How To Engage in a University Context: Texas A&M

Part 1 of 2: Social Challenges Facing Students at Texas A&M
with Darrell Bock, Ben Stuart
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Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. I’m Darrell Bock, Executive Director for Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center at Dallas Theological Seminary. Today, our topic is the college campus, and the specific campus that we’re looking at is Texas A&M – whoop, whoop.

Ben Stuart

Whoop.

It’s great to have Ben Stuart with us. He leads a ministry on the campus called Breakaway that he’s about to describe to you. This is one of a series of podcasts that we’re doing on the college campus in America where we’re taking a look at the social and intellectual pressures and tensions that students are under today as they head off to college.

We do this as a service to churches to help them think through how they’re preparing their kids in high school for the college campus. Ben, welcome to The Table. We’re really pleased to have you.

Thanks. I’m glad to be here.

It just shows that payback is fair play because when I came to College Station a couple of years ago, you audioed me, so I’m getting you back, plus – with video as well.

All right. Let’s go for it.

Let’s talk about Breakaway. Tell us a little bit about the history and the nature of the ministry that you have there on the Texas A&M campus, and then we’ll go from there.

Breakaway is a home-grown ministry. It started on the campus of Texas A&M in 1989 by a group of sophomores. Literally, a handful of guys just met in their apartment to pray, read the Bible, and it just took off in a grassroots kind of way from there.
We moved it onto campus several years ago, and really see ourselves as missionaries to the campus. Tuesday nights, 9 o’clock. We use venues on the campus to reach students, have a worship service, and then we spend a lot of our energy plugging them into local churches. That’s who we are. We’re – Lord willing – the hub in the middle of the campus, getting them connected to the Lord and His people.

This is not a small ministry by any means because on an average week, how many Texas A&M students are you getting to your meetings during the week?

This fall, our average has been over 5,000. Our largest we did outdoors and had a little over 11, which is pretty crazy.

Are they expanding Kyle Field to accommodate you eventually? Is that the goal?

They’re doin’ it for us. Oh yeah. Four-hundred-and-fifty million dollar expansion. We’re real grateful they did that for us.

It’s amazing, ‘cuz I was there a year-and-a-half ago, and it was 3,500 then. So, you guys are still blowin’ and goin’.

It’s been awesome. The University had 10,000 incoming freshmen this year – that’s brand new freshmen. So, the school is blowin’ up, and it’s just a fun time to be in ministry.

You mean growing.

Yes. So it’s a fun time to be on the campus.

So, in your average meetings, what’s taking place?

They’re real simple. We’ll use the basketball arena, and we’ll get in at 6:30 and need to have it set by 8:30. So, there’s not a lot of flashing lights and whatever. It’s pretty raw, but it’s worship and then teaching of the Bible, a chance for students to pray with people, connect with folks. We have teams that are helping them learn about the churches in town and get connected.
I think the benefit for some students is they can come and be anonymous. They feel the freedom to bring their friends. They’re on campus – 9 o’clock at night they go, “Hey, let’s just slide over to this thing and check it out.” It’s very much in their world, about their world. But it’s a pretty simple worship service – I guess. We call it a Bible study, but I know that can be a little misleading language. But that’s basically what it looks like: some worship, some teaching.

Darrell Bock: Is there any small group stuff going on out of it, or any discipleship stuff? Or is it strictly these once-a-week meetings?

Ben Stuart: We disciple our volunteers. We have a volunteer core of students that pull all this off. I have a staff of four, including myself. This thing is really run by students. We spend a lot of time with those students. But ABC Student at Coms – we made a decision a while ago. If we start a robust, small group network we basically become a church. So what we discovered as we studied A&M was – we’re a big ministry; it’s a big campus, but it’s a small town. So there’s a handful of churches that have amazing ministers that love college students, and we all work together.

Darrell Bock: That’s great.

Ben Stuart: We told them, “We win when your churches grow.” These churches will come to Breakaway. They’ll set up booths, hand out flyers. Our language is, by their sophomore year, students are going to find their community either at a church or at a bar, and if we can push them toward the church, we feel like we won.

Really, I think part of the reason why God blesses what’s happening here is we all work together – the churches and ministries, we work together.

Darrell Bock: That’s great. How large of a student-volunteer – you said your student volunteers – how large a group is that who help you pull off these events?

Ben Stuart: It’s about 200.

Darrell Bock: Wow.
Ben Stuart: A little less than that.

Darrell Bock: So four of you are working with 200 students basically. Am I getting that about right?

Ben Stuart: Yes. I mean, we work with about 20 team leaders. It’s fun, because they really do run it. They know where some things are; I don’t know where they are. They make stuff happen, and we get to train them up. It’s fun to work shoulder-to-shoulder with 20 year olds.

Darrell Bock: As I take it, most college ministries are, you try to bring them in when they’re freshmen and hopefully your top leadership has stayed with you and been around for a while by the time they’re either graduating or moved onto graduate school and hung around.

Ben Stuart: That’s right. That’s the toughest part, is right when you get them where you want them, you send them on to somebody on. Hopefully, we’re staffing a lot of great churches.

Darrell Bock: That’s great. It sounds like it’s a terrific ministry.

As you know, since I told you, we’re interviewing ministry leaders literally around the country. We’ve done one in the northeast with Princeton. We did one interview where we combined three schools. This was a Korean professor at Talbot who actually had worked on the campus of three schools over a 30 year period, which was kind of a neat interview because he was able to talk about how the campus has changed in the time that he has been on the campus – over three decades. Also, he was able to very much specify how the campuses were different from one another.

You’re situation is a little different. How long have you been at A&M working on campus?

Ben Stuart: This is my 8th year.

Darrell Bock: Eighth year. Were you a student at A&M as well?

Ben Stuart: Yes.
Were you part of Breakaway when you were a student? Have you been connected with the ministry that long, or did you come into it afterwards?

Yeah, I attended when I was a student. It was off-campus at the time, and running a little under a thousand people. I went and had a wonderful experience, but I left never thought I would move back, per se, but I’m so glad I did. We love it here. We love what we get to do.

Eight years is still a pretty interesting slice of time. Is there any sense in which A&M – is the A&M of today the A&M of eight years ago, or is the campus changing? Have things changed very much? What’s your take on that question?

I would say so. People ask me that all the time: “Is it like a trip down memory lane?” and I say, “No, not at all.” It’s a very different place, physically, ‘cuz so many new buildings have come up. The school is expanding; it’s so much larger than when I was there.

How many students does Texas A&M have?

It’s over 50,000 now.

Wow, so it’s one of the largest schools in the country.

That’s right. I think it’s in the top five now, and they’ve just thrown the doors open. They’re going for it in terms of population.

What is that doing demographically to your campus? Has that impacted the demographics, the fact that they’ve thrown the doors open? What I have now in mind primarily is the ethnic mix of the campus.

One of the great things at A&M is there’s a lot of international students, and particularly because A&M produces a lot of engineers. There’s a lot of students from all over the world that come to get engineering degrees, work with oil – that kind of things. We have a huge international student population.
Once you get within the U.S., I think there’s a decent size Hispanic population. There’s not a very large African-American population.

**Darrell Bock**

Interesting.

**Ben Stuart**

That’s something I think the school has constantly been working to change. It is interesting; you’ll see people from all over the world, everywhere. There’s a lot more international students, which is nice.

**Darrell Bock**

You said the physical layout and size of the school has changed a lot in eight years. Anything else about the school changed over that period? Is the feel of the campus – even though it’s bigger and there are more people – pretty much the same? Or has that changed? Are the issues staying the same, or are they changing?

**Ben Stuart**

No. I would say it’s a very different day. These students – they were born in the mid-90s. The freshmen were born in ’95. This generation is being raised – YouTube was around when they were kids, cell phones. The way they’re interacting with the culture around them is so different than people that were in school in the 90s. I think it’s very much changed their experience of how they connect with each other, the speed of flow of information to them.

**Darrell Bock**

That’s an interesting observation. We haven’t heard that one before. That’s a very important observation.

When we talk about this in relationship to the seminary and the education models that we’re dealing with – in class versus online, that kind of thing – I actually like to make the point that kids who grow up who are born now, and I had my kids in mind, who were born in the mid ’80s, ’80-to-’84, so they’re actually probably about your age. Anyway, they grew up with technology around them even to a lesser degree than the students you’re talking about. But they interact with each other and through that means naturally, whereas we – my generation – had to acquire that ability, and we differentiate how we relate: technologically versus non-technologically in a way, generally speaking, that younger people don’t, at least not as much.
I do think that’s a difference, and I like to say we have to be careful not to measure the way in which we grew into technology relating and confuse that with someone who’s been used to it from the day they were born. It does make a difference.

It totally does, yes. Their interactions with their parents are very different, their interactions with each other. Even watching just the speed of gossip zoom around campus, or even the primary shapers of culture are not even necessarily local anymore with college campuses.

That’s an important question. What kinds of influences are you talking about there?

I just think with students, their phones are everywhere now. So if there’s ever a dull moment, [holds up cell phone] something’s happening right here. So you’ve got constant flow of information that may have nothing to do with the building you’re in, the people around you. It’s coming from whatever sources that you’re being marketed by.

Interesting, because the image that flashed through my mind when you picked up the phone and started to look at it is – I work out regularly, and the place where I work out happens to be real close to SMU, and it’s amazing to watch younger people work out because they work out and their iPhones are still working. They aren’t watching the television a lot of the times. They’re sitting there interacting with their email while they’re on the treadmill. I’m thinking, “That’s a different definition of multitasking than what I’m used to.”

You know, we live in a culture – with these students – even different from mine, and I’m not that old. But they’re growing up in a culture that in no way encourages meditation or reflection. It’s just constant new data. That’s where you’ll meet students that their worldviews are just extremely fragmented, because there’s not really been anyone even encouraging them to try to integrate how do these different things you believe relate to each other – does it make any sense, cohesively? They really don’t.

We’re not in a culture that promotes meditation or contemplation.
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**Darrell Bock**

The metaphor I like to use is the picture of a news channel where you’ve got split screen, text going down the bottom, and it’s all happening at once.

I often tell this story of being in a furniture store when my daughter was buying furniture for her first house. I was standing by a TV that was on MTV and I was counting how long an image was on the screen. I never got to the number 4. This was over a five-minute period. I call my wife over, and I do the same exercise. I say, “Just listen to this; just listen to how long an image is up on the screen.” Another two or three minutes, I never get to the number 4. I turn to her, and I say, “That’s how our kids are processing their information.”

**Ben Stuart**

Yes.

**Darrell Bock**

It’s coming in bursts, and it’s short, and it’s sweet, and it moves on, and you’re always doing it. I said, “That’s just the image. I’m not even dealing with everything else that’s on the screen here that’s happening.”

So I think it’s a very good point. We’re kind of – how should I say – moseying over to the core questions that I want to ask you. What, in your judgment as you minister to this horde of kids – 5,000, good grief – what are the key social and intellectual challenges that students are facing? Let’s start with the social ones first, and then we’ll move to the more intellectual challenges.

As they think about their walk, the development of virtue, the development of character that their faith is calling for, what challenges are they facing at a social level?

**Ben Stuart**

I would say there’s two different pressures I see that are the most frequently showing up in the lives of students. One is: there’s a lot of stress and anxiety about hurrying up to arrive somewhere. There’s been new studies on it. Jean Twenge wrote that book, Generation Me, about how this young generation’s more entitled and miserable than ever. You see that – this message of “do whatever you want, be whatever you want, you can go,” is meant to be encouraging. But what it does is it creates stress in students of, “I’ve got to hurry up and accomplish whatever.”
They’re telling, “I can,” and “I should,” so there’s this stress. I was surprised when I came back – I graduated in ’98, came back in the mid 2000s – and the number of hours students take per semester has radically gone up. They don’t even know why they’re rushing so fast to get out or rushing so fast to get the next internship or whatever. There’s just this, “I’ve got to grab it, I’ve got to get it,” and there’s not much contemplation on it, but there’s a lot of stress to perform.

I would say what I think it is with students is they’re being pressured to be the creator of their stories rather than the discoverer of them. I think they’re being told, “You’ve got to find what makes you happy and go do it,” and that puts enormous pressure on them – rather than saying, “Hey, God built you to do something for the common good. Discover that. Go on an adventure to discover how you’ve been made.” They’re trying to be the author of their story rather than the character in their story. So, you see a lot of stress in students.

The common thing you ask is, “How are you doing?” “Busy.”

**Darrell Bock**

That’s the answer.

**Ben Stuart**

Yes. The second thing, I would say is – James says, “True religion is to visit the orphan and widow in their distress and to keep one’s self unstained from the world.” What I love about this generation of students is they’re killing it on the first one. They are so concerned with social justice issues. It’s beautiful. My generation wasn’t.

But the “unstained from the world,” the college campus is heralded – culture is the place of experimentation, and everything’s good and try it all. The boundaries have disappeared. For this generation, they don’t look for pornography; it’s finding them. These kids – what’s the latest statistic? Ninety percent of them, before they were 10, had seen hard-core pornography online. They’re not looking for it.

So, this generation has soaked in some really intense sexual pressures, exposure for most of their lives.
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**Darrell Bock**

How does that impact them at the relational level? This answer to this question in this area is pretty consistent almost no matter what campus we talk about. Maybe it’s slightly more intense and less subtle in the Ivy League where they have the annual sex week and that kind of thing. But it’s still there and I think every person we’ve asked this question has put this topic on the table.

How do your students deal with that?

**Ben Stuart**

You mean in a good way, or a bad way?

**Darrell Bock**

It’s a wide open question. Take it wherever you want. Obviously you’re talking to them a lot about these areas, and you’re challenging them in these areas. Process that for me.

**Ben Stuart**

I think because there’s such a bombardment of information and so little time, and encouragement for reflection, students are just getting stuff thrown at them – images online with the pornography and different things and different pressures socially. One of the strengths I think the minister has, like I do, is they’re not really being presented with logical argumentation. “It would be really life-enhancing to have this kind of sexual experience.” Nobody’s saying that. It’s just more, “Do it, do it, do it, do it.”

As a minister, you’ve got logic on your side. Nobody is really helping them think through –

**Darrell Bock**

What are the consequences?

**Ben Stuart**

What do I believe? Yeah, do whatever you want – where does that road go? How has that worked out in others’ lives? What you’ll find is that’s just maybe not even been contemplated. It’s not that they’re dumb. They’ve just not put those pieces together of, “Oh, yeah, that may not be the most healthy lifestyle,” because I don’t think the culture encourages that kind of contemplation.

**Darrell Bock**

So, you’re supplying something that’s missing – or attempting to?
Yes. I think what we’re constantly trying to do is integrate that. “How do your beliefs connect to each other? Do they logically fit?” I’ll talk to students about – if they’re a Christian student – talk about their faith in Christ, and they’ll have things to say about their church and what they’re reading. Then I’ll ask about what they’re studying and what they want to do with their lives, and this will not really have informed that at all.

We’re actually dealing with that at a completely different level with something else that we’re doing, which is we’ve received a grant from the Kern Family Foundation to talk about faith and work. The point is that most pastors in churches don’t talk to people about how they should view the nine-to-five part of their life. They might talk about the character, but they don’t talk about: “How should you view your work? Do you have a theology of work?” If you want to say it that way.

When I was in seminary I didn’t have a course on workology. So what we have tried to do is to come alongside and say, “Look, if you’re going to have a holistic discipleship and if your life’s going to be integrated, you’ve got to think about how you think about your nine-to-five job.” You shouldn’t think of it in a secular kind of way where you walk in and “I do it so that I’m freed up to do the other things with my life that I want to do in the rest of the time that I have.” You’ve got to integrate that into what you do.

What I’m hearing you say is you’ve got the same kind of disconnect. It isn’t surprising. If their parents haven’t connected it, the kids aren’t going to connect it either. Same kind of disconnect with their lives, that there’s the secular portion of their life and then there’s the time that they give over to spiritual things.

Yes.

It’s disjoined, and because it’s disjoined, they separate things out and don’t connect the dots.
**Ben Stuart**

That’s how it works at work. You’ll definitely see it in that, in choosing a career path. The prevailing message is, “Do whatever makes you happy,” which is some combination of fame or money based on however you see it. It’s not a contemplation of what can you do to serve the public good, that God really built you to do to bless the community. It’s more “What’s good for me?” Do you see how that philosophy’s not really Christian at all, and trying to connect those things.

But then you’ll see it sexually, too. You know, I had a friend in ministry encourage me. He said, “Whenever somebody Tweets and mentions your ministry or you, try periodically to go look at their Twitter feed and see what else they talk about.” It’s funny. I’ll do that, and students will not seem to have any problem connecting, “Oh worship tonight was awesome.” “Oh I was so hammered on Thursday.” Or, Tweet a Bible verse out and their little picture is them in a bikini or with their shirt off, flexing. Does that not strike you as strange?

I don’t think – they’ve not gone, “Well, I actually have a really integrated way of combining those two things.” They’ve just not thought about the implications of worshiping God on their sexuality and how they present it. That’s not every student, but that’s a common theme.

**Darrell Bock**

I take it there’s a lot of pressure to go there. College campuses – now again, I’m taking the clock back to when before there were trains and cars and that kind of thing. But when I was on college campuses, the terrific pressure, some university campuses, the University of Texas – I think I can say that even though I’m talking to someone from A&M – the pressure to drink and socialize and connect was huge. That’s what the weekends were. They were like magnets to that, and full of opportunities for poor choices, if I can say it that way.

I suspect the nature of the experience may have changed, but I imagine the dynamics of that core thing haven’t changed very much. Would that be fair?

**Ben Stuart**

I would say so. It’s interesting. Even when I think about when I was coming up, there was still a sense of it was the forbidden. Now it’s the common – you know what I mean?
Darrell Bock: So, something switched. We’ve crossed the Rubicon, so to speak.

Ben Stuart: Absolutely. They’re still all doing it, but it doesn’t have –

Darrell Bock: The stigma that it did.

Ben Stuart: – the thrill of doing something really taboo. It’s kind of like, “Well, this is what we do.” The upshot of it is, it’s not a very satisfying life intellectually or socially. That’s in a sense made, I think, my job easier as a minister because the culture has said, “Just run.” When students run that way or even see people doing it, that’s actually – they’re not really much happier. So I think being able to come to them with a presentation of the truth is compelling to students in a new way because they’re seeing this is the culture soaking in.

Darrell Bock: How much of the tension is – I’m trying to think of a good way to ask this – how much of the tension is, when that’s the scenario, that in the attempt to seemingly connect and connect more often, it’s actually because of the – I’ll characterize it – the shallowness of the connection. It’s actually a more lonely kind of existence. Is that irony taking place?

Ben Stuart: Absolutely, yes. Sex without love doesn’t really work. Love without commitment doesn’t really work. I think that’s the pervasive kind of feel in the culture, and I think with students it’s fairly easy to tap into that: this isn’t really working; let’s just think down this road a little bit – it’s not a very satisfying road.

Darrell Bock: Then they emerge from the other end having – I’ll say it this way – “bought in” to a certain degree, and then an element of disillusionment sets in ‘cuz it isn’t delivering.

Ben Stuart: Yes.

Darrell Bock: So then what do you do? You either intensify the numbness, if I can say it that way. Or you say, “There’s got to be another way.”
Ben Stuart: That’s what I think is – ministers today have lost maybe what we had in the past, which is the credibility. I feel like maybe there was a day where you could tell people, “Well, this is the way to view sex or work or life.” People would go, “Well, of course. You’re quoting the Bible; everyone believes the Bible.” There’s this common acceptance of a biblical worldview. There’s less of that now.

Darrell Bock: Yes, absolutely.

Ben Stuart: But, I think if you preach, what you have on your side is truth, logic. Because logic isn’t really even used that much in the arguments of what students believe. They’ve just been told it a lot. So, when you just talk through the truth of, “Okay, this is a common, prevailing thought in the culture; where is that going? Is that a very satisfying place at all? Now let me show you a more excellent way. Let me show you a way that actually touches the deepest longings of your heart, is intellectually satisfying to your mind, and works socially.” That’s what I think is fun in preaching, is always trying to push integration of if you really believe that statement, what kind of culture does that make, what society does that make?

If you believe – a prevailing thought is – we were joking about it the other day, me and a group of students. The prevailing thought is, “You do you.” It’s a prevailing thing which basically means you do whatever you want. “Oh, okay.” Just run that out a little bit. If everyone in the culture does that, women lose and kids lose. Then you just start giving them examples of when cultures embrace selfishness as a core value, women and children lose because the strong people win.

Darrell Bock: Then everybody loses because we get messed-up families.

Ben Stuart: Exactly. Then ultimately everyone loses. Who wants a world like that?