

W e all have our Nicoles. Nicole was in my small group from her ninth-grade year until she graduated. Of the seven girls in the group, Nicole was the loudest, most provocative, and, to be honest, most fun. I could always count on Nicole to liven up our discussions by asking questions like, “Do I have to be nice to people who totally annoy me?” and “Does it hurt to have sex?”

When the Pomp and Circumstance Fades

**A Profile of Youth Group Kids
Post-Youth-Group**

Kara Powell and Krista Kubiak

COMING OF AGE
YWJ FEATURE



As youth workers, when are kids no longer our responsibility?

I did all the normal small group stuff with Nicole and the other girls. We had overnights at my house. We'd grab lunch after church. We talked about everything from guys to grace to getting braces. I also made an effort to get to know the girls' parents so I could learn how to support what they were trying to teach their daughters.

For the first few months after Nicole graduated from high school, we stayed in touch. But by that fall, she had stopped returning my calls. She also stopped coming to our church, claiming that the college ministry was boring. Given that I had a new small group of freshman girls sitting before me every Sunday, I ended up focusing my time, energy, and attention on them. Every few months when I thought of Nicole, I'd toss up a "God, please keep her close to you" prayer, but I wasn't sure I'd ever see her again.

Three years later, I ran into Nicole at a mall near our church. She wasn't alone. She was pushing a stroller. After we hugged, she somewhat timidly introduced me to her nine-month-old son and told me that she'd lost contact with her son's father. When I asked her if she ever went to church, she said she wasn't into that God stuff anymore. While I was thrilled to see her, our conversation was dripping with awkwardness. We'd shared four years of life together. We'd talked about Jesus at church and at coffeehouses, talked about what it meant to follow him. Now we stood there feeling guilty—Nicole because she had a son and not a husband, and I because I'd failed to follow up with Nicole after she graduated.

As I drove from the mall back to church, I couldn't help wondering: *What had I done wrong? What conversations with Nicole could I have handled better? What should I have done in Nicole's life but didn't?*

We all have our Nicoles.

We all have our students who graduate from our youth ministries and seem to graduate from following God.

We all have our students who walked the

narrow path in high school but somehow made a U-turn and stumbled, or maybe even sprinted, in the opposite direction.

Graduating from God

Various denominations have estimated that between 65% and 94% of their high school students stop attending church after they graduate. To our knowledge, there's no broad, multi-denominational, research-based calculation of how many youth group graduates stay connected to the church and how many end up like Nicole. One anecdotal estimate that often gets tossed around is that only about 25% of youth group graduates end up plugged into a church or a parachurch college or young adult ministry the year after they graduate. That means only one out of four kids in your youth group will choose to stay involved in Christian community once graduation day is gone.

Since that 25% figure is only a guess, let's imagine that it's actually higher. Say 35%. Or even 50%. Or hey, let's get mathematically wild and assume that 67%, or 2/3, of the kids in your youth group will transition well into Christian community following their graduation. That still means that 1/3 won't. One-third of the kids that you and your team have poured your blood, sweat, and tears into during high school will drift away from Jesus and his church after they walk across the stage and pick up their diplomas.

Even that best-case scenario is alarming.

At the Center for Youth and Family Ministry (CYFM) at Fuller Seminary, we try to provide resources and training for youth and family workers that are practical, accessible, and grounded in research. In the summer of 2004, we launched the College Transition Project with two goals. First, we

hoped to better understand what happens to students when they transition from youth group life into college/young adult life. Second, we wanted to see what parts of youth group life seem to be associated with a healthy, positive transition into college life.

What We Did and What We Learned

In the fall of 2004, largely under the direction of Professor of Marriage and Family Dr. Cameron Lee, we sent a survey to 234 students who had graduated from the youth ministry of a Presbyterian church within the last four years.¹ This particular youth group was comprised largely of middle-class Caucasian students. The responses on the 69 questionnaires that were returned were both interesting and surprising.

When it came to risk behaviors, alcohol use was the only behavior engaged in by 100% of the respondents. The next most frequent category of risk behaviors was sexual encounters (defined as hookups, sexual intercourse, or oral sex), which were reported by 69% of the students. Twenty percent reported having over forty sexual encounters (could be the same partner or multiple partners) in the last 12 months. In the midst of these relatively high rates of risk behaviors, students' responses revealed that the greater their faith maturity, the less likely they were to engage in alcohol-related or sexual encounters.

When students were asked to list the most difficult elements of their transition, the most common responses related to friendships—such as not having friends, not having a community, and not knowing how to make new friends. The second most common answer related to the experience of being alone for the first time and the responsibilities that come with living away from home. The third most frequent responses related to the desire to find a faith community or church. Many students felt they weren't prepared to seek

¹ The survey included six measures of religiosity and spiritual/personal faith, a social desirability scale, a measure of parental involvement, a measure of risk behaviors (alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, narcotics, pornography, sexual contact, online Internet dating, and gambling), questions about the youth group and youth leaders, a set of demographic questions, and two final questions asking students about the toughest part(s) of their transition and advice they'd like to give to youth workers. Participants who returned the questionnaire received a 15 dollar gift certificate to Amazon.com in return for their participation. All questionnaires were analyzed for the study, and statistical analysis was conducted by Dr. Cameron Lee. Limitations include: a low response rate (29%), and because participants were from a single church, the population was limited geographically, denominationally, ethnically, and in socio-economic status.



out such a community and didn't know how to find a church or ministry where they felt welcome and fed spiritually.

Students' struggles in finding a new church were also evident in their advice for youth workers. Overwhelmingly, respondents' greatest advice was to prepare future college-bound students by warning them about the difficulties in finding a new church and encouraging them to do so anyway. Secondly, the college students surveyed encouraged youth workers to teach differently about sex, alcohol, and drugs. Instead of just an education about what is "right" and what is "wrong," students were eager for training in how to handle temptations that emerged in college and how to be confident in making decisions that went against common peer pressures.

One of the most interesting findings was the role that expressing doubt played in students' youth group experiences. Those students who felt most free to express doubt and discuss their problems with the youth group leaders and the youth group as a whole reported having a greater faith maturity and religious motivation when they were in college. These two factors of expressing doubt and admitting problems with youth group leaders and the youth group were clearly the most significant factors of youth group life that translated into a healthy college transition.

More than Just Interesting

Any time we come across research findings such as these, we have two options. The first is to think to ourselves, "Hmmm. That's interesting," and then put the article aside and never ponder it again.

The second option is to say to ourselves (and maybe even others), "Hmmm. How should this shape our ministry?" and then keep the research in mind as we think about our strategies and programs.

CYFM invited six youth workers to four hours' worth of discussion to try to make sure that we didn't take the easy way out and simply file this away as "interesting research." While we viewed this as a pilot study and will be doing more studies in the future, we asked them to wrestle with what we'd heard up to this

point from graduates until we pinned down some possible implications. Here are some of the issues that they thought were most significant:

Responsibility

As youth workers, when are kids no longer our responsibility? It's tempting to view June 15th as the hand-off date to your church's college ministry or the local gathering of InterVarsity, Navigators, or Campus Crusade for Christ. After all, we've got a new group of wide-eyed ninth graders fresh from the middle school ministry or a group of scared-to-death sixth or seventh graders leaving the children's programs for the coveted "youth group"—and these kids need our attention, too. We feel pressure to channel our available energy and adult

leadership into helping these newbies get connected to our ministry so we don't lose them. While we wish it weren't the case, we have little left over for our graduates. Unfortunately, they're out of sight, out of mind.

That's how youth ministry has generally been done in the past. But maybe given what we're learning about our graduates, that's not how it should be done in the future. It's lousy stewardship to pour ourselves into students for four years and then cut the relationship back to a trickle when we know the majority might end up in a dry relationship with God.

Sure, our relationships with our graduates will take on a new pace and flavor, and perhaps we won't even live in the same town anymore. But handing them

'Quarterlife What?'

Quarterlife what? That's the reaction I typically get when describing the thoughts, emotions, and feelings I've experienced over the past two years—feelings that can best be summed up in what I'd call a quarterlife crisis: confusion, doubt, loneliness, discouragement, feeling old.

When I'd try to explain my heart and mindset to mentors, parents, and pastors, I'd be met with a mix of blank stares, patronizing smiles, or tiny violins playing for the woes of the 24-year-old who was feeling her age. It wasn't that they didn't care or want to help me. It was just hard to empathize with any kind of crisis for someone who should be in the best years of her life.

In many respects, my full-time position in youth ministry was a dream job for me, and I genuinely enjoyed it. As I entered into planning for yet another summer, however, I found my passion quenched as the monotony of yet another season of ministry flooded over me. I stopped and wondered, *What am I doing with my life?* and even more, *What should I be doing with my life?* My feelings were very real, even if the public at large didn't readily validate them, and the worst part was that by their very nature, they were incredibly isolating. It seemed no one could understand and help me through this crisis of my life and the God to whom I'd always turned was incredibly quiet. What I felt to be a proverbial spiritual desert others saw as a vacation at the beach.

Imagine my relief when I found a Web site entitled www.quarterlifecrisis.com based on the best-selling book *Quarterlife Crisis* by Abby Wilner and Alexandra Robbins (Tarcher/Putnam). There were comments and stories of other twentysomethings who were feeling exactly like me. My heart screamed, "I'm not alone!" Yet I was saddened to hear emptiness in the words of people searching for answers, advising each other to look to a new career, a new relationship, or religion to find their security. Though I didn't always feel it, I knew that God hadn't left me and that Jesus Christ was my only anchor in this hurricane of nebulous questions and uncertainties. Without that, I could easily see how I, too, could be floating aimlessly in this sea full of possibilities desperately searching for a way to calibrate my compass to true north.

God most definitely met me during this time and showed me that it wasn't the answers that were important as much as the questions themselves. God used them to stir up a restlessness that awakened me from the comfortable bubble I'd created and drew me closer to God. When my focus shifted from my big, self-centered questions to an even bigger God, my quarterlife desert became an oasis, and I desperately wanted other quarterlifers to experience the same.

For those who may be experiencing their own quarterlife crisis, I say to you, "You are not alone." For those who've already walked through, look back and provide support not through answers, but by providing community, listening to the questions, and pointing to the one who can quiet the storm with a word and navigate all ships home.

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If they leave our ministries with a **sense** of who a Christian is—or maybe more accurately **who Jesus is** inside them—that might stick with them long after their diplomas get dusty.

an engraved graduation Bible and wish them the best doesn't seem to be working. While there's no magical formula that guarantees success, a few e-mails here, a letter there, a Christmas reunion during their freshman year, and sharing phone numbers of healthy churches and ministries near their homes or schools might strengthen their transition into college.

Preparation

What type of special attention and preparation do our seniors deserve in the months before they graduate? It doesn't take a Ph.D. in statistics to understand the words from seniors' own mouths: they wished their youth leaders had done a better job preparing them to tackle the tough issues they faced after they picked up their high school diplomas. Based on the responses to our survey, the big three topics that seem to deserve special attention are developing new friendships in new contexts, how to live responsibly when you're away from home for the first time, and how to find a new church or college ministry in which you can be both nurtured and challenged.

Perhaps it's time to address these issues directly with seniors and their parents. Maybe youth workers could invite recent youth group alums back to the youth group to share their own highs and lows as they transitioned to college. Perhaps distributing copies of this article would help seniors, as well as their mentors and parents, think about how to cross the bridge from high school into college before the deck falls apart under their feet.

Sin Management

Are graduates' high rates of sexual activity happening despite what we teach them in youth group...or are they somehow *because* of what we teach them in youth group? Consistent with other published reports, we were struck by the large percentage of respondents who engaged in hook ups, sexual intercourse, and oral sex. It made us wonder how much of our teaching and conversation with students had inadvertently fallen into a pattern of sin management.

The "gospel of sin management" is a term coined by Dallas Willard to describe the narrowing of the good news into a divine formula for handling (or forgiving)

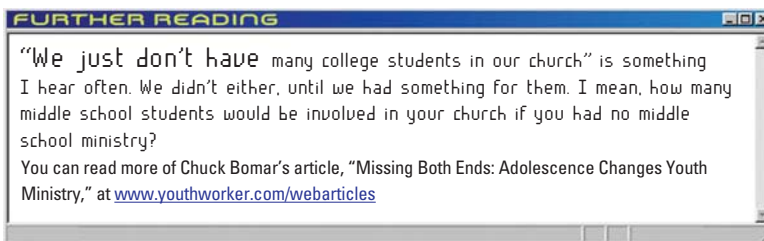
our individual sins (see Dallas Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy*). When this trickles into youth ministry, it means we spend more time teaching kids the Christian tips and tricks to "just say no" than helping them experience true transformation of life and character.

It's not that teaching about "how far is too far" or warning about the consequences of premarital sex is inherently wrong; it's just that it's not enough. Instead, we need to help instill in our students a solid faith identity that they own personally and that will give them confidence to say "no" when everyone and everything around them is chanting "yes." Instilling in students that type of positive faith identity is the difference between helping students understand what a Christian does and who a Christian is.

If they graduate from our ministries with only a sense of what a Christian does, that'll likely fall away as soon as the cap and gown come off. But if they leave our ministries with a sense of who a Christian is—or maybe more accurately who Jesus is inside them—that might stick with them long after their diplomas get dusty.

Doubt

What's doubt got to do with it? When kids are in the midst of a personal crisis or a crisis of faith, we're tempted to grab some tissue, tie on our Super Youth Worker Counselor cape, and come to their aid. Making them feel better can easily become more important to us than helping them learn and grow.



Perhaps the most significant finding of the College Transition Project to date is that students who felt like they had a safe place to talk about doubt showed greater faith maturity. Whether it was with the youth group overall or with a specific adult leader, students who had the opportunity to struggle with tough questions and pain during high school seemed to have a healthier transition into college life.


Youth workers who are part of the conversation generated by the emergent movement and its books and conferences often reflect on the importance of helping students wrestle with difficult theoretical and personal issues. Interestingly, the findings of this first phase of the College Transition Project seem to empirically confirm some of these rumblings. Crisis and pain bring not just suffering, but opportunity for growth. Perhaps it's the depth that comes from the well-processed tough times that builds roots that can withstand the shifting winds of college life.

Further Study

After completing this first pilot phase of the College Transition Project, we find ourselves with a handful of possible answers and a whole lot more questions. Our intention is to survey more students from more youth ministries to learn about the good,

bad, and ugly of what happens to kids once the "Pomp and Circumstance" fades.

In the meantime, those of us closely connected with the study are finding that it's impacting the way we relate to kids. We're sharing these findings with seniors and their parents before they graduate. When we meet with kids, we're trying to do more exploring than explaining. We're thinking more about building students' faith identity than simply urging them to "just say no" to certain behaviors. And we're trying to encourage small group leaders to contact every one of their students every month during their freshman year.

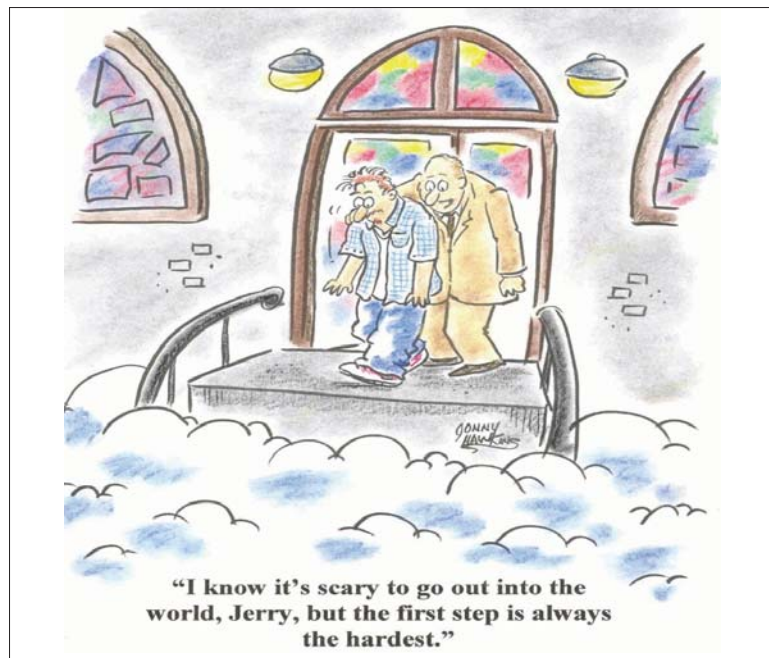
Nicole deserves that. And much, much more. 

* You're invited to join the discussion at www.cyfm/ywj/nicole.php (placeholder URL only)

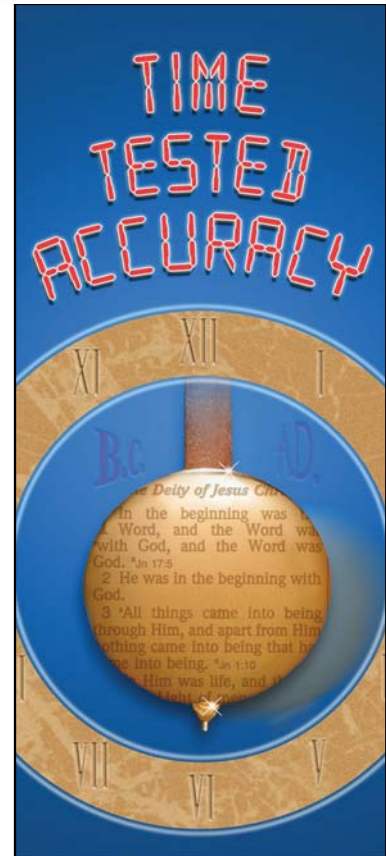
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