

Christian study centers strive to help students integrate faith, intellect

The two dozen centers across the country want to cast off the perception that evangelicals are anti-intellectual.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue



Anna Grace Freebersyser and Barrie the dog at the North Carolina Study Center on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. RNS photo by Yonat Shimron.

The regulars punch in a code on the front-door lock at any hour of the day or night. Rows of coffeepots greet the students in the hallway. The library has a few desktop computers—and 12,000 books. Three floors of tables, chairs, and couches are available for studying or lounging.

The Center for Christian Study at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville has been beckoning students since 1976 to socialize, listen to a lecture, participate in a book study or a small group, or get mentoring or counseling. Study centers are unambiguously evangelical in their theology, if not in their politics, but they want to

cast off the perception that evangelicals are anti-intellectual or antiscience.

Today there are 24 Christian study centers at universities across the country, including ones at the University of California, Berkeley, Cornell, Yale, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Like the one in Charlottesville, housed in a building on fraternity row less than a block from campus, these centers are privately owned and run and funded by alumni and local Christians. They are usually staffed by half a dozen Christian educators tasked with providing programming and hospitality.

Sarah Macris, a biology and religious studies undergraduate at UVA who lives in an off-campus women's dormitory sponsored by the study center, said she appreciates the spirit of open inquiry at the center. Study center regulars don't agree on issues such as sexuality, President Trump's politics, or the evangelical label, she said, but the leaders and students are committed to respecting other people's beliefs.

"The goal isn't to shut down discussion by how right you are," she said. "It's a conversation in which you love and care about one another in pursuit of truth."

One of the most popular study center groups at UVA, offered through a long-standing partnership with the Virginia Atheists and Agnostics, focuses on faith, reason, and science. Participants might reflect on a chapter from a book by evolutionary biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins one week and one by geneticist and evangelical Francis Collins the next.

The study center's biggest event last year, drawing some 1,500 people, was a forum with Massachusetts Institute of Technology physicist Ian Hutchinson, who argues that Christianity and science can be reconciled.

"We are grateful for the ways universities disseminate knowledge and work on integrating knowledge for the betterment of society," said Drew Trotter, executive director of the Consortium of Christian Study Centers, a loose fellowship of 24 centers, based in Charlottesville. (Each study center is independent but contributes dues to the consortium.)

This emphasis on interaction with scholars is intentional. The study centers encourage students to think seriously about vocation and how they will integrate their future professions with their Christian life. At the North Carolina Study Center, a

conference last year brought together community leaders in business and academia to talk to students about how they might live faithfully and contribute to the world.

“Universities might do a great job of teaching—here are instruments to use to flourish as an individual—without much discussion of ‘What does that flourishing actually mean or look like?’” said Madison Perry, executive director of the North Carolina Study Center. “That’s where I see a space for well-informed, traditioned voices that can say, ‘Here’s what we think that means.’”

This focus on integrating faith and learning distinguishes study centers from campus ministries whose main mission is evangelism or worship. Many of these ministries, such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Cru (the name of Campus Crusade for Christ International in the United States), are membership-oriented, whereas the study centers are open to all. It’s not rare to find Catholics, Muslims, and atheists popping in and flipping open their laptops.

Since 2010, InterVarsity has been stripped of its status as a recognized campus organization on several campuses because it requires student leaders to affirm a statement of faith—which is seen as a violation of the schools’ inclusiveness policies. Many of these ministries now rent space at study centers, which are typically located off campus.

Another difference is that while InterVarsity or Cru might offer a Bible study that’s mostly devotional in nature, study centers are open to exploring biblical texts within a wider body of scholarship. At UVA this semester, the study center is hosting a five-week seminar on the binding of Isaac, taught by a lecturer in the Jewish studies program.

“Universities are increasingly professionalized,” said John Terrill, director of Upper House, a Christian study center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “You’re in your silo, and you’re rewarded to stay in your silo and not necessarily to look laterally. The presence of study centers can raise the game.”

One way the centers have done that is to start literary journals of Christian thought. *Wide Awake*, a magazine produced by UVA students, was the subject of a 1995 Supreme Court case. After UVA refused to subsidize the journal, citing religion-state entanglement, students sued and won. The Supreme Court ruled that the university could not discriminate against a religious point of view.

Wide Awake is now defunct. But other Christian journals such as Yale's *Logos* continue in its tradition. Students at UNC Chapel Hill's study center are planning their own, called *To the Well*. The first edition will be distributed in the fall semester.

Parker Marshall, a sophomore at UNC, is the journal's editor in chief. He got hooked on the study center after attending two book groups there, one on Augustine's *Confessions*, the other on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. He looks forward to a panel discussion in April on the future of American evangelicalism.

Marshall, who is majoring in economics and journalism, sees the study center as a "safe place" where students are free to think aloud.

"It's a place," he said, where "I can pursue Christianity in a way that engages my mind." —Religion News Service

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