

TOWARDS A BALANCED MINISTRY IN A COMMUTER UNIVERSITY

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The logo used by National Student Ministries defines our campus ministry program into five areas of Christian faith (worship, study, fellowship, churchmanship and stewardship), and five areas of Christian outreach (witness, missions, ministry, social action and international students). It would seem that one could quite easily achieve a balanced program using these suggestions. Simply have the officers evaluate the program and make the necessary course corrections. "Plan your work, and work in your plan." What looks good on paper, however, may not work in reality.

Having worked on a commuter campus for seventeen years, I can write from experience that "balance" is much more difficult to reach than one would expect. Many times in years gone by, I have given up on this subject, because of leadership shortage, time limitations and lack of commitment in the larger group. Given these problems, what can one reasonably hope to accomplish in terms of a program ministry? The word "balance" can become very subjective at this point, depending on what the individual wants it to mean.

I would like to contend in this paper that, while "balance" remains mysteriously elusive in a commuter situation, significant progress is possible and worth the time and effort. We never fully arrive. We always live with the tension of what is and what might be. Some areas, such as fellowship, are always strong, while others, like worship, or international student ministry, remain consistently weaker. Our weakest areas are in the outward journey of ministry and witness. Many students come for the fellowship. When we mention other opportunities for growth and outreach, the lack of response indicates that this is our agenda, not theirs.

The Commuter Mindset

Commuter situations present some problems which will not go away. While Old Dominion University has added some dorms and apartments, it still basically has a commuter population and mentality. Students are busy commuting to class, work or back home. Problems begin with the difficulty of the initial contact, then general involvement and finally drawing out the leaders.

The fact is that commuters are usually struggling financially and often academically. They are often the first generation college students who are working their way through school without much help from home. Clubs and extracurricular activities are not high on the priority list. With the cost of education increasing and the broader age range of students, the population of commuters will rise in years to come. How then do we begin?

I would suggest that campus ministers who work with commuters beware of the "commuter mindset." In defining the problems and frustrations of our work, it is easy to suffer the paralysis of analysis. Their problems become our problems to the extent that we cannot see around them or beyond them. It is difficult to keep the goal of balance, and the necessary tension to reach that goal, in place when hundreds of students say "I am doing all I can do."

There is a real temptation to let several generations of students, who did not have time to meet at night or do mission work, set the stage for the next generation. Part of seeing the whole picture is realizing that students with negative or "can't do" attitudes do rub off on us. One can, for the sake of peace, capitulate to the problems and stop dreaming of what might be.

The commuter mindset must be challenged if one is to hang in there faithfully over the years. The students who said that it could not be done were partially right. It could not be done by them. Fortunately, new students come in who bring new dreams and a willingness to work toward them. Miraculously, the impossible happens!

The commuter mindset is basically a problem of attitude, faith and commitment. When one is leading a group that is short on faith or commitment, "balance" is the

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last thing you want to think about. You must work and minister with those who come to invest time with students who will never "pay off" in terms of program growth. Commuters seem to have a lot of problems, and one can easily become a full-time counselor.

Starting Where You Are

The basic building block of a commuter ministry is fellowship. Whether one has five students or two hundred, there must be a reason to come together. If the students are turned off by the "strange" people who are present, they will not come to hear sermons on loving your neighbor! Good group dynamic is essential for spiritual growth as well as growth in ministry.

Over the years, we have had a fairly strong fellowship in the group. When we said "retreat" or "party" the crowd was ready to go. When we said "summer missions" or "spring break mission trip" the attitude was that "somebody" ought to do it, but I have to work. Normally, we would have two or three summer missionaries out of seven or eight who were interested.

Three years ago, four students heard Mildred McWhorter speak at a missions conference. A spark ignited. Three students went to Houston to work in an inner-city Spanish mission. They returned with an excitement and vision that swept through the BSU. The next spring twenty-two students went to South Bronx to do mission work. Then came Baltimore, Atlanta and Boston. The trips became focal points of the semester and inspired and challenged the whole group to serve Christ.

The fellowship of the group has greatly intensified. A new desire is present to bring others. Programs are improving and student involvement is increasing as gifts are being called into service. Significant investments of time are being made by those who previously did not think BSU was worth it.

Things are beginning to move in our weaker ministry areas of evangelism, international students and local missions. Students are beginning to experience the reality of finding life by losing it in ministry to others. Our music ministry team, which performed twenty-two times in one

semester, grew enormously in commitment to Christ, the church and each other. Our BSI President has chosen "servanthood" as the theme for which he wants the council to be remembered. Fourteen students are considering church-related vocations.

The Commuter Dragons

The difficulties of the commuter campus focus in two basic areas: available time and available leaders. Who has not agonized over the many groups that never got together for the first time because of schedule conflicts? How many meetings have you gone to and only one student showed up?

One of the greatest problems the incoming president faces is setting the Council meeting time. We have tried every trick in the book and then looked for a new book. And this is with students who are committed to the cause!

We have had to confront head on the dragon of limited time. We found the statement, "you get what you ask for," to be true. Students who want to be officers are closely questioned on their time availability, class loads, QPA and part-time jobs. They are asked if they will attend Fall Convention, LTC and Ridgecrest. Will they be present for other key BSU events? For too long, we did not expect enough! By becoming more assertive and asking for greater time commitments at the outset of the process, our leaders have accomplished more and felt better about their positions.

Once students are committed to the process of leading, the opportunities for training them are already built into the system. We do not ask new commitments of the council once they take office. Each council sets its goals and objectives and evaluates its growth.

As the council responsibilities have increased, in spite of time, financial and academic pressures, the problem of officer burn-out has developed. Preaching "delegation" is often fruitless because of the difficulty of getting a committee together. It's easier to do the job alone.

One saving grace has been a large number of committed students who did not have the time or desire to be officers, but who are willing to help, offer counsel or give support.

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Some students, who are on the 6 to 8 year plan, also continue to provide leadership at various various times.

As our leadership base has grown, we have seen many officers become campus leaders as well. Their presence in BSU, though limited, has given the organization greater visibility and credibility. New friends on campus are introduced to BSU by "our" Preview Counselors, Resident (dorm) Advisors and Honor Counsel members.

The commuter dragons do not go away. Their presence still limits and challenges our growth at every turn. Faith and hope and love will find a way to effectively challenge them.

The Agony... The Ecstasy

Ministry to commuting students is a complex process demanding both flexibility and assertiveness. One must lovingly confront immaturity and irresponsibility on one hand, while developing ministry teams and doing officer training on the other. Numerous leadership skills are needed daily to bring all of the parts together in a way that will give wholeness and warmth,

When you finally see some of your students leading others to Christ, receiving a standing ovation after a musical concert or ministering to the poor in the name of Christ, the struggle has been worth it. There is hope for tomorrow.

If I could do it all over again, I would still choose a commuter campus. There are some things I wish I had known at the beginning of this ministry. I do not think any particular formula will guarantee success or balance. Some things just have to happen when God wants then to happen regardless of your having touched all the right bases.

In terms of particular actions, I would:

1. Hit the mission trip trail earlier (there is not substitute for this hands-on experience);
2. Learn to be more honest and assertive when the group maturity / commitment level was low;
3. Seek more guidance from others working with commuters;

4. Spend more time working in two areas: self-esteem and motivation;
5. And establish some long range priorities that would transcend several generations of students.

The fact that some problems may not be solved with this generation of students does not mean we will not be more successful the next time around. The journey inward, journey outward model can still be held as a goal of our program ministry. May God give us grace and wisdom to make a difference each day in the lives of students and give them a vision of the difference they also can make with their peers, in the church and the world.