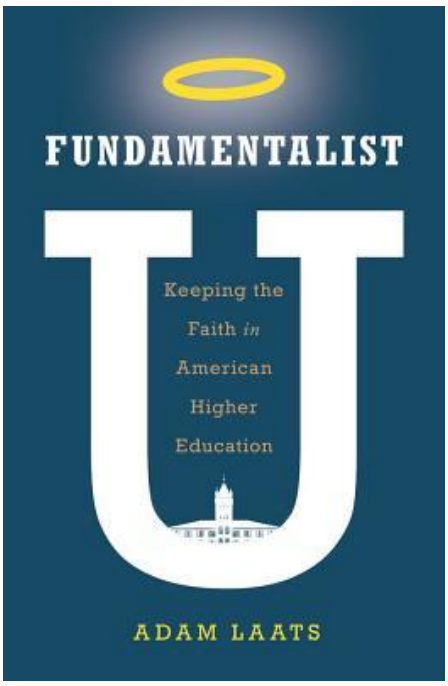

Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education

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Colleges, universities, and seminaries do more than just transfer knowledge to students. They sell themselves as "experiences" that transform young people in unique ways. The conservative evangelical Protestant network of higher education has been no different. In the twentieth century, when higher education sometimes seemed to focus on sports, science, and social excess, conservative evangelical schools offered a compelling alternative. On their campuses, evangelicals debated what it meant to be a creationist, a Christian, a proper American, all within the bounds of Biblical revelation. Instead of encouraging greater personal freedom and deeper pluralist values, conservative evangelical schools thrived by imposing stricter rules on their students and faculty.

In *Fundamentalist U*, Adam Laats shows that these colleges have always been more than just schools; they have been vital intellectual citadels in America's culture wars. These unique institutions have defined what it has meant to be an evangelical and have reshaped the landscape of American higher education. Students at these schools have been expected to learn what it means to be an educated evangelical in a secularizing society. This book asks new questions about that formative process. How have conservative evangelicals hoped to use higher education to instill a uniquely evangelical identity? How has this identity supported the continuing influence of a dissenting body of knowledge? In what ways has it been tied to cultural notions of proper race relations and proper relations between the sexes? And perhaps most important, how have students responded to schools' attempts to cultivate these vital notions about their selves?

In order to understand either American higher education or American evangelicalism, we need to appreciate the role of this influential network of dissenting institutions. Only by making sense of these schools can we make sense of America's continuing culture wars.

Fundamentalist U: Keeping the Faith in American Higher Education Details

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Reid Mccormick says

“…an evangelical Christian community of disciples and scholars who seek to advance the work of God…”

“...a University that fosters wisdom, faith and service through excellent academic programs within a Christ-centered community.”

“...liberal arts community serving God's kingdom by cultivating thoughtful scholars...”

These are just a few snippets from some school mission statements I have worked for in my career. They are heavy and quite wordy, but they all say the same thing: the Christian faith is the foundation of our school. Writing a verbose mission statement is one thing, executing your mission statement is an entirely different thing. Why is it so difficult? Simply put, Christian institutions have a hard time defining what “Christian faith” means.

Fundamentalist U by Adam Laats is a unifying work on disunity. Christian universities were mainly built on a foundation of disagreements, be it a disagreement with a specific doctrine, a disagreement with modern education, or a disagreement on the direction of American culture. The heart of Christian higher education is built upon a sense of rebellion. As whole, the history of Christian higher education has been better defined by it antagonistic ideals than it Christian ideals

Laats layouts the rocky history of fundamentalist schools such a Bob Jones University, Moody Bible Institute, Biola University and the like. Each school faced a near continuous line of criticisms from students, alumni, donors, church leaders, faculty and even other administrators. With every criticism, schools had to double down on their holy image.

Administrators condemned alcohol, sex, dancing, playing cards, going to the movies, and (at many times) thinking independently. As society shifted and culture changed, Christian schools were slow to change. Their rebellious nature taught them to only to be reactive and never proactive.

I have lived and breathed Christian higher education for over a decade and half now. I am in the trenches of these fights. I think someone from the outside would be amazed that Christian higher education has been so successful for so long when the foundation seems so shaky. Thus I think this book could have benefitted from a little more positive conversation. A lot has gone wrong, but what has gone right?

I really enjoyed this book. It was a great history lesson and I think it is vital to understand this history.

Eugene Douglass says

Good book.

Excellent book on history and climates at many Christian colleges. I graduated from The King's College in

New York, and a lot did nit make sense until I learned some of the history of the Christian college phenomena.

Kendra Morgan says

Reads like a text book.

William Gallo says

I was homeschooled, attended a tiny church/school (five students in my graduating class!), and then went to Pensacola Christian College and Moody Bible Institute. And let me tell you, as someone who has only ever known fundamentalist Christian education, this book pretty much nails it.

Though it must have been tempting, Adam Laats has not written a polemic. Fundamentalist U is a serious, unemotional history of evangelical and fundamentalist colleges and universities in the United States. Though it is academic, it's still a very easy read, even if depressing.

There's just too much to comment on - I'll be thinking about it for weeks. But a few thoughts:

- I appreciate how Laats places the history of these schools within the wider context of higher learning in the US. For instance, I hadn't really thought about the fact that before the 1960s and 1970s, even some non-religious colleges and universities had harsh student rules against drinking, co-ed dorms, etc.

- Though it admittedly falls outside the scope of this book, I would have appreciated if it attempted to convey what it felt like to attend one of these schools. In my experience, the cult-like atmosphere (e.g., the absurdly strict rules and strange punishments that serve no clear purpose apart from tests of absolute loyalty) is the defining feature of many of these schools, especially when viewed from the students' perspective. Laats does note some of these rules in several chapters. But still, it seems possibly misleading to examine some of these communities from a primarily academic perspective.

- On that note, I would have liked more updated info on what these schools are like now. This book basically takes you from the formation of evangelical/fundamentalist schools in the 1800s until the 1970s, when many of these institutions began to change. But it pretty much just leaves it at that. In some areas, a reader may assume that even some of the more conservative schools like BJU have changed their approach to the world in some substantive way. While that may be true of places like MBI and Wheaton, it most definitely is not true of schools like PCC and BJU.

Mostly, though, you can disregard my criticisms as the ramblings of a disgruntled former evangelical who is hopelessly over-invested in this conversation. In the end, it is very good to see a serious academic write about something that has been covered so infrequently by outsiders.

This is a topic that very few people know about at all, let alone understand well. As Laats notes, that's in large part because words like "fundamentalist" and "evangelical" have no set definition, so it's hard to even know where to begin. That said, even though he does not come from the world of Christian fundamentalism, his grasp of its history could fool you. This book is essential if you want to understand how Christian

colleges came to be, and how they've changed over the decades.

Greg Watson says

Laats book provides a well-researched account of the inner-workings of fundamentalists an evangelical colleges. The level of detail in his historical analysis is unlikely to be found elsewhere, at least in a secular history book.

Laats is especially strong in discussing the identity of colleges rooted in the fundamentalist and evangelical tradition. What constituted fidelity to that tradition was often difficult to define and even more difficult to appease all interested parties -- alumni, students, parents, and pastors.

As strong as the book is, though, Laats over-emphasizes the need for school leadership to remain true to their theological traditions in order to maintain a flow of tuition dollars. Leadership at these schools believes in the theological tradition, or so one would trust. Defining what that tradition is might be difficult in some ways. In other ways, it isn't. From Laats account, it's clear that some students and professors struggle to believe in such things as "a real, literal, historical Adam and Eve as the progenitors of the human race." This should not be a struggle for a student or professor at a fundamentalist or evangelical college.

All in all, the book is written well and is well researched and generally fair.

Melody Schwarting says

I love fundamentalist history. Some people like true crime or inspirational stories. I like fundamentalist history. And this book had no shortage of scandals, movements, and revelations to tantalize me.

Adam Laats has a (mostly) fair and balanced view of things. As an alumna of Colorado Christian University, I appreciated the inclusion of Clifton L. Fowler's torrid leadership of Denver Bible Institute, a forerunner to CCU. Most of the book centers on non-denominational, self-identified fundamentalist institutes, colleges, and universities. Laats clarifies his perspective helpfully at the outset, which is useful for those who would isolate his opinion as an "outsider." I, for one, welcome his opinion, and hope that the responsible history of denominational higher education is explored further in the future.

Jeremy Gardiner says

What a fantastic and fair book on the history of Fundamentalism in Christian education. It provides an in-depth look from the 1920's to the modern day of schools like Gordon-Conwell, Moody Bible (where I am a student), Bob Jones, Biola, Wheaton, and Liberty. He touches on other schools too like DTS but those six have a more prominent focus.

Some of my takeaways are that Creationism has always been a forefront issue. I found it funny hearing about the battle with evolution from the 1920's-1960's and realizing nothing has changed. I also learned that Fundamentalism has always been involved in politics (the "Christian Right" under Falwell wasn't new--a myth he substantiates).

I especially hearing an academic, non-Christian take on some of our darker history with authoritarian control (especially Bob Jones) and racial segregation. Learned a lot, and was reminded how watchful we must be because of how easy it is to turn cultural issues into theological positions.

Ben Vance says

A very in depth read of a fascinating slice of an American subculture. Fundamentalist colleges and universities are an almost parallel world with a fairly large influence on the US. The author has very detailed notes on the positions and changes to most fundamentalist school from their foundation to the 1980’s. Along the way he cover the change to neo evangelicalism and how the conservative movement in general deals with cultural changes. One of the best books I’ve read on fundamentalism and evangelicalism.

Megan says

An important & revealing book. I went to a "fundamentalist u" and much of this resonated with me deeply. Full review to come.
