

Nine ways to kickstart your faith at college

If you try to “keep your faith” in college, you’ll likely fail. “Keeping your faith” is a defensive position in a game of stamina with the odds stacked against you. It’s like holding water in cupped hands and trying desperately not to let any spill out. You fear losing what you already have.

No one is fearful about losing the knowledge they acquired in high school. Rather, the point of a college education is to build on that knowledge, stretch it, develop and enrich it. Faith in college is more like that: a matter of growth and development. Rather than merely “keeping your faith,” the point is to “prioritize your faith.” And the best way to do that is to be proactive.

You don’t prioritize something by waiting to see what happens with everything else first so you can make the important thing “fit.” That’s the biggest mistake when it comes to developing your faith in college. The first and most critical step is to make basic, intentional commitments right from the start. In fact, the summer before college begins is prime time to get started. It’s the time for setting the foundation for who you are going to be, even when a great deal of what college will be like is still uncertain.

Going off to college is a significant transition, and it’s hard for everyone. Priorities lend clarity to hard and confusing times, but as we all know, priorities require foresight, regularity and planning. After nearly two decades of working in Catholic higher education and informed by a host of interviews with current college students, recent college grads and incoming college students, I want to offer some suggestions about how to plan ahead for making faith a priority in college.

Leonard J. DeLorenzo, Ph.D., is on faculty at the McGrath Institute for Church Life and teaches theology at the University of Notre Dame. His latest book is ["What Matters Most: Empowering Young Catholics for Life's Big Decisions"](#) (Ave Maria Press, \$16.95).

1. Begin and end with prayer

The first and last thing you do every day says a lot about your priorities. A consistent morning and evening prayer routine helps set a foundation of faith for life in college. Such routines give your days a basic order, which becomes especially important when you go through periods of being overwhelmed or stressed. These are small, daily acts of trust. What matters is not so much that you "feel" something, but that you stick to it, just like hanging out with your best friend or family is sometimes just about being there.

For day's beginning, I recommend nonspontaneous prayer that is prepared for you because, let's be honest, most college students aren't at their best in the morning. Morning prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours is ideal. If you are unfamiliar with the Liturgy of the Hours, it's easy to learn, especially with someone to show you (any priest can help, among others). There are also multiple apps, but maybe less time on devices is a good thing. Morning prayer will take 10 or 15 minutes each day. The Church's prayers are there so you just show up to pray, alone or with others.

For the end of the day, you could pray Evening Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours, or something like the "examen" (if this is new to you, just Google "examen" – all the top hits are helpful). This prayer leads you to become aware of God's presence, give thanks, review your day, face your shortcomings and look forward to the day to come.



Shutterstock

You don't necessarily have to do the same thing every day, but the point is to do something each day and keep a regular schedule. You may need variety, so perhaps in the evening you pray a Rosary on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, then do the examen on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and write in a prayer journal on Sunday night. The aim should be to establish an intentional routine so you can spend at least 15 minutes in prayer at the beginning and end of each day.

Rather than waiting for the semester to begin before figuring this stuff out, begin practicing this summer when you likely have a more flexible schedule. Build momentum so that when the semester begins, you already know what you're doing. This routine will give you stability when a lot of other things are in flux.

2. Frequent the sacraments

Indeed, many things in your life will change in the coming years. How you spend your time, what you're passionate about and the quality of your relationships may all change. You'll

likely go through periods of self-doubt and try-and-fail many times over. In times like these – which continue throughout life – we need a constant presence to guide us. The sacraments give us precisely that: the abiding presence of Christ, who always shows up and doesn't change on us.

Go to Mass at least every Sunday, and maybe more often. Receive the Eucharist. Even when you don't "feel anything" at Mass, show up, receive, leave and return again. Before you go to college, figure out when and where you will go to Mass, and maybe even with whom.

Also, regularly celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This may sound odd, but plan in advance when you'll go. Put a date on the calendar monthly or quarterly, then follow through. The confessional is a place of freedom, where Christ frees you from what you are not and for the sake of who he calls you to be.

We all have non-negotiable things in our lives – things we do no matter what. For Catholics, that means frequenting the sacraments.

Incoming Freshmen

High school graduates from the class of 2018, beginning college this fall, shared their plans and concerns for growing in faith on campus:

What do you think will be important for practicing your faith in college?

“In addition to Mass and confession, adoration and daily prayer are priorities for my spiritual life in college. I plan on surrounding myself with other holy women who share my values.” – Molly S.

“I want to follow Pope Francis’ advice to always rejoice and be glad and to try to live a life of holiness, or charity, to the fullest.” – Anna S.

“I plan to find a spiritual director when I get to campus, and I expect that I will become involved in campus ministry.” – Lizzie S.

What worries you about going into college?

“I worry I’ll allow myself to get too caught up in grades and competition. I’m worried about finding those people who support me and help me grow and challenge me to be more authentically who I’m called to be.” – Maggie G.

“I think I’m most worried about being on my own. I’m going a long way from home I’m going to have to hold myself accountable, not just in my faith life but in my academic, musical and athletic pursuits.” – Rob H.

“The college social scene is a slippery slope, and even those with the best intentions can end up in the worst situations. I will have to be firm in my resolve when it comes to how I will and will not spend my time.” – Lizzie S.

How do you think you most need to grow in college?

“I need to better my practice of prayer itself and transition it into more of an adult prayer life.” – Nicholas K.

“I need to grow in my confidence in myself. ... And I need to continue to get better at dealing with challenges, anxieties, and failures.” – Maggie G.

“I need to work on taking full ownership for my faith life and for my personal development. I also need to develop better time management skills.” – Katie L.

“In college, I think I need to grow most in my dedication to service.” – Anna S.

3. Keep holy the Sabbath

There's a lot to do in college, whether school work or extracurriculars or socializing. One week flows into the next, and it can feel like you're always trying to catch up, just to start something else. Actually, this isn't just college – this is what life is often like after college, too. And for more high school students today than ever, it is even what life is like before college. It's easy to become run by a schedule with an endless series of tasks. That's not only exhausting, it's also inhuman.

Here's a way to be totally countercultural: keep holy the Sabbath. What does that mean? At minimum, it means don't do work on Sundays. To make this possible, plan your weeks smartly so you can accomplish your work in six days rather than seven. Keeping Sunday different has all kinds of practical benefits, but at its base it's a commandment. The Lord knows what's good for us and working all the time is not.

So what do you do on Sunday if not work? Obviously, go to Mass. Spend time in conversation with friends and family. Spend a bit of extra time in prayer. Journal. Read something nourishing that has not been assigned. And perform a work of mercy.

But isn't a work of mercy, well, work? Not in the same way that school work or a job is work. A work of mercy – like feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, teaching the ignorant, praying for the living and the dead – is a free gift of your time for the sake of someone else who is not free. If someone is hungry, they're not free, or if they're ignorant, thirsty, homeless or neglected and lonely. When we perform a work of mercy, we do the work of God, which is never a "work" of compulsion or necessity, but a gift. Giving time on the Sabbath to practice making a free gift of yourself is itself an act of faith.

4. Mend broken relationships

College is a time to start fresh. It's possible to try "to put your past behind you," as Timon tells Simba in the Lion King, but it's better to take care of what you're leaving behind before moving forward. Are there people from high school you've hurt and whose forgiveness you need? Are there people that have hurt you in some way whom you might be able to forgive? Are there people – old friends, family members, classmates – that you just couldn't get along with, whose relationship soured in some way? Before moving on to another stage of life, it's wise and healthy to address these relationships and seek reconciliation whenever possible. This is a hard thing to do.

We carry the weight of broken relationships with us as we go along. Most of the time we may not even realize how they still affect us or how they affect the other person. Initiate a conversation, write a letter, send a message in some way to seek or grant forgiveness, to set things right and to end on a positive note. Err on the side of seeking reconciliation.

There may also be people you need to thank that you haven't had a chance to thank yet – so do it. Part of starting well in the place where you're going is ending well in the place that you're leaving.



Shutterstock

5. Minimize your stuff

At the very least, whoever is helping you move to college will thank you for this: Don't take everything with you. Yes, this means physical stuff. Create space by not cramming your entire home life into your new environment. Having space gives you room to grow.

But in addition to physical stuff, try to minimize other stuff, too. Is there a social media account you can delete? Whatever time you've spent on there can be freed up for something else. Is there a subscription you can cancel, maybe even Netflix?! Not falling back on that old habit opens space for new creativity.

And though nobody likes to hear this, the overwhelming majority of current and former college students strongly recommend breaking up with your high school boy/girlfriend when you go to college. This isn't necessarily about being able to date new people but, rather, about giving each other

space to grow.

Focus on setting a foundation for college – especially with these practices of faith and balance – without having to hold on to everything you had at home.

6. Plan to keep in touch

In order for the people who mean the most to you to continue to be important in your life (and vice versa), you need to prioritize staying in touch with them. Again, waiting for everything else to settle in to place before figuring out how and when you'll tend to these relationships is a recipe for unintentionally deprioritizing them.

You simply cannot stay in touch with everyone from home or from high school, nor should you. You'll be making new friends and your old friends will be making new friends, too. You may reconnect with people later on, perhaps over breaks. But for those people whose relationship is important, make a plan. When will you talk by phone, and how often? If it is going to be something like every two weeks, then just put dates on your calendar. You may have to adjust those dates together later, but at least then you're rescheduling something, which means that you're already committed to having the conversation.

Of course, texting and social media can keep you in contact with a fair number of people, but to really invest in a relationship will require talking or maybe even writing letters. That sounds old-fashioned, but old-fashioned people knew how to cultivate strong relationships over distance. We can learn from them.

On the flip side, it's also important to not stay in constant contact with people back home if you go away to college. Give each other space to adjust to new lives in new places. Part of scheduling when to talk is not just keeping communication regular but also keeping it from being too much. (Attention

parents: Let them go a bit!)

7. Read for pleasure

With the flow of college classes, it is all too common for your course syllabi to determine all that you will think about and read. So here's another countercultural practice for a college student: Choose one book that you will read during the first semester that is not for a class. Make it something enriching, or educational in a different way from what you will be reading in school. Then, intentionally set time aside for this book. One book is not a lot – maybe you will finish this early in the semester – but don't try to do too much; pick just one book.

8. Seek out spiritual direction and faith community

Most young people have not had a spiritual director. College students who have say that having one is essential, and those who haven't often wish they had. A spiritual director is a more mature disciple who is trained to help you develop your faith. This is a person with whom you meet regularly (maybe twice a month) to talk about your prayer life, your relationships, etc. Spiritual direction is not a back-and-forth thing, like when friends listen to each other and help each other out; rather, a spiritual director guides you.

How do you find a spiritual director? If there is a Catholic student center, Newman center or campus ministry at your college, get in touch with them and tell them you are looking for a spiritual director, or contact local parishes. Do this in the summer before spiritual directors get booked for the year.

Almost all the current college students and recent college graduates I talked to also said that participating in and

building a community with other people of faith is imperative. Spend time with different groups of people, but make a point of spending time regularly with a group of people who share the Faith. And if you can't find a community, don't be afraid to start one yourself. Find a few other people who are looking for a Catholic community, then commit to going to Mass together, sharing a meal and talking on a weekly or monthly basis. Just make it regular.



Shutterstock

9. Reassess often

The summer before the first semester at college is prime time to set the foundation for developing faith in college. Being proactive rather than reactive is the key. In fact, being intentional is itself a huge step in growing into mature, adult faith. Those who enter into mature faith prioritize their faith, taking on daily and weekly habits that shape their lives over the long haul.

And yet, don't put pressure on yourself to get everything right immediately. You won't. A recent college grad said she'd tell incoming college students to "Give yourself a lot of grace the entirety of freshman year to adjust to this new lifestyle. Be gentle on yourself."

To that point, at the end of the first semester, assess how your first semester went. How do you feel about your daily prayer (morning and evening), your engagement with the sacraments, your weekly schedule, your communities, etc.? Use the winter break to intentionally plan out the second semester, tweaking what you did the first semester as needed. Then reassess again at every break between semesters. This habit of assessing and intentional planning is a further sign of maturing faith and indeed a practice that you can and should hold on to for life.

College students speak

Our Sunday Visitor asked current college students and recent graduates what they did to grow in faith during college:

"The summer before would be a great time to get into a routine of daily prayer and set some goals for your prayer routine for the upcoming semester." — Kelsey, University of Dallas, Class of 2018

What do you wish you would have done in the summer before going to college?

"I wish I would have talked to other students at my high school going to [my college] that were Catholic. I ended up going to the Newman center all by myself instead of inviting them along." — Maclaine, Indiana University, Class of 2019

"I wish I would have learned more about my confirmation saint. By going to the small Catholic college that I did, I saw that many people had strong devotions to saints, and I saw how that strengthened their prayer life." — Matthew, University of Dallas, Class of 2018

What was most important for nourishing a life of faith in college?

"Having friends who challenged my faith but who would also sit with me at Mass each week!" — Lauren, University of Notre Dame, Class of 2017

"Sticking to a prayer routine! And having a spiritual director." — Kelsey, University of Dallas, Class of 2018

"Showing up for Jesus is important. I had to schedule him in a lot in my planner. ... He's important enough for me to purposefully give him time every day." — Maclaine,

Indiana University, Class of 2019

“Try to form your mind around these questions: How will I serve the people I am going to meet and the campus I am moving to? What will I give?” — Jeanne Marie, The Catholic University of America, Class of 2019



“Make small, manageable goals that can carry over from the summer into your college career. ... One goal I set ... was to go to adoration, just for 15 minutes every Friday. This eventually turned into a lot more time spent in the adoration chapel, but it grew out of starting small.” — Becca, University of Notre Dame Class of 2017

“Give yourself a lot of grace the entirety of freshman year to adjust to this new lifestyle. Be gentle on yourself. Also ... break up with your high school boyfriend/girlfriend in the summer — it frees you to grow without having such a big shift in your life in the middle of the school year.” — Christina, University of Notre Dame, Class of 2017

For the full interviews with the teens and young adults conducted for this article, visit <http://bit.ly/collegefaith>.