Challenges facing Christian Students at UCLA, UC Irvine and UC San Diego

Part 2 of 2: Social and Intellectual Challenges facing Christian Students at UCLA with Darrell Bock, Ben Shin
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Darrell Bock

Well, I think you’ve introduced kind of the first social challenge which is just the freedom of choice that a student has in learning how to make good decisions, be discerning, developing, I guess, the virtue of discernment in some element of perseverance in terms of their commitment to walking with God and reflecting the virtues that scripture talks about. What else represents a social challenge and what are the intellectual challenges on campus?

Ben Shin

Well, I think the big social challenge is that everyone seems to drink. I mean that’s the cool thing to do, but of course they don’t drink responsibly. And then there are all these clubs, as I mentioned earlier, within the radius. For Asians, Koreans, they have something called K-Town, which is Koreatown, and they’re not particular concerned about carding you and saying, “Well, okay, are you of legal age?” They just want you to get the expensive booze and help them to bolster their business. And so we’ve had incidents where students will get plastered, and then they drive back, and they crash, and they’ll have a DUI, and it’s very unfortunate to see that.

But I think alcohol is a huge social issue because everyone does it. It’s a big pressure both within the Asian culture as well as just in the college culture. So I think at UCLA it’s very plentiful and all the fraternities and sororities are within walking distance and of course, you just have to walk in. If you’re a gal and a pretty face, they’ll welcome you in. So there’s no restrictions. Everything is offered to you. You’re very tempted, and if you aren’t strong in the temptation, you’re going to give into that. So that’s the big social one.

Darrell Bock

Now I’m gonna ask a larger cultural question here ‘cause it helps to define the alcohol issue and that is generally speaking in the Korean community when it comes to Christians and drinking – I’m from Texas and Southern Baptists. You don’t drink. Is there abstinence generally in the churches that is urged or is it more drink in moderation? What is it that a child coming out of a Christian background would have been exposed to in the context of a Korean church?
**Ben Shin**

Well, it’s pretty strict abstinence. You cannot. You should not. It’s a horrific sin if you do, but that’s the problem in the sense of the way it was communicated now when these young kids are out of their parents’ homes, there’s no restriction. There’s no mom and dad saying, “You can’t do this,” and so they swing the pendulum the other way. They become totally intoxicated with this stuff, and I’ve seen some pretty bad cases. I think it’s a response that is just a reaction to how strongly and perhaps how legalistically some of this was proposed.

So I think we’re rethinking this. We just had a meeting with our campus leaders this last Saturday, and we were just exhorting them, “If you’re of age, be responsible. If you’re younger classmen who are under 21, then don’t do it so that it stumbles them.” We’re able to talk about this in a healthy manner that would allow them to be mature and to make wise decisions. But for the most part, Korean churches and parents have said just strongly, “Don’t do it,” and there’s no explanation why. It’s, “If you do it, you’re a sinner,” and that doesn’t go well with millennials, especially.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah. Now some of the other campuses that we’ve done interviews with, the whole issue of sexuality and the challenge of sexuality on the campus is also a big issue. Is that true in the Korean community or is the Korean community more restrained in this regard?

**Ben Shin**

My personal opinion is that the perception is that it is restrained, but the reality is it is not. Asian culture is a strong honor and shame culture, much like the first century, and so that’s still ingrained in our culture as Asians. But what happens with that culture is that we go stealth or we go underground, so it’s being done but it’s not flaunted in the same way that maybe a Westerner would want to take credit or make notches for their sexual conquerings of people or whatever. But when I counsel students who are Asian in nature, they’ll have as many if not more of the same problems, but because of shame, they won’t make that known publicly.

**Darrell Bock**

So it’s a little bit harder to deal with in the sense that it’s underground so it’s less likely to come up directly.

**Ben Shin**

Absolutely.
Now another issue that we often see on campuses is not so much the personal sexuality choices that a person has but the environment of sexuality that’s on the campus in general and the views with regards to sexuality that people are exposed to. I would take it where in UCLA we’re near Hollywood that this is also an issue that’s of significance.

Yes. Obviously within evangelical Christianity, this is a hot topic that we’re trying to formulate solid, truthful, gracious but loving responses to some of the movements that are there. Our students have friends, coworkers, dorm mates, classmates, who are of homosexual, lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, you name it, and they don’t know what to do with this. They have a general idea, but they also have the relational friendships with these people, and they seem like they’re nice people. Maybe they’ve known them since high school or even grade school, and this is a constant question that’s being asked, “What do we do? How do we respond? Should we reach out? Should we go where they go to or not?”

So we’re asking the Lord for a lot of wisdom. This is where my resources, again, at the seminary would be very helpful to have people who give thoughtful responses where we’re not stereotyped as just intolerant and hateful, but at the same time we do uphold truth. We want to give grace, and of course we want to share the gospel with these folks. So I think that’s gonna be one of the big challenges that we need to really put attention to to help college students to know how to give thoughtful and careful responses because that is the reality of the secular university.

Now I take it these topics sometimes come up in your meetings as topics that are addressed and who tends to address those for you all? I mean do you get pastoral help, or do you get help from somewhere else?
We try to go for both pastoral and professors. So of course your friend and my friend, Scott Rae, is a real good source. He always gives sound, biblical advice. He’s got a lot of experience, not just textbook ideas but real practical ideas. So we’ll have him or someone come to the campus and give a talk on this. It’s pretty much an in-house family talk, helping the students know how to respond. I believe they’ve had Veritas forums where they might have introduced this as a topic, but they’re careful because that could draw a lot of heat more than light, in light of it being a very highlighted issue that the media could get into. It could turn into a three-ring circus.

Darrell Bock

Now I’m very aware that at USC, the gay and lesbian student groups are very active, very visible, and actually among the more popular groups on the campus. What’s the situation at UCLA?

Ben Shin

I don’t know specifically but my guess it would probably be the same.

Darrell Bock

Okay. Well, that’s some of the social challenges. I take it that your core response to these is to, if I can say it, surround and encourage the student with support. Is that a good summary?

Ben Shin

Yes, I think so.

Darrell Bock

Okay. Well, let’s turn to the intellectual challenges now. Does UCLA offer some intellectual challenges to students on the campus?

Ben Shin

Yes. One of the surprising things, Darrell, is whether they’re overt or under the radar, there are a lot of faculty at UCLA who are actually believers. I actually worked in the Chemistry Department. For 16 years, I washed test tubes. That’s how I started as a student in the ‘80s and I got to work my way up where actually I was in charge of photocopying all of the chemistry exams for all the classes, and I would deliver it to professors. And part of why they trusted me with this was I was a youth pastor at the time, so they thought that I had some integrity, so I was thankful for that.
But I think that what is surprising is that all these Christian profs, when they talk about their faith, they will do so in a very inviting way where it’s not in your face. There was a guy named Chip Anderson. He passed away many years ago. He taught a very popular communication class. At the end of the quarter, he would say, “I have some other really important things that I would love to share with you about, and if you are interested, stay after class and I would love to share that with you.” He was known to give out bookmarks that had crosses on it. This was a big class, Darrell, like 500 students in the largest lecture hall.

So these kinds of stories I am mindful of and remember them. And then we’ve had other people, just recently Scott Bartchy. You might know him. He retired.

Yes.

And he was doing stuff around, and there are movements within Cru when they worked with faculty at UCLA, and I’ve known and identified a number of them. I think what they do is in their office hours, they do share about the gospel, and I think students somehow know about these professors so when they face an atheistic professor, which there are plenty of those, they’ll then go to a person who’s in that same discipline and say, “Can I ask you what you think about –” let’s say molecular biology or evolutionary sciences, and they’re able to respond. I think that’s been an interesting dynamic that we’ve seen. I don’t think all the students are aware of it, but students talk to each other and with social media, they text or message each other.

So I think the professors asked them not to put it out on Facebook so that everyone could see it ‘cause that could jeopardize some of their tenure and otherwise, but for the most part, I think students are aware of these Christian professors

So that’s an interesting dynamic. So there is internal support, at least potentially, if a student has sensitive radar in terms of what’s going on. Are there challenges intellectually on the campus? You mentioned at UCSD there was the Western Civ course that was a challenge. Anything like that going on at UCLA?
It’s interesting. You would think that the Philosophy Department, for example, would have been one of the strongest challenges but for many years, there was a professor here named Dr. Robert Adams. He and his wife were Christians, but they taught the Into Philosophy classes. So they actually brought philosophy and religion into their general philosophy classes. To my knowledge, Darrell, surprisingly I have not found too many antagonistic professors. I’ve heard of a few. Most of them were in the sciences.

UCLA is divided into South Campus and North Campus, so North Campus is more of the liberal arts. I haven’t heard too many in the liberal arts and surprising when I go to campus, students don’t ask me as many questions as Irvine or San Diego.

That’s very interesting. Well, I think that UCLA may grade out in this interview process as one of the more accepting of Christian faith. That actually can be an encouragement to students in the midst of all the other choices that they have.

I think another huge thing, too, Darrell, is there are so many Christian organizations at UCLA. I don’t know the latest statistic but I believe there is as many as 90 Christian groups at UCLA. That’s a lot.

Yeah. Now I almost hesitate to ask this question but since we did it for the other colleges, I probably should. I take it that there’s church support, too, for student who are there so there are plenty of places for students to go and get connected to a larger community.

Yes. So one church that has a large campus is Grace Community Church, John MacArthur’s church. They have a Bible study called Grace on Campus. I was part of the initial group that started in ’86 for that Bible study and when I was there, I was the only Asian in that Bible study. Now it’s 70 percent Chinese and Korean. It’s really just taken off in that way, and that’s a trend generally for campus ministries.

Yeah, I want to come back to that.
Ben Shin: Okay. I think Young Nak Celebration Church, which is a church that I go to, that’s been a real support. L.A. Open Door Church is another supporting church. Bel Air Pres, West L.A. Baptist Church. The funny thing, Darrell, is a lot of people who would go to UCLA, they actually travel pretty far to church. So a lot of churches that are there, we don’t have that much interaction with. A lot of the churches are at least a half an hour to an hour away. That’s where the students go.

Darrell Bock: Now that actually raises a question I was going to raise about all these campuses and didn’t ask and probably should and that is how much are these campuses are commuter campuses versus students living on campus? My sense is that in California, you’re dealing more with commuter students generally speaking than you are residential students.

Ben Shin: The UC schools have a large dorming system and apartment system and so typically most UC students, I’d say up to maybe 80 percent, live on or near campus so they don’t commute necessarily. But at the Cal State level schools like Cal State L.A. or Cal State Fullerton, those are the opposite. They are primarily commuter schools. So that’s a little different dynamic.

That has led to some problems with campus ministries, because when students are on campus, they want to be there so they’ll stay a little bit longer and come to our general meetings. We tried campus ministry with some of these Cal State schools, which are primarily commuter schools. They just are in and out and so to stay another hour or two, that’s an inconvenience for them. So it’s been difficult to do campus ministries at the Cal State level.

Darrell Bock: What I’m also hearing now is there are two kinds of state universities in California? Is that correct?

Ben Shin: Correct.

Darrell Bock: Interesting. From just the state’s point of view, what is the difference between the two systems? Is there a difference?
The UC system, I think what they would say is that’s the top 12 percent of the elite academics graduating out of high school go to the UC systems. It is much more expensive, but they also have in most cases better quality professors and thus education. Cal States are more affordable, but I don’t believe they are as difficult to get into. They have excellent professors there all across the board as well, but some would say maybe generally it’s not at the same level as some of these schools like UCLA.

Okay. So let’s wrap up on UCLA here. It sounds like in many ways UCLA is not – well, how do I want to say this – it’s not as intellectually challenging a campus in being less hostile to Christianity, but in some ways at the personal level, it’s more challenging because of all the choices. Is that a fair way to summarize?

I would generally say that’s true. I’m sure there are some antagonistic and hostile academic challenges around. I’m not saying that there aren’t. But the predominant challenge seems to be the social challenges and the environment because of what you said, all the choices, all the temptations.

So how would you say the ministry in UCLA differs, if it does, from UC Irvine or UC San Diego?

Well, I think that the students have a little bit different attitude in some ways. From the UC San Diego, UC Irvine perspective, they might say the students are a little more “stuck up.” In the UC systems, the two coveted schools are Cal Berkeley and UCLA. I don’t think even from a ranking perspective it’s necessarily true that other schools are not as good, but the perception is that there’s a first tier which would be UCLA and Cal, a second tier which would be Irvine and San Diego, and then there would be a third tier which would be like maybe Riverside and some of these other UCs that are not as well known.

That’s the perception that unfortunately plays into the stereotype of Asians who try to get into the top tiers. They feel sometimes discouraged when they don’t get into those, and a lot of it is the parental pressure and the stereotypes and so forth. All of them are excellent schools. They all have excellent professors, and obviously the students are all very bright. I’ve gotten to meet many of them. I think it’s more of a stereotype than an actual thing.
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Darrell Bock

Now, again, this is partially to help churches and parents and that kind of thing. So when I think of California schools I certainly think of UCLA and Berkeley but I also think of USC and Stanford and maybe Pepperdine is in that mix as well. Are USC, Pepperdine, and Stanford private schools, not state schools? Is that the difference?

Ben Shin

Correct. They are private schools.

Darrell Bock

I see. So part of the rivalry between USC and UCLA has to do with the structure of the school and where it’s coming from in terms of it’s competing for the L.A. or the Southern California student.

Ben Shin

There’s no rivalry, Darrell.

Darrell Bock

There’s no rivalry? Look, I know that’s not true. I’ve gotten up and spoken in groups in California.

You’ve been doing this 30 years now. I’ll come back to a question I asked at the start in light of our conversation, and that is how do you think campuses have changed from the time you started ministering to now? Now we’re not thinking so much of the individual campuses as kind of the environment there in Southern California as a whole.

Ben Shin

Well, I think there’s so many more temptations that can hinder students, whether it be accessibility to social media. Many years ago, the Internet was not a big issue. A lot of it has to do with what you can do on the Internet. You can do gambling and I’ve met students who are $10,000.00, $20,000.00 in debt when they go online and they do this. Of course, pornography is rampant. All these things and all these distractions with the pressure to study harder with the sense that if you study harder and graduate with a degree you’ll get a better job. You get a better job, you’ll make more money. Now it’s more competitive, because there aren’t so many jobs. The economy is fading. All of those really hinder people in terms of their faith.
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So I think that many years ago, it was easier to do campus ministry than now. Now it’s tough to get the students to come out, and that’s where I think the key is you’ve got to enlist other students who aren’t committed to get those students, because they’re more apt to come out because their peers come out than if let’s say we just have a big hoopla and just throw a bunch of food out there. So I think that peers are really key.

Darrell Bock

And I think the overall flavor of this interview has struck me, because normally when you think of the challenges of a university and the university campus you think about the challenges of what happens to a student intellectually and the way in which their Christian faith gets challenged at that level. But you’re really saying that the larger challenges in many ways operate at a much more personal and relational level. Fair?

Ben Shin

Yeah, I would say so, at least for our students.

Darrell Bock

That’s interesting and you’re the second interview we’ve done that involves a major school, Princeton being the other one, that where this pressure at the personal level is so intense. It’s in a different way at Princeton but it’s the same kind of core challenge to the whole person, if you will, and their walk, as opposed to merely being a challenge about how they think about the Christian faith.

Ben Shin

So when we go back to youth groups, what we need to do is we need to help them not only have a robust, solid worldview, but we need to help them mature so that they would have biblical wisdom to make the right choices when they’re faced with all these temptations. I think that’s what we should major on.

Darrell Bock

That’s interesting. Well, that’s a great word, and I think it’s an interesting place to wrap up our conversation. Ben, I really appreciate you taking time with us to do this. It’s great to see you. We usually at least get to touch base when I get out there in the summers and so I wish you all the best as you continue to minister to these campuses and as you minister on the Talbot campus and I thank you for taking the time to talk with us today.

Ben Shin

All right. Thank you, Darrell. God bless you, brother.
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Darrell Bock

And we thank you for joining us on the table as we look at the state of ministries and the nature of challenges that students face on college campuses around the United States.