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What Makes Faith Stick During College?
*Findings from Fuller Youth Institute research provide
surprising insights on instilling lasting faith in young people.*

Pasadena, California, Sept. 7, 2011—Parents and church youth leaders often see big changes in youth group graduates as they transition to college, but one change that can catch them off guard is a vastly diminished commitment to faith. To give parents, leaders, and churches the practical tools needed to instill long-term faith in young people, the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) at Fuller Seminary has just completed six years of “[Sticky Faith](#)” research through the College Transition Project.

Previous studies indicate that 40 percent to 50 percent of all youth group graduates fail to stick with their faith or connect with a faith community after high school.* To unearth why that is and what can be done to help students develop a faith that thrives over the long haul, FYI paired interviews of youth group graduates with a longitudinal study of approximately 500 youth group graduates during their first three years in college. Based on this research, FYI has unveiled three counterintuitive findings with enormous ramifications for the long-term faith development of American teenagers:

1. While most U.S. churches focus on building strong youth groups, teenagers also need to build relationships with adults of all ages.

Contrary to the assumption that involving teenagers in youth group and peer activities is the key to vibrant spirituality, students’ participation in all-church worship during high school was more consistently linked with developing a mature faith in both high school and college than any other participation variable. Rather than only attending their own Sunday School classes, worship services, small groups, and service activities, young people appear to benefit from intergenerational activities. Churches and families wanting to instill deep faith in youth should help them build a web of relationships with committed and caring adults.

2, Churches and families overestimate youth group graduates’ readiness for the struggles ahead with dire consequences for the faith.

Only one in seven high school seniors report feeling prepared to face the challenges of college life with few ready for the intensity of the college experience: loneliness, the search for new friends, being completely on their own for the first time, and the sudden availability of partying. One pervasive struggle for college students is finding a new church, as evident by the 40 percent of freshman who report difficulty doing so. Young people retrospectively report that the first two weeks of their college freshman year set the trajectory for their remaining years in school.

Parents and leaders should talk earlier and more frequently about college, including helping entering freshman develop a plan for the first two weeks complete with church attendance, as well as an investigation of ministries and churches nearby that offer a transitional lifeline.

3. While teaching young people the “dos” and “don’ts” of Christian living is important, an overemphasis on behaviors can sabotage faith long-term.

When asked what it means to be Christian, one-third of subjects as college juniors (all of whom were youth group graduates) failed to mention “Jesus” or “Christ” but rather emphasized behaviors. This and a few related findings suggest that students tend to view the gospel as a “do” and “don’t” list of behaviors instead of a faith that also transforms interior lives and beliefs. One of the dangers of reducing Christianity to this sort of external behavior is that when students fail to live up to the activities they think define Christianity, their feelings of guilt can make them quickly abandon their faith altogether.

Parents and leaders eager to build sticky faith in youth need to exemplify and explain that while particular behaviors and practices are part of the faith, the focus is on trusting (not just obeying) Christ along with explaining how he leads, guides, and changes us from the inside. Young people better navigate their faith journey when adults share the challenges of their own spiritual paths—including ups, downs, and turning points.

Commentary on the Findings

Dr. Kara Powell, executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute, expressed both concern over the faith trajectories of youth group graduates as well as optimism about the transformative potential of the research findings. “As many churches and denominations experience decline, and as anxious parents wonder about their children’s futures, this Sticky Faith research has the power to spark a movement that not only changes youth, but also families and churches. Throughout the research, we’ve been sharing preliminary results and are impressed with the powerful changes families and churches have already been able to make by incorporating the findings.”

Brand New Sticky Faith Resources

Expanded analyses of the groundbreaking Sticky Faith research and implications are fleshed out in two just-released books: *Sticky Faith* by Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, and *Sticky Faith: Youth Worker Edition* by Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford (Zondervan Publishing). For more information on the research and to sign up for a free FYI E-Journal, visit stickyfaith.org, or follow @stickyfaith on twitter.

About FYI

Based in Pasadena, California, the Fuller Youth Institute (fulleryouthinstitute.org) is part of Fuller Theological Seminary, one of the largest evangelical seminaries in the world with more than 4,000 Master’s level and Doctoral students. The mission of the Fuller Youth Institute is to leverage research into resources that elevate leaders, youth, and families.

* Barna Update, “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years.” The Barna Group, 2006, September 16, 2006; George H. Gallup, Jr., The Gallup Poll, 2006; and Christian Smith with Patricial Snell, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105, 108, 109, and 116.