio files. Do you have poor reading comprehension? Get an easy-to-read translation like the New Living Bible or The Message.

There’s an old worship song called “In the Secret” with this line: “Pressing onward, pushing every hindrance aside, out of my way; ‘Cause I want to know you more!” Discipline yourself in the area of Bible reading joyfully, not as a duty, but as spiritual training, and you will likely thrive. Neglect this call and no matter how much dutiful guilt you feel, you will not fully succeed as a disciple of Jesus. I cannot claim that I am a devout “learner” of a teacher unless I make learning his teaching a consistent priority. Nor can you.

Second, engage in deliberate and regular Christian fellowship (Syler writes on this in chapter 8, but it is worth hitting on twice). This may be in the context of a campus fellowship, a church large group meeting, a Bible study, regular worship, or a living situation. The context of fellowship is not as important as its existence. Hebrews 10:25 says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Scripture makes plain that following Christ is a team affair.

Although, as discussed above, we each do individual training as disciples, we are meant to live out the faith together through what is called “community” or “fellowship.” In fact, Scripture teaches that we are to participate in both personal and corporate Bible

study, worship, and prayer. The things we do alone we are also to do together.

By “fellowship” (now often called “community”) I do not mean hanging out with Christians, although that is fun and good. Fellowship is the means by which we share our lives with each other on consistently deepening levels. Deep relating among Christians cannot long ignore spiritual things and the encouragement of spiritual growth among those in the community of Christ. Through meaningful Christian fellowship we find God’s intention for how his community is to work. We find people who will look deeply at Scripture and its implications with us; confront sin in us for our own good; care for us when we are in need; accept our care when they are in need; and experience the working of the Holy Spirit together with us. By experiencing life together we all become healthier, deeper, and stronger disciples of Jesus. Remember Ecclesiastes 4:12, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

Third, find a spiritual mentor. For many, your colleges will have paid staff workers whose calling is to help you grow in your faith. Others will not. If your campus does have such people, I would start with them. Others will find college staff and faculty members who are believers, graduate students, or people in your church who are farther along in the faith than you are.

There are three criteria that are essential for a possible mentor. First, you should sense a deep authenticity in his or her love and devotion to Christ, the church, and the Bible. Second, you should sense that she or he is an experienced, seasoned, and clear thinker who has already dealt with many of the issues you will be facing. Third, find someone who is a match with your intellectual temperament, but not your sins. There is some similarity needed, but you do not want someone so like you that they cannot help



you because of your shared spiritual blind spots. If you are passive, find someone who will challenge you. If you tend to exhaust your emotions with your thinking, find someone who thinks deeply, but doesn't get all worked up over figuring every little thing out.

Remember also, good mentors are usually well-disciplined people who live full lives. If you take their time, give back so that you will not be a burden on them. Find some way to save them time as they invest time in you. Babysit their kids or do the dishes if you visit for a meal. However, the best way to repay them is always by living wholeheartedly for Christ for the rest of your life. Nothing brings a mentor—or a youth pastor—more joy.



## 2.

# DEALING WITH THE DATING SCENE

My first hint that college was going to be different from high school came during my first weekend at DePaul University. I don't know if it's that Chicago girls are more forward than the polite Texas girls I was used to, but I was not exactly ready for them to be invading my personal space uninvited. On a "Welcome to Chicago" tour of the city that included a boat ride on Lake Michigan, a girl I had just met was putting her hands on my legs during our conversation as though we were married. "I can barely remember your name," I thought, "and now you're touching my leg?"

A couple months later, at a Halloween party, things got even more interesting. Picture this. For my Halloween costume, I dress up as packaging material. Basically, I wrap myself in bubble wrap, fashion a pointy hat out of the same material, make a big "Silica Gel—Do Not Eat" sign and tape it to my bubbles. So here I am, sitting on a couch at a party with lots of upperclassmen, lots of drinking, lots of smoking, and I'm there as Bubble Wrap. "What's your name?" I hear. It's the voice of a fourth-year redhead, sitting next to me. I recognize her as one of the stars of the most recent play in the Theatre School. "Hello," I respond, adjusting my bubbles.

A conversation ensues, the topic of which I can't recall, mostly because, following the pattern of the boat ride girl before her, she invades my personal space like a marauding bandit, and begins grabbing my hand and pulling it down between her leg and mine. "I'll send her a hint that I'm not interested," I think. So I sort of smile and

chuckle, pull my hand away, and keep talking. We talk some more, but then she grabs my hand again, and pulls it down. I pull my hand away again. She isn't getting the hint.

Finally, apparently bored with our patty cake, she goes for it. Leaning over, she whispers in my ear: "Walk me home," gets up, and walks away. I'm left on the couch, thinking: "Lady! Why are you doing this to me? There are any number of other young men in this room who would love to hold your hand, walk you home, and perhaps stay awhile. You're messing with the wrong dude. Come on, I'm the flippin' bubble-wrap boy!" Thankfully, I never saw her again. But I thought: we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto. Not to say that those of you heading to Kansas won't experience the same struggles. You get the idea.

I realize this story is relatively tame compared to many that could be told. I share it simply to illustrate that even though you might have faced some serious temptations relating to the opposite sex in high school, it certainly doesn't let up. In fact, in most cases, it gets a lot more challenging and complicated. So my advice on how to respond to these situations is to wear bubble wrap everywhere you go. OK, not really.

Of course, what would college be without the opposite sex? Imagine all of the work that could actually be accomplished if our schools weren't co-ed! Although I'm not so sure, given the presence of the Internet, video games, and ESPN. So maybe it's just the women who would get some work done. Regardless, you must have a Game Plan on how you will interact with the opposite sex.

## A good thing

First, I want to make perfectly clear that men and women relating with one another is a very normal, important, and healthy thing, something that God is in favor of. One of the reasons why the Shakers (a denomination of Christians in the 1700s) didn't gain widespread

popularity in their day was that they believed it was wrong for men and women to interact. (This also meant that there were no Shaker babies, if you know what I mean. So much for church growth the old-fashioned way.) God has made men and women to live and work and play together, and this is a great thing. The complicated part is that God has not only made us intellectual and emotional beings; he's also made us sexual beings. When men and women gather together, there is a level of interaction that cannot be ignored, and that is the sexual dynamic.

I'll never forget the realization I came to when I was a freshman in college. I was what one would call a "flagrant flirter," but was personally unaware of it. I was talking to a friend of mine about a high school girl I had befriended on an out-of-town retreat, explaining that we had been writing a lot, that she had told me many of her problems, and that I was really trying to help her. He very politely but firmly made it clear that this was a situation where she could easily get emotionally attached to me, and that if he were in my situation, he certainly wouldn't want that to happen. I remember leaving that conversation feeling offended. What right does he have to tell me what to do? He doesn't know the whole situation! The nerve!

But as I began to reflect on my interactions with girls, I realized that I had a glaringly obvious pattern of befriending cute girls. I looked at my prayer list, and as I remember it, at least 80 percent of the people on the list were girls. I really thought my heart was pure! I had ulterior motives, namely that I wanted these girls to like me in the same way that I liked them.

## The Hazy

It was about the same time that my best friend, Britt, was coming to the same realization. We were relatively popular guys, both in our