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

Part 2 of 2: Preparing students for the challenges of life in college
with Darrell Bock, Ben Stuart
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So, what kinds of topics do you cover in, say, a year of Breakaway meetings? Do they kind of jump all over the place, or is there a specific approach that you take? Does it move around from year to year? Do you have something pretty standard that you try and cover ’cuz you realize you’re laying some foundations?

That’s an interesting challenge – is 25 percent of your audience is brand new every year, so you’re not necessarily building over the years – like a church. So what I’ve tried to do is – within a year I’m always trying to move between Old Testament, New, a narrative, an epistle, giving them exposure to different parts of the Bible. Then I’m always trying to work in a topical series as well. I feel like if I can do that, you’re hitting every different area that they may have questions or issues or thoughts coming up.

So your Bible study is book-based with the topic mixed in every now and then. Is that what you’re saying? Or, is it more topically focused?

Yeah, I would say – and it’s probably just my preference – I’ll lean towards teaching through a book. But for me, the way Breakaway works – you know, a school semester is only 16 weeks. You lop off holidays. You go – I’ve got 12 sermons. So when I go into a semester I go, “Okay, I got 12.”

That’s 48 across a normal college career. That’s one year of preaching –

Yeah.

– in church terms.

So I go, “Okay, I’m not going to do every verse of Romans for three years. I’m just not going to. Like, I’ll do the book of James in five weeks.” Then I’ll cover some kind of topical issue. So, I try to break it up that way.

What kinds of topics do you cover when you cover topics?

I’m trying to think what the last one I did was. I did sort of a “Why College,” like why even go. Some of the big –
Darrell Bock: Now that you’ve gotten here, I’m gonna tell you – why are you sitting here.

Ben Stuart: Yeah, basically.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, yeah, exactly, yeah.

Ben Stuart: Here’s the thing. When I presented that to them, you know, I gave them the latest polls from Pew research where they interviewed college professors, college presidents, parents, students. Their answers were all over the board. There was no one in America knows what exactly we’re doing here. Why are you here? They came up to us afterwards and they’re like, none of us asked that question. We’re just kind of here ‘cuz it’s the next thing you do.

Darrell Bock: Huh. Example of the lack of contemplation about doin’ what you do.

Ben Stuart: You do it ‘cuz you do it.

Darrell Bock: Yeah.

Ben Stuart: But you know, some of the biggest issues for them is – you know, this is their first time out on their own, you know. So, things that we think are normal now: structuring your day. I mean, they went from a very structured day to – they only have to be somewhere 15 hours a week, and that’s if they even go. So they’re having to build their own structures. They’re having to take on responsibilities, and they’re trying to ask these big questions of: “Who am I? What am I built to do? Where am I going?”

Darrell Bock: Yeah. ‘Cuz universities are pretty good at making sure people at least think about that question.
Ben Stuart  Yeah. So, that’s a lot of what we do, sort of the “Why are you here? How do I trust God with the unknown? How do I deal with anxiety and stress?” Then, sex is always big, you know. I think we’ve taught every passage of the Bible on sex possible. I was kind of off it. I was kind of like, “You know, we’ve done that to death. I’m sort of over it.” Then we did a series on confession and I put these big trash cans near the stage and said, “If there’s some things you’ve never gotten off your chest, they’re weighing on you, this isn’t the end of it, but if you want to start by just writing it down and throwing it in these deals, you can.” So, we had thousands of ‘em. Four out of five were – some of ‘em just really tragic sexual thing in their life.

Darrell Bock  Wow.

Ben Stuart  I looked at that and was like, “Never mind, we’re doing a whole new series on it. You know.” We did Song of Solomon. Rather than beat ‘em up on stop doing that, we said, “Let me show you a beautiful picture of what you really want: love, commitment and sex all together.” That was fun.

Darrell Bock  Let me transition now. What are the intellectual challenges that a student finds on campus? Are they being challenged with regard to their faith when they’re on campus? I will just make this observation. Except for maybe UCLA, the other schools that we’ve done these interviews on, the campuses – well, it’s not neutral, it’s usual pretty hostile to the faith. But my sense is, is at least there’s the potential in certain parts of the country where that’s not yet the case, at least not entirely – the campus is more mixed in that regard. UCLA came up that way. There were pockets of Christian activity and you could find Christian professors on campus, that kind of thing. I suspect that Texas A&M is a little more of a mixed bag. Am I right about that, or wrong?

Ben Stuart  Yeah, I think so. I mean, there’s – any student you talk to will tell a story of a professor that was fairly hostile to Christianity. But the context as a whole – I mean, maybe in their dorm they might feel that, or there’s places and ways you could live. But if you want to be a Christian here, it’s not like, “Boy, I am constantly having to deal with being assailed by people.”

Darrell Bock  Are there any early Christianity classes on the campus?
Ben Stuart  

Not that –

Darrell Bock  

Any faith-buster class like they say -there’s a nickname for a class at Princeton. It’s the faith-buster’s class. I mean, everyone knows what it’s about and what it’s attempting to do. So, there’s not anything like that at A&M?

Ben Stuart  

Not really. I mean, there’s – there are a few Christianity religion classes, and they’re not converting anyone to Christianity, but they’re not really successfully undermining it for a lot of people, either. I would say – you know, at A&M, you don’t get as many philosophy majors at A&M. A&M is –

Darrell Bock  

Plato and Socrates are not roaming around your campus? [laughs]

Ben Stuart  

It’s – and again, that’s not a knock on their intellect, it’s more A&M is cranking out engineers.

Darrell Bock  

Right.

Ben Stuart  

Who was it, The Wall Street Journal put out their deal where A&M students are some of the top recruits in the country by Fortune 500 companies. People love Aggies ‘cuz they work hard. This is a work-hard culture. Like I’m not having to kick kids to get them volunteering. If anything, you got students that have joined 40 organizations and are trying to figure out how to balance it. These are stallions running at 100 miles an hour; they’re not donkeys you got to kick to move.

But with that, it’s an unreflected-upon running, and a lot of ‘em what it is, what it can become is just, “I’m here to get a business degree, get an engineering degree, get a law degree, to go make that money.” So, they’re not really contemplating the philosophical underpinnings of that. They have a school system that’s telling them, “Here’s how to get hired; here’s how to get a job; here’s how to make money. We’ll set you up to do that.” And it’s just full speed towards as much as I can. So, that’s what I run into.

Darrell Bock  

So, the intellectual challenge is not as great as just the social – how can I say it – the wave of just pursuing life overwhelming people spiritually. Is that what you’re saying?
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Ben Stuart
Yeah. It’s sort of like – I don’t know that there’s any professor telling them, “Students, I want you to unashamedly chase money. It will solve all your problems; it is fantastic,” and just extol the virtues of money. They’re not being encouraged to contemplate their worldview that way. They just get here and the assumption is, “Okay, you’re going to want a job at this kind of company. To get at this kind of company you need this kind of grades, so you better do this. So let’s ride ho ho, ha ha.” They’re not even thinking about, “Do I even want that.” It’s more just being caught up in the rush.

Darrell Bock
That’s the person who trains for law and then they get their law degree, they get through, they’ve got their job, they’re making their money, but they get there and they realize, “This job is taking 85, 90 hours a week and is sucking the life out of me at the same time.”

Ben Stuart
Well, who was it – the President of Wake Forest a couple of years ago came out and admitted it. He said, “We have a disproportionate number of students going into law and medicine because of the allure of prestige and wealth,” and he said, “What we’re getting back now is higher and higher reports of job dissatisfaction.” Because they didn’t go in thinking, “What am I gifted at, passionate at, and able to do well for the sake of the world.” It was just, “What will make me a success?” And without even a real reflected-upon definition of what success is.

You’re being told success is money and a job that looks successful. Oh, okay. It’s like, “Man.” But that’s not proclaimed; it’s assumed. So as a minister, you have to say, “Here’s the assumption we’re operating off of,” and you have to name it. You have to name the spirit and then cast it out. You know? That’s what’s happening. It’s not a boxing match where it’s right in front of you.

Darrell Bock
It’s a ghost. It’s a ghost that’s moving. It’s a shadow that’s moving.

Ben Stuart
Exactly. So you have to name it. This is what the culture is teaching you. Does everyone agree to that? Does everyone see that? Okay, let me analyze that and see if that makes sense at all. That’s the idea.

Darrell Bock
Interesting.
Well, let me shift to kind of the last level of questions that I want to ask you, and that is – part of what we’re doing with these is: they’re on the net, they’re available to churches, they’re available to youth ministers, and we really have in mind here two audiences: parents on the one end, and high school kids on the other. Those who are on the edge of – who will be in Breakaway next year or four or five years from now.

So, I’ve got three audiences here. One are the church leaders. The other are the kids, and the third are the parents. I’m not sure what order to take them in, but, what advice would you give to those three groups?

Let me ask you this question; this is a better way to ask it. What do you find youth leaders are not doing that you wish they would do that would help the students you work with be in a better place when they get to Texas A&M?

**Ben Stuart**

Yeah, that’s a great question. I would say – this may sound silly, but it’s really true – I would say I would encourage them to bend their whole ministry around the two things that only the church can give these kids, and that is: the truth, and love. Everything else they can get in the culture – better.

I was a youth pastor right out of college, and loved it, and had a budget of like nothing. When we started the youth ministry, I started the event that was kind of the gathering event, play games, loud music, fun, the big thing. Then for me, I had a passion to just teach small groups with the Bible, and literally we just studied the person of Jesus.

I’ll never forget, man, sitting in there. There was this student looked at me and he said, “I can’t believe we’re doing this.” I said, “Doing what?” He was like, “Reading the Bible.” I’m like, “What else do you do in a Bible study?” He was like, “I don’t know; I’ve just never really done this.” These students were blown away by this small group bible study that was just really teaching them the Bible.
Then, I worked really hard to get leaders that I told them, “You’re not chaperones. You’re here to love these kids and walk with them through high school and teach them the truth.” Our “shock and awe,” good times, events, stayed about this level, and our “We love you, ask about your day, and then really teach you a book of the Bible,” we just kept outgrowing venues.” We realized they can get entertained better by everything else, but what they can’t get is someone to honestly care about ‘em.

So, I would tell youth leaders: spend your money, your budget, your time hiring hard. I mean, make it hard to be a youth leader. Pick the best people, and get people that really love these kids. Then, make them people that don’t just love kids, but love the truth of the Gospel, and will teach the Bible to these kids. So, that’s what I would tell youth leaders, is the big event is of value, but grounding the kid in a loving environment where the truth flows freely – that’s what they need, man. So, that’s what I would encourage a youth pastor to do.

**Darrell Bock**

Okay, so that’s the youth pastor. What would you tell – it probably wouldn’t be very different, but it’s worth distinguishing – what would you tell a senior pastor? How should he view? You know, the kids are often times the forgotten part of the church program.

**Ben Stuart**

Yes.

**Darrell Bock**

It’s handed over to someone else within the church. So, what would you say to senior pastors?

**Ben Stuart**

I would say – you know, when I was a youth pastor, part of what I was doing is I would look around at who were the kids that weren’t just the good kids, but really the mature kids, who could articulate themselves well, were healthy and stable emotionally, were able to make good decisions on their own – and love the Lord.

I’m looking at those kids, and I remember going, “Okay, I’m going to see those kids, and what’s different about them?” All of them had parents in their life who spoke to them like they were adults. By that I mean they never belittled them. They didn’t belittle their ideas. They weren’t dismissive of them. They would engage things that they knew students valued and talk about them seriously with them, you know? So, that’s what I would encourage ministers to do – is the things that matter to students, talk about them like they matter, and then help them think through them well.
That can be anything from discussing pop culture things like movies or whatever, and it can be, when you think of illustrations, talk about the school context and how that would work out in a school culture. But I wouldn’t belittle like, you know, peer pressure with your friends. No, “Peer pressure was huge when we were in high school.” So, speak about it seriously. I would just say that respect goes a long way for them of you building credibility with them.

**Darrell Bock**
Okay. So, we’ve talked about the youth leader and we talked about the senior pastor. Now let’s shift to the family itself. What would you say to parents?

**Ben Stuart**
I would say, “Talk to them. Talk to your children.”

**Darrell Bock**
But how you talk to them is important, too. Isn’t it?

**Ben Stuart**
Well, yeah. Because what I would encourage them to do is help their child learn how to think things through. This generation of students particularly – I was kind of off of it ‘cuz I thought it was a little overstated, but then it’s amazing now. You watch companies that recruit college students how parent’s day is now, because so many parents were trying to negotiate their kids’ salaries. Their parents – I mean, they negotiate their salaries.

Then I started getting letters periodically from parents – if their kid wasn’t accepted as a volunteer, I would get a letter from their parents. I’m like, “Your kid’s in college, your kid’s deep into college. I don’t know why I’m getting a letter from you.” This is – come on, man.

So, I would encourage them to think with their students, let their young people articulate what’s going on in life, think with them, help them process information and come up with decisions, ‘cuz that’s what’s going to happen in college.

**Darrell Bock**
Now, am I hearing an undercurrent, too, that says, “Don’t try and manage your kid’s life…”

**Ben Stuart**
Yup.
Darrell Bock: “…so much that you incapacitate their ability to function on their own?” Am I hearing that, too?

Ben Stuart: Yeah. So, absolutely. There was a movie, Hanna, that came out a few years ago. Did you see that one?

Darrell Bock: No, I didn’t.

Ben Stuart: It’s not a particularly amazing movie, but it was Eric Bana. I’ve got two little girls, and it starts with him raising his daughter. They’re out in the wilderness. It starts with her killing an elk and gutting it and him teaching her hand-to-hand combat, but they’re out in the middle of the woods. There’s no boys. I was telling my wife, I was like, “I like where this movie’s going.” This girl – he’s got her educated, and he’s got her away from all the crazies.

But when the movie develops, it’s -they have to move into society, into the world that he fears the most, with all the social pressures. What you find is, she’s got her Ninja skills and can shoot a gun, but she has no preparation of how to handle society and make decisions. So he’s helped her in no way reason out what people are saying, the philosophy behind it.

Darrell Bock: Hasn’t helped her learn how to live life.

Ben Stuart: No. So that’s what I would say – encourage wisdom. To not just present to them data, but really help them assess and analyze wisdom.

Darrell Bock: I find that one of the things that happens, at least with a segment of kids, is that their parents have managed their lives so much and in every detail that when the child gets to college and has to make choices, one of two things happens. Either they’re incapacitated – they don’t know how to do it – or they go wild. You know, “All of a sudden I have this freedom I never had before, and I am grabbing it with gusto because I was never given that kind of space when I was growing up.” So the management of the child – which oftentimes is very well intentioned from the parent –

Ben Stuart: Yeah, totally.
Darrell Bock: You know, we love our kids—we want to protect ‘em, we want ‘em to make good decisions—has actually been done in such a way that when the child hits college and has to manage their life on their own, they haven’t been given the skills to be able to do it.

Ben Stuart: Yeah. Then I would say—two thoughts that brought up. One, I would say to parents, just the encouragement of Jesus is stronger than the culture. I think as a new dad now, I definitely know that fear of my girls being out there in the world.

I was thinking about it this morning, just praying over that and the parent with the kids that’s demonized, that’s throwing itself into fire and whatever. You know, his dad is, “It’s terror, oh my gosh, my son is being thrown into the fire,” and whatever, and so he comes to Jesus and goes, “If you can, do something,” and Jesus answers, “If I can? Really?” But this parent is so scared of these forces being acted on his kid; Jesus is maybe able to do something. You know, he’s completely misunderstood the power he’s dealing with.

Darrell Bock: So, have the confidence to trust God is what you’re saying.

Ben Stuart: Yeah.

Darrell Bock: And teach them the same thing.

Ben Stuart: Yeah, that college can be a scary place, but Jesus is stronger than the culture.

Then the other thing I would say maybe to ministers, pastors, is to not underestimate the devastation of fatherlessness. I think it is—divorce has become common, or normal. So we’ve gone, “Well, it’s normal,” but its normalcy hasn’t made it any less devastating to a child’s confidence.

Darrell Bock: So the shrapnel’s everywhere.
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Ben Stuart  Yeah. I’ve found that with a lot of students, we’re having to help socialize them because they’ve not learned good social skills – a lot of them, if they’ve spent all their time on video games, interpersonal skills can be lacking. Then some of ‘em, they’ve just lacked good mentorship even in life and need to know they’re loved and cared for and valued. So I would say to keep that in mind.

Darrell Bock  Now we’re down to the kid himself, or herself, who’s a junior or senior in high school. What would you say to them as they are really starting to think about college and “I’m two years away from being on my own, and man is it going to be great.”

Ben Stuart  I would say, “You’re going to be like who you run with, so have friends of all different stripes, but make your core group people that are chasing after the Lord because they’re going to shape what kind of person you are.” I’ve found with students, they have been raised in all different contexts and have read all different books, but if you’ve put yourself in a social sphere that’s good or bad, you’re going to be shaped by it – whatever it is. So I would say, choose your core group wisely. Be friends with everybody, but be wise about the core, you know. That would be probably my biggest encouragement.

You want people that are going to speak to you the truth of God, build you up. That’s where you’re going to find strength. That would be my encouragement.

Darrell Bock  Well, Ben, I really do appreciate you taking the time to be with us and to walk us through your ministry and what’s been goin’ on. It’s fun to talk to you, ‘cuz having seen first-hand what you’re doin’, and what the Lord is doin’ through you is exciting, and it’s encouraging to see someone coming alongside people whose lives are being formed, and their life choices are being made. You’re trying the best you can to encourage them in a good and virtuous direction that is connected to the Lord, and that’s enjoyable, and so to get the time to interact with you and get your sense of kind of where things are on the campus is really helpful.

Now, the last question is a standard journalistic question that I get asked all the time when I’m interviewed. Is there anything that we haven’t said or that we haven’t covered that we should have or you’d like to bring into the mix here?
Ben Stuart: Oh gosh, I don’t know.

Darrell Bock: That’s always the way I answer it.

Ben Stuart: It is an enormous privilege to work with this generation, to intersect with students at this age. It’s such an exciting – they’re a crazy, incongruous mix of adult and child. We joke about, “There’s no other time in life where you can literally study physics in the morning and then go racing down a slip-and-slide after lunch.” Who does that? I probably should do that.

It’s such an amazing, strange, wonderful time to intersect with them, and we’re grateful to do it. So I would tell people, “Pray for the college campus.” Sometimes it can feel really separated from the rest of the world. But God’s at work; God’s doing amazing things, and this is a fun time to intersect with a human life.

Darrell Bock: You know, as you say that, one other thing comes to mind, and that is, it is a little bit unusual to hear – although we did hear it also a little bit in the California interview, interestingly enough – the conscious effort to be sure that these kids get connected to a larger, and if I can say, cross-generational community in which they can be a part, in which as an adult they begin to interact with people of all ages in the context of this very formative stage of their faith. It actually is a very important part of the equation, it seems to me.

Ben Stuart: Yes.

Darrell Bock: So, that seems commendable, and hopefully other people will see the value in perhaps – you know, we tend to think of theirs para-church ministries and then there’s the local church ministries, and what God has put asunder let no ministry put together.

Ben Stuart: Yeah, right.

Darrell Bock: I think that what you’re modeling and what you’re talking about here is a wedding of the para-church and the church in such a way that they actually mutually encourage the students to be connected in the various contexts in which they have to live.

Ben Stuart: Yup.
Darrell Bock: That’s commendable, so I appreciate that very much.

Ben Stuart: You know we’ve seen it – when I first got here, we did a lunch with ministers, and we had three come. It was awesome. We did one this fall and there were 70 of us. We pray together. We’re friends. I brought them onstage. They come to Breakaway.

You know, Jesus said it, when “They will believe the Father sent me.” You know, “Let them be one, as we’re one so that they’ll know that the Father sent me.” The Gospel’s legitimized in the community when people see us get along. So for me as a para-church leader, I do think there should be missionaries on the campus, somebody who’s coming in, because the campus has its own culture. But, I think we fail as para-churches if we’re not connecting them back to churches because that’s where they’ll go the rest of their lives.

I don’t know any para-church that would say, “Eh, we don’t value the local church,” but I think pragmatically sometimes you see them not working hard to celebrate and connect students with the local church.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, I think the natural inertia of ministry is such that you stay disconnected unless you really work at it.

Ben Stuart: Yeah, and what we found is as students see us work together, it legitimates the message. It brings a power to it, a strength to it. What we’ve found is everybody wins, you know? I mean, the churches are growing, we’re growing. There’s a way to do it where everybody wins, and it’s by championing each other.

Darrell Bock: Well again – thank you again for taking this time, and I’m sure our paths will cross in the future. All the best to you there at A&M as you proceed through the year. We just really do appreciate you taking the time to be with us on The Table.

Ben Stuart: Well, thanks Dr. Bock. Love it, grateful for you, and if I don’t see you soon – you know, I keep these all by my desk [holds up a stack of books by Dr. Bock].

Darrell Bock: [Laughs] It’s a frightening thought. Yeah.
Ben Stuart | I appreciate you, man.

Darrell Bock | I’m losing sleep just looking at that stack. Anyway, great to see you, Ben. All the best, and we thank you for being with us on The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture.