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### HOUSES OF WORSHIP

# Bible Colleges Shouldn't Need a State Seal

These schools offer an affordable education, but many are not allowed to award a degree.

By JOHN MAUCK

March 19, 2015 6:54 p.m. ET

President Obama last week directed federal agencies to change the way graduates pay back student loans, the latest in a string of measures that aim to make college more accessible and affordable. Governors across the country have echoed the president's claims that it is time to get college costs under control. Here's one idea that wouldn't cost taxpayers a nickel: Stop overregulating Bible colleges.

As it stands, some state education boards are keeping Bible colleges from issuing bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees. Instead, such colleges can only give out diplomas or certificates of completion. Bible colleges have an illustrious history in the U.S.—Congregationalist ministers founded Yale to equip young men for the ministry, after all—but many of today's more than 1,000 Bible colleges are being relegated to second-class status.

In Illinois, our law firm recently filed a lawsuit on behalf of three Bible colleges, with the backing of the nonprofit Alliance Defending Freedom, against the Illinois Board of Higher Education. The IBHE claims that the Bible colleges do not meet the state's curriculum requirements, and therefore cannot issue degrees.

That claim is absurd. Receiving a tailored, specialized education should be encouraged, not stigmatized. These schools operate primarily as ministries of churches or denominations and offer two- to four-year programs to prepare high-school graduates for a variety of faith-based careers—as teachers, coaches, nonprofit workers, ministers and more.

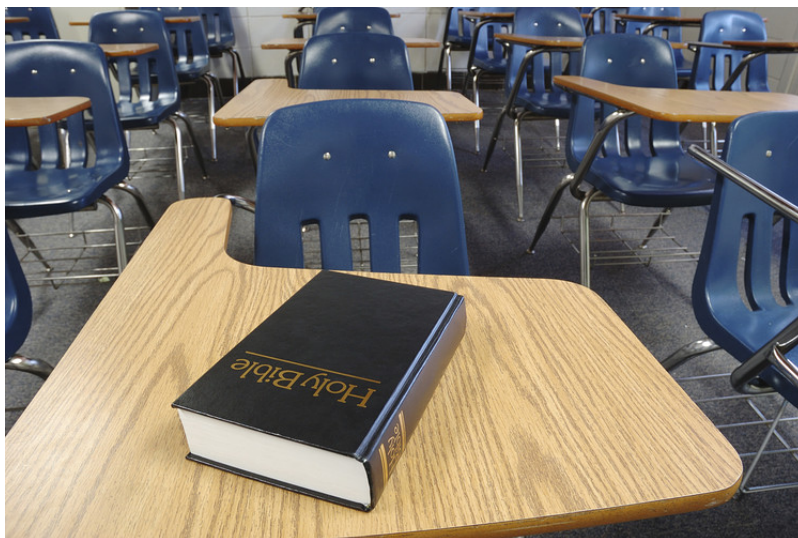


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They  
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be

affordable: The cost of a four-year Bible college runs 30% to 50% less than most state-approved private or public schools. For example, Dayspring Bible College and Seminary charges tuition and board of only \$5,300 a semester. At Providence Baptist College, the cost is \$3,800 a semester. But the nearby Northern Illinois University rakes in more than \$11,000 a semester per student. Since Illinois Bible colleges can't award degrees, the students who most need affordable education may never consider attending. For those who do head off to Bible college, the state effectively tells future employers that the education students received is inferior.

Students don't need the protection the IBHE claims to offer. Thanks to the Internet, prospective students can evaluate cost, location, facilities, faculty, course offerings and extracurricular activities; the government doesn't need to step in with an official stamp of approval. College tuition is not all paid upfront but spread over several years. If any school is not delivering value or proves to be unsuitable for any reason, students can go elsewhere. In addition, most states, like Illinois, have strong consumer protection laws to help if the protection afforded by vigorous competition fails.

Such concerns aside, the state's refusal to let Bible colleges use the term degree amounts to a violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause. These schools are not "approved" to grant degrees because many reject any government interference with religious education, knowing the loss of freedom of expression and religious exercise that inevitably ensues.

This issue is not limited to Illinois; more than 20 states have similar regulations. Yet there has been some progress: In 2007, the Texas Supreme Court ruled in *HEB Ministries v. Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board* that the Lone Star state's rule requiring approval from the state to grant degrees constituted a violation of the establishment clause. One problem, among others, was that the rule allowed the state to approve or disapprove of different kinds of religious instruction.

Chief Justice Nathan Hecht concluded: "It is hard to imagine a more active involvement in religious training than by determining whether it meets the comprehensive standards set by the [state] coordinating board, and equally hard to imagine a more direct state sponsorship of religious education than by indicating . . . on every academic award whether the state approves the programs of study." Amen to that.

Since the Texas decision, 19 new Bible colleges have been founded, many serving African-American and Hispanic young people. Allowing those educational opportunities to flourish will no doubt turn out to be cheaper than providing free community college for everyone.

For a cash-strapped state like Illinois, eliminating the annual cost of enforcing unnecessary regulations is worth considering, particularly for a new governor like Bruce Rauner, who seems willing to confront regulatory obsolescence. But most important, allowing Bible colleges to offer degrees is an opportunity for states to extend affordable education—and consequently, upward mobility—to young people in an expensive and ever-changing higher education world.

*Mr. Mauck is partner at Mauck & Baker in Chicago.*

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