

Evangelical students get into once-barred dancing: The swing thing

News in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

Classes are done for the day. Meetings and work are winding down, and Facebook can provide a study break for only so long. So what's a restless Christian college student to do?

For undergraduates at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, a walk down to the campus theater provides one solution: dancing to the tunes of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.

Inside, young men offer their hand to available young women and take them to the middle of the hopping dance floor. Beginners practice basic steps while more advanced dancers take on the more complicated moves, flipping their partners over their heads and through their legs.

At Union, as at a growing number of Christian campuses, "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." Dance fever hit the Southern Baptist campus when two freshmen, Grant Kelly and Brandon Walker, started recruiting students to dance for fun last fall.

Fans say the swing thing has now taken root in at least ten Christian colleges in the U.S.—and the fever is spreading.

But like a scene out of the 1984 classic film *Footloose*, some campuses have had to overcome religious or moral qualms about dancing. Union's student handbook, for example, says the university "prohibits dancing at any Union University-sponsored event held on campus." Students simply host the dances as unofficial events either on or off campus.

"It's fun and innocent," in the view of Dean of Students Kimberly Thornbury, who said she was given a heads-up by the students. "The university is not going to hunt people down. That's not the spirit of the policy."

While swing is downright innocent compared to the bump-and-grind moves found on many secular campuses, at religious schools it often falls under the category of “social dancing” that some believe could lead to temptation, and therefore it comes with guidelines attached.

To be sure, many conservative schools like Bob Jones University continue to prohibit all forms of dancing. None theless, some Christian schools have lifted the dancing ban in recent years.

For example, in Waco, Texas, Baylor University students were permitted to boogie in 1996. Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, initiated a new dancing policy in 2003. In 2006, John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, expanded its dancing policy to allow students to jive at more campus-sponsored dances with gentler genres such as ballroom and swing.

Randall Balmer, a chronicler of American evangelical trends, said he was a little shocked to learn that more Christian campuses are picking up swing dancing but sees it as an indicator of shifts within the evangelical subculture.

“What clearly has happened . . . is that after 1980, evangelicalism was still a subculture—but it was no longer a counterculture,” Balmer said. “With that decreased attention to ‘worldliness,’ some of the taboos have fallen.”

Balmer, who teaches at New York’s Barnard College and is the author of *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, says the suspicion of the “outside world” beyond evangelicalism has faded. “There has been a general loosening of the [fundamentalist] structure of the 1920s and 1930s,” he said. “The dancing is just another evidence of that loosening.”

Still, some schools have reservations. In Kirkland, Washington, Northwest University’s dancing policy states that the school “recognizes the temptations inherent in the sensuous and erotic nature of some social dancing” and then sets guidelines to keep dancing off campus.

Those rules haven’t dissuaded Michael Weber, a Northwest student, from dancing for four years. He and his friends go off campus to community centers and dance halls in order to stay within the guidelines and still swing.

Weber organizes dance events a couple times a month to encourage students to learn basic moves. He likes swing because, in his opinion, it’s easier to master than

ballroom dancing. "Swing dancing is easy to learn," he said. "It's not as proper." –
Angela Abbamonte, Religion News Service