

Student of leadership tapped to take reins at Gordon College

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue

For the past decade, sociologist D. Michael Lindsay has been living the very phenomenon he's studied: evangelicals climbing the ranks of secular institutions and becoming American elites. Yet in a surprise move, the 39-year-old has traded a tenure-track position at Rice University to become president of Gordon College, a respected outpost of evangelicalism in Wenham, Massachusetts, 25 miles north of Boston.

Some of Lindsay's former students have wondered why he would leave a highly ranked university with a growing, well-funded sociology department. For Lindsay, it's a matter of calling. "I know that I'm the right person for Gordon," Lindsay said, "because what I bring to the table today is what Gordon happens to need right now."

A Southern Baptist with Mississippi roots, Lindsay gained a national reputation with his 2007 book *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite*.

His broader research interest deals with leadership, and on September 16 he was inaugurated as the youngest leader in Gordon's 122-year history.

Though he's never been a college president before, Lindsay has spent countless hours talking with CEOs, big city mayors and even former U.S. presidents about their lives and work. His Platinum Study project, featuring interviews with 550 leaders in various fields, is said to represent the largest body of interview data ever collected from a cross section of American leaders.

He's also no stranger to helping institutions grow. He's built a reputation as a capable

fund-raiser for numerous projects, including Rice's Program for the Study of Leadership, which he founded.

Lindsay plans to leverage both his experience and his power-packed Rolodex to help Gordon raise its profile. Starting October 14 in downtown Boston, he'll conduct a series of onstage interviews with corporate executives whom he had interviewed for the Platinum Study.

While snagging Lindsay is a coup for Gordon, Paul Corts, president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, hopes Lindsay can help galvanize interest in data collection and analysis across Christian higher education. "We want to take advantage of his background and skills," Corts said. "Research is increasingly important for us and our institutions. . . . So having people like this in our leadership will be very helpful to our whole movement."

If personal style is any indicator, Lindsay is apt to hold Gordon and Christian higher education to high standards. Lindsay expected all his research assistants to wear sharp business casual attire when working on his projects. If a student's cell phone ever rang during class, Lindsay would assess a \$5 fine to help pay for an end-of-semester party at his home.

"He was the only faculty member in the department who was always here every Saturday," said Elaine Howard Ecklund, who also teaches in Rice's sociology department. "When you're writing personal thank-you notes to everyone you meet in addition to doing your scholarly work, it means you put in a lot of hours."

On the Gordon campus, Lindsay's stately new office looks as if he hasn't had time to unpack. There's no dust, clutter or signs of work in progress—just books in shelves so high they require a ladder to reach.

Relaxed in pressed slacks and a patterned sport jacket, Lindsay smiles warmly as he talks about his three young daughters and his wife, Rebecca. He

says he feels comfortable at Gordon, despite his young age and lack of experience in college administration. In his work, Lindsay said, he found that the most successful leaders are those "who found their talents and skills matched up with what was needed at a particular time at a particular organization."

Location, however, doesn't hurt.

Boston, he said, "is where the world comes to study," and Gordon's location is an ideal place to build bridges between evangelicals and the broader community. "Because there's so much intellectual activity in Boston, there's an opportunity for conversation, for alliances, for collaboration that you just don't find in other places," he said.

In studying leadership, Lindsay says he's not pushing an evangelical agenda or "trying to help people who I like to get power or have influence or shape public policy." Instead, he's curious how effective leaders get to where they are and what helps them exercise good judgment over the long term.

Lindsay followed his mother, Susan Lindsay, from Catholicism to evangelicalism in his youth. At First Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi, an 11-year-old Lindsay committed his life to following Jesus. Though he's a Southern Baptist, Lindsay has also spent time in the Assemblies of God and the Christian and Missionary Alliance. And he sent his eldest daughter to a Jewish preschool.

Once he gets settled, Lindsay plans to teach sociology at Gordon and to stay active in sociological research. Meanwhile, some are hoping his career path will inspire more evangelicals to find their callings in Christian colleges.

"It's a very hopeful sign for Christian higher education that Gordon has been able to attract him," said Michael Beaty, a Baylor University philosopher who studies Christian higher education. "I'm hopeful that it means we're going to see an increasing number of senior administrators who return to Christian colleges and universities [after finding] success in secular academic institutions. But we'll have to

wait and see." —RNS