

An Assessment of BICS' Future Viability

Steve Brown, President
Eastern Regional Association
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Introduction

On behalf of the BICS Board of Directors and the staff in Lenox, I thank you for the opportunity to report to the Eastern Regional Association.

As many of you know, BICS did not open this fall with a class of students—for the first time in 30 years. While it was a hard decision to make back in June, it was necessary. At the BICS Board meeting last week, after considering the prevailing factors of our present situation, the following statement was issued by the Board.

The Board of Directors has affirmed the mission of the Institute and believe its ministry should continue.

To that end we ask our alumni, church friends and benefactors to continue pray for the Lord's guidance in the months ahead. In particular would you please mark Monday, November 20, 2017 as a Day of Prayer for BICS. Perhaps, you or your pastor might announce this special prayer call on Thanksgiving Sunday.

Not only will we thank the Lord for sustaining this ministry for 30 years but also lay before Him our desire to continue to lay the Christian foundations for emerging adults. This is a challenging era of spiritual fragmentation on the one hand and a time of sovereign opportunities to prepare new generations to live to God's glory.

BICS will identify the specific needs to bear up to the Lord as this Day of Prayer for BICS approaches.

So, thank you to everyone who prayed for these meetings this week. We believe the Lord has given us a window of opportunity to review our efforts to again teach and mentor those young people who long for substantial spiritual growth and principled Christ-centered lifework.

And the Board also thanks our faithful benefactors who continue to sustain this work. Our financial needs must be included in the call to prayer as we know God will supply through various channels the resources we need to make this work flourish.

To Him be the glory!

Our intention is to move forward in 2018. Yet, there are considerations to be pondered. This report attempts to reflect some of the factors the Board took under advisement in order to situate

BICS in current cultural and subcultural (Christian) contexts in order to assess the Institute's viability for the future.

There are four sections of the report:

- 1) The cultural context of prospective students and a description of their generation
- 2) The challenges facing institutional theological learning
- 3) BICS in the Advent Christian orbit
- 4) Informing considerations

The ultimate concern of the report points to the issue of leadership succession. Otherwise, whatever retooling is done for 2018 will be short term and possibly extend the ministry of the Institute for only a few years, perhaps three at most.

There is some helpful research out there included in this report, the most significant conducted by the Barna Group for the *Association for Biblical Higher Education*. While BICS has always operated in the expectation of God's blessing (and been blessed as a result), it seems wise not to ignore profound changes of the past 30 years nor the current climate in which we operate within and outside our Denomination. The Barna research is a helpful tool in surfacing those changes in attitude and spirituality in the church and her young people.

~~At the same time, what follows is not an attempt to persuade the Board to any specific course of action. I have tried to be helpful to you since the last meeting upon request, but otherwise have chosen to let the subcommittees work toward this meeting. It is my hope that this report will assist the Board to take informed action as we collect information and continue to understand our situation and a plan for the future.~~

~~I expect, as a result, we will have a much greater sense of the headwinds facing us as well as possible opportunities for the continued operations. I do not believe BICS' mission should be altered or compromised in any way. The greater concern is to act in wisdom in light of our circumstances and assess our viability in terms of resources and recruitment potential for 2018.~~

Section 1: Trending in Culture. What is coming?

The present cultural context

If the moral decline of western culture feels like a toxic burn, the disintegration of the philosophical foundations of the West is a five-alarm fire. No longer is there even tepid agreement as to the nature and purpose of the universe. The atmosphere is noxious especially in the public schools and on the campuses of the country. Philosophers, educators and mentors of the newest generation have abandoned hope for a unified explanation of existence so much so that we are witnessing a crisis of civilization.

“On the public level, there is a growing illusion that worldviews and religions should be considered equally valid for whoever holds them. In this postmodern view, worldviews are nothing more than communal

beliefs we inherit; we ourselves are victims of worldviews and therefore unable to evaluate them or to understand those that others hold. It matters little whether a worldview is *true*, as long as it is *true for someone somewhere*.”¹

~~On this point, I am sure we are in agreement, but I think it is important to hold worldview thinking in mind with the hope anticipate the possibility of retooling BICS for the future.~~ Out of this fragmented philosophical milieu the next generation is rising. If past is prologue, some will resist the BICS approach because emerging adults are highly individualized and self-focused. After all, if the prevailing mental map is at best agnostic in regard to universal truth, what is left to believe? The answer is usually some permutation of self qua self.

Moreover, the biblical explanation of reality is not considered, even at the margins. When once Christianity was the dominate explanation of all things, it has become irrelevant in the curricula of the West. In that sense, young people not only live in a post-modern era but one that is post-Christian. Since a worldview is the heart of one’s social environment (culture), this problem is carried forward by even Christ-professing young people who arrive here for our program. Most of them will immediately feel a challenge to several basic values they have absorbed from the culture.

In 2009 Ken Ham and Britt Beemer published *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit the Church and What You Can Do to Stop It*. Their thesis may explain why recruitment has become a problem and underscore the challenge facing the church, even more than BICS.

“Most people assume that students are lost in college...but it turns out that only 11 percent of those who have left the church were still attending during the college years. Almost 90 percent of them were lost in middle school and high school. By the time they got to college they were already gone!”²

This unhappy reality reveals the power of the culture, especially driven through the educational systems within it. The kids’ worldviews are transformed, their values skewed and their hearts are emptied of faith early in adolescence.

“One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh.”
Ecclesiastes 1:4

We are in for more as the next generation comes forward. So who are they? What do they value? And how does it matter to BICS?

Meet Generation Z

The sociologists have labeled the generations since World War 2 as follows:

The Boomers	Gen X (the Busters)	Gen Y (Millennials)	Gen Z (iGen)
1946-1963	1964-1979	1980-1994	1995-2010

Rather than questioning the validity of these designations, they can be useful in conversation and quickly identify the groups now active in American society.

James Emery White says that Generation Z will come to typify the new reality of a post-Christian world:

“As the first truly post-Christian generation, and numerically the largest, Generation Z will be the most influential religious force in the West and the heart of the missional challenge facing the Christian church.”³

Here is why they present a challenge to the church. They are noted for their religious non-participation, aligning with the findings of Ham and Beemer. One major secular study concludes:

“... if trends continue, the number of those affiliated with an organized religion will likely decrease as Generation Z ages, moving people out of the religious category and into either the spiritual or none categories. Will we see a generation whose faith is not tied to organized religion and where spirituality is more fluid than religious doctrine?”⁴

But the church cannot not leave this generation to destruction. God in His grace will draw out from them his chosen ones. Those kids will need theological education and wisdom acquisition (hopefully, early in life before they are “already gone”). Nevertheless, the cultural pressures to conform to the prevailing mood at an early stage of development will continue to intensify in the post-Christian era. It may be too late to save the nation, but it is not too late to save these young people.

So who are they?

The sociologists and marketers have labeled them “Generation Z”. They are also called the “Digitals,” some have labeled the “iGens.” MTV calls them the “Founders.” In the fall of 2015 they arrived on the college campus.⁵

1. This is the generation under 25 born after 1995. They now comprise 26% of the US population.
2. They will likely be the last identifiable generation in the country because the speed of cultural change is so rapid it will no longer be measured in generations but more likely in days. (White, 39)
3. They are recession bred (“The Great Recession” 2007-2008 -- economic uncertainty, high borrowing by parents, housing collapse, bailouts by the government, fear over the future). They have seen the greed of raw materialism (institutions and households) and question its value. They view socialism as a viable alternative to the naked capitalism of the recent past. Gloomy about the economy, they tend to support the ideas of Bernie Sanders (socialism).

4. They are anxious about the present world order. They have known nothing but war in their lifetimes. They are not shocked by terrorism, having experienced 9-11.

5. They are socially conscious and want to make a difference more than to make a fortune. They want to found a new world order in which everyone benefits, not just a few.

6. They are “wi-fi enabled” (White, 41). They are “digital natives” who grew up with the smartphone—a supercomputer in their pockets. They relate to the electronic coding of information. They spend 9 hours a day absorbing media. Twenty-two million 12-17 year olds owned a mobile device in 2015. They can find whatever information they want without the help of a library or even a teacher. That makes them self-directed. However, that does not make them wise.

Being experts in social media, they switch effortlessly between Facebook, SnapChat and Instagram, creating a persona depending on the platform. They are highly influenced by others’ opinions and word of mouth or in this case the word on social media. “They spend 41% of their time outside the classroom on a computer, smartphone or mobile device.”⁶

7. One important consequence of the digital revolution is the huge change in the way students learn. The traditional library based resources have given way to online search engines that access huge databases on demand. The modern library primarily exists to provide a comfortable convenient space to collaborate or work alone.

“Gone are the days of physically going to the library to find various books and articles to complete an assignment.”⁷

The preferred method of learning is experienced based. Generation Z prefers intrapersonal methods like working in groups and social settings where instructors are viewed as mentors and guides. “Situated learning” means acquiring knowledge by experience as much as through lectures and the metrics of the traditional classroom model.

“Traditional school work using paper and books is rapidly being replaced by online work modules, instructional videos and handheld learning devices such as smartphones and tablets.”⁸

8. They are racially diverse and inclusive. By 2020 it is estimated that half of all US kids will be part of a minority race or ethnic group. (46)

9. They are sexually fluid. Increasingly, they strongly support gay marriage and transgender rights. They moved from acceptance to approval of sexual diversity. The social change which troubles the post WW II people like me is common place to Gen Z. The radical individualism of the previous decades resulted in the acceptance of blurred sexual boundaries, self-centered behavior and liberal laws on divorce. They offered faint, if any, opprobrium of cohabitation, out of wedlock births, transgenderism and same-sex marriage. Gen Z is not socially conservative but adopt a live and let live philosophy.

10. Generation Z has demanded and been given much moral freedom by their parents. Homes have allowed children to take the lead, thus they have become very self-directed. So powerful are cultural values and icons that parents have given up arguing with their kids. The kids now dictate what they eat, the media they consume, their fashions they buy and the colleges they choose. Kids no longer read alone, and their minds ping-pong in endless distractions in the digital swamp.

11. But most all Gen Z is post-Christian. “The younger the generation, the more post-Christian they are.”⁹ That means they tend not to identify with the church and while they value spirituality on the one hand, they reject its traditional manifestations on the other. Faith is highly privatized and tends not to be public. They are biblically illiterate. Spiritually, they are leaderless. They get little guidance from their families. They do not know how to answer the basic questions in life.

None of the above discounts the fundamental spiritual needs of adolescents from the biblical perspective. Whatever the prevailing philosophical atmosphere, emerging adults are created by God, fallen in sin and need the Savior if they are to have a truly good outcome.

Yet, the post-Christian shift presents different challenges for our teachers and the living of the faith in community. These “digital natives” are online and distracted. They tend to be diminished in traditional skills like reading, basic language skills, and written and formal communication. For the last five years or so, this has been our experience at BICS.

Section 2: The challenges facing institutional theological learning

Awareness of current research is helpful. The Barna Group, commissioned by the Association for Biblical Higher Education, recently published (2017) a study titled *What’s Next for Biblical Higher Education?*

Barna identified nine trends that are reshaping the future of Bible Colleges. In addition, they explored the market perceptions of Christian colleges comparing the attitudes of the general population and Christians. The research reveals a strong correlation of attitudes between the two groups. I was surprised to learn there is not much daylight between them: both groups subscribe to the concept that college is about preparing for a career. In the Bible college subset of Christian colleges, attitudes change but not dramatically.

*Barna’s nine trends.*¹⁰

1. **Demographic.** Non-traditional, older students are in the market but want to access education on their own terms (online).
2. **Social.** Colleges used to be finishing schools on the way to maturity. Now they are half-way houses between adolescence and adulthood.
3. **Economic.** Economic pressures on the middle class and working families are making private college level education less affordable and accessible.

4. **Vocational.** The nature of work is shifting, moving toward a free-lance multitasking paradigm with multiple careers as the norm in a digital environment.
5. **Institutional.** Learning is no longer confined to the college campus. People access information where, when and why they want at the cheapest price. Knowledge is no longer confined to traditional models/schools.
6. **Legal.** Christian schools are increasingly running afoul of the law and losing eligibility to accept federal or state aid.
7. **Digital.** Students are “always on, hyperlinked, and immersed” in a culture in which they are exiles.
8. **Moral.** Society’s center has shifted away from external sources of authority to the self.
9. **Spiritual.** Nominal Christianity is no longer the default position of Americans. The “nones” are the fastest growing segment of the population.

Some of the trends impact BICS directly and some are secondary influencers. But they should be kept in mind as BICS is in the Bible college market in student recruitment.

College is about career.

It is to be expected that people think of college as preparation for a career, and the following chart (Barna 29) is instructive for the intensity that Christians cling to this prevailing paradigm. This is especially poignant in light of the characteristics of the Generation Z.

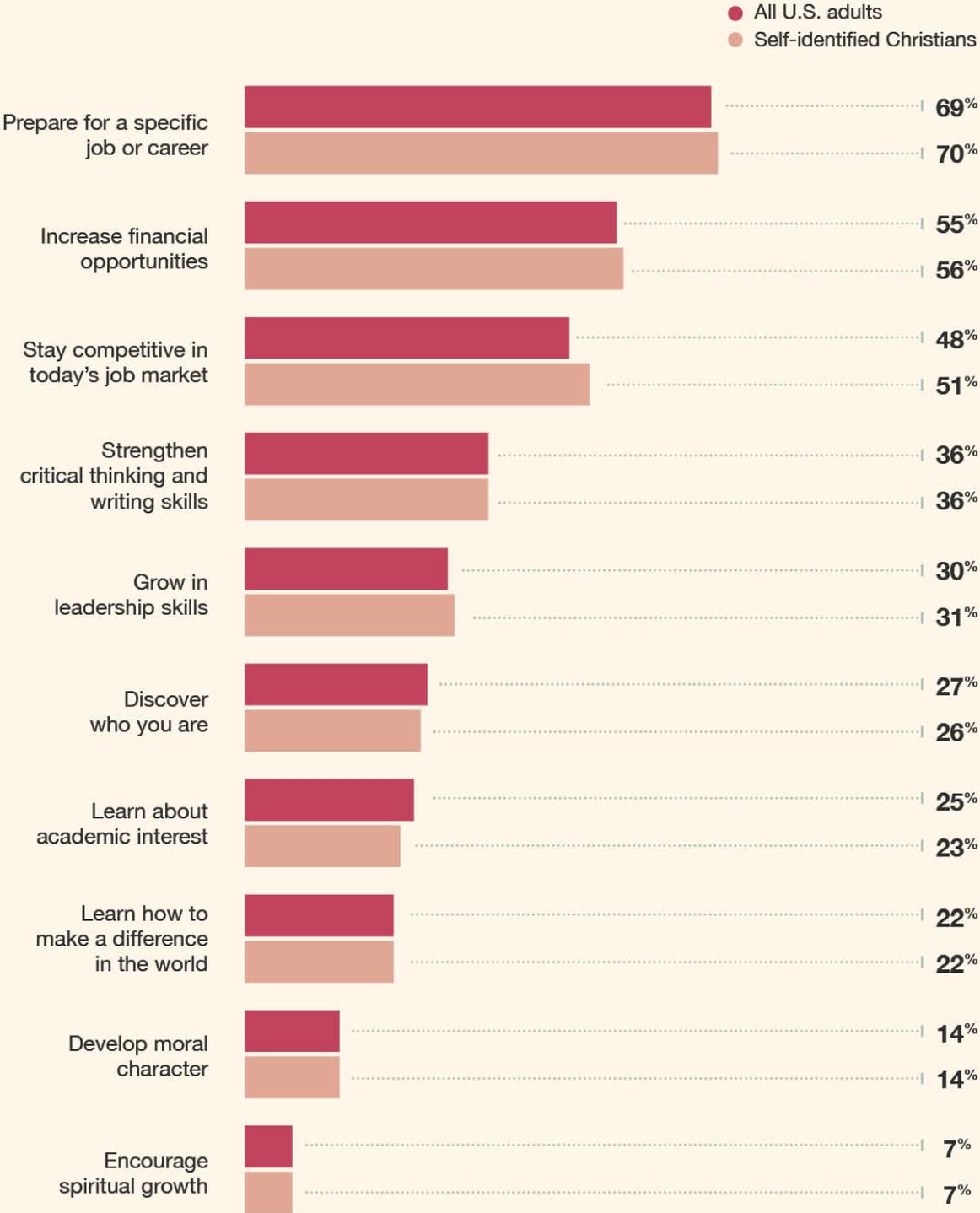
The chart because reveals the hierarchy of values for choosing a college. While BICS puts a high premium on spiritual growth and character development, these are not high on the value list in the survey data.

“Perhaps the most unsettling finding, however, is Christians’ overall disassociation of higher education with spiritual and moral development...Unexpectedly, those with no faith—a category that includes atheists, agnostics, and ‘nones’—are statistically tied with self-identified Christians in saying spiritual growth is the purpose of college.”¹¹

The chart does not specifically reveal the intent of Christians’ attitude toward the Bible college model per se, but it is useful in getting a handle on their general outlook on Christian higher education.

What's the Purpose of Going to College?

% among U.S. adults 18 and older



n=1,011 U.S. adults 18 and older. October 21-30, 2015.

What about the narrow subset of Christian prospective students?

According to Barna there are two important findings that are of interest:¹²

1. Of all prospective Christian students, only 24% are inclined toward a Bible College education.
2. In the traditional category of students aged 19 and younger, the three top goals for attending college are determining a career path (56%), gain practical job skills (45%) and experience the world (40%). The finding reinforces the wide acceptance of college as career preparation.

It would seem that spiritual growth is not a priority among these students, but it could be that it is thought of as an overall life priority. Maybe it is not a big factor in the college to career paradigm. Whatever the case, this data should be factored into our understanding of the mindset of recruits and their families. Spiritual growth and character development are not high on the priority list of those choosing Christian higher education. It may explain why Bible colleges continue to multiply majors to attract students. And it may explain some of the reticence of young people to invest a “gap year” of study at BICS.

Section 3: BICS in the Advent Christian Orbit

What follows is a short list of observations/comments that summarize my sense of where we stand in the AC movement, and why we should not expect the atmosphere to change significantly in the near term.

1. After we informed our donor base, alumni and denomination about the plan to retool BICS, God willing, the response was muted.

Of course, there have been expressions of concern from friends, some alumni and donors. Those conversations have been encouraging. I suspect there is a reservoir of such feelings that identify with us out there. Please understand, I am not suggesting our stakeholders have abandoned us, not at all.

2. The Board conducted an alumni survey which revealed that their opinions of BICS vary probably because we impacted them for a relatively short time when their life experience was dynamic and fluid. They have moved on in careers and lifework, and it would be understandable if the Institute is not in full focus in their present circumstances.

3. In trying to assess the ACD (by this I mean the churches and their pastors/leaders) attitude toward BICS, I do not expect much to change. We will remain fairly well known here in the Region and generally little understood to many across the Denomination.

The ACD is presently concerned with developing pastoral leadership for the churches in the near term. With current pastors aging and churches languishing and closing (not all, for sure, but a large number), such concern is understandable. Yet, the path forward has not been cleared. There is no unified strategy for future leadership training, suggesting to me that the present is prologue for the next few years.

However, one-year program has been an incubator for future leaders, but it does not offer a solution for the near term, which is the focus of most of the discussions and proposals I have seen in our network. That is understandable.

The prevailing paradigm for leadership training remains college and graduate school, the formal pattern of the last 50-75 years.

4. Traditional feeders to our program have been church youth groups, friends of friends and camps. These sources of students have diminished over the last 3-4 years. I suspect the reasons for this decline are multiple. We cannot discount the failure of our traditional church systems/programs and the family disintegration as contributors to the general mood in the churches. And I think the Barna survey data above points to a significant shift in college preparation influenced by the “career, career, career” mentality embedded in the culture rather than spiritual foundation and character development, which lies at the heart of our mission.

Section 4: Four Considerations to Assess BICS’ Future Viability

As BICS wrestles with the practical matters of survival and retooling, issues both large and small are on the table. This report is more of a reflection on philosophical issues which I hope will be helpful in your considerations. Consequently, what follows are four factors to throw into our deliberations. They are not proposals for action but meant to be guides for thinking ahead.

The Cultural/Post Christian Shift

The first section of this report was an attempt to describe incoming students. Whether we call them adolescents in the traditional way or Generation Z as the sociologists describe them, does not really affect the external cultural values that drive them. Most important is the fact that we are completely engulfed by post modernism, which is post Christian. BICS will have to keep in mind their mental framework if we are to help them mature in Christ. Mostly, new students will not have biblical background data set as a base line for thinking.

This argues for not changing our mission but our strategy for discipling and teaching.

BICS’ Value Proposition

With career as the prime mover in those seeking Christian higher education, BICS is swimming against the current. And with dollars for an education which is not accredited (even though of great value in my mind) in short supply, the dollar value of BICS may not be appealing. Perhaps, heavy scholarship aid has immediate currency (pardon the pun). That will depend on our recruitment philosophy and support from benefactors who believe, as we do, that the mission BICS mission is still viable.

Experiential Learning Pedagogy and Curriculum Adjustment

Thought has to be given to the curriculum design to capture the experiential learning ethos of the era. This is not a barrier to future success because seen from a certain perspective, experiential learning is the biblical paradigm.

Leadership Succession

Leadership succession looms as the key problem for BICS going forward. Wes and I have discussed this issue extensively but have yet to see a way forward. And now that we are both in our (early) seventies, we know that our useful days are numbered.

It seems likely that Wes will not be available to us for the next year. His treatment and recovery from bone cancer will be long term. None of us is irreplaceable, but the unique gifts and motives that brought us together are now unraveling, making the leadership challenge bigger than ever.

The Board of Directors is in agreement that this challenge must be met by identifying a leadership team that owns the BICS mission and has a passion to advance it for another decade at least.

Final Thought

None of the above discounts the will of God nor His wisdom and power. Surveys and studies may explain what is, but they do not always determine what is to come. That is left to the Lord and the appropriation of the wisdom and resources He supplies.

Respectfully submitted,

Steve Brown
President

Footnotes

¹ Gary, Brown and Stonestreet, 21.

² Ham and Beemer, 31.

³ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 11.

⁴ Seemiller and Grace, 44.

⁵ White, 35.

⁶ Seemiller and Grace, 66.

⁷ Seemiller and Grace, 174.

⁸ Seemiller and Grace, 184.

⁹ White, 49.

¹⁰ Barna, *What's Next for Biblical Higher Education?* 5.

¹¹ Barna, *WNBHE* 10.

¹² Barna, *WNBHE* 18.

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