

WHY DO STUDENTS DROP OUT?

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Anyone who has worked in a student ministry for long has experienced the frustration of seeing students start to attend programs or Bible studies and then disappear after a while. What happened? Why didn't they stay involved? What could have been done to prevent losing them from your student ministry?

First, realize that many who drop out did not make a conscious decision to do so. Often it happens over a period of time, and the decision is only to remain out after having not attended for awhile. But eight common reasons identify most of the causes why students are lost to your ministry.

1. SURVIVAL NEEDS HAVE BEEN MET

One reason many students first become involved in a Christian campus or church group is for a sense of belonging and as an avenue to meet friends. As the school year develops, those needs are met by other groups, and other friendships have developed. If during their early involvement they have not realized a need for other benefits, they drop out.

Studies of large churches indicate that a large number of people that join drop out or quickly go on to another church. The assumption can be made that a large, well developed student ministry that is well known on campus and is aggressive about recruiting students will have a significant dropout rate just as very large churches do.

For some, this is a negative factor about large Christian groups; they tend to have more dropouts than smaller groups. However, a point can be missed. An aggressive, well publicized ministry may have a fairly large dropout rate because it has enlisted many students

who would not have normally been attracted to a Christian group. Consequently, the likelihood is greater of some dropping out after an initial period of making some friends and making the transition to campus life. However, some of the students who may or may not be Christian will stick as a result of being exposed to other aspects of the student ministry.

One can never feel alright about students dropping out, but it helps to realize that one is reaching and attracting students who would not normally respond in the first place. There is greater gain in those that stay since they most likely would never have come to a lower profile ministry.

Those who drop out may circle back in future years and/or become another part of the perception that your ministry is there and offers some things of value. If you only reach those that climb over barriers to find a Christian group like yours, your drop out rate may be small. But reaching those students that are more likely not to stay involved usually means you are sharing the gospel and/or challenging many Christians who most need that encounter.

2. DO NOT BECOME PART OF A GROUP

In most cases no matter how good the quality of programming is, if students do not find personal friendship and acceptance, they will not stay. Every effort has to be made to help each student find a place of belonging, a group of warm relationships and/or a sense of being needed.

3. PERSONALITY CLASHES/CHANGE OF FRIENDS

Just as relationships will hold students in a student ministry, so a clash in relationships will run them out. Too many stories can be told about two students having a fuss and now one does not come because he or she is uncomfortable around the other. Also there is the dread breakup of a dating couple, and one or both do not come for

fear of running into the other. Some then make new friends and choose to devote time to them.

No group is "fuss-proof." However, part of the solution lies in helping students to see the need and value of the ministry beyond just being a group of friends. Also establishing a variety of groups creates a greater likelihood of someone continuing to be a part because they do not have to have eye to eye contact with their "fuss partner." Be sensitive to personal relationships and be quick to help one or both find a little different group to plug into. Those who have developed a new set of friends outside the BSU ministry may need to be asked to do new tasks that will help them focus on the value in their involvement for more than relational purposes.

4. SCHEDULE BECOMES MORE COMPLICATED WITH WORK

The farther students go in school the more likely they are to have their schedules crowded with work, labs, observing and other activities. There is no simple answer to this problem other than trying to meet student's needs by providing a varied schedule of activities and ministry possibilities. Make sure that the students know yours is not "an all or nothing" ministry. The variety in scheduled activities must be there because student schedules are complicated.

5. FEEL THEY HAVE DONE ALL THE PROGRAM HAS TO OFFER

If a student can participate in everything a ministry has to offer in one or two years, why should they start? Some things ought to be for juniors and seniors only. Some highly attractive trips or other alternatives should be junior and seniors only. Some groups or Bible studies ought to be geared to issues faced by different classifications. Many student groups do not allow freshmen to audition for any music, drama or ministry group. Is your ministry organized for more than one year's participation? Are there any benefits for staying around for the long haul?

6. FEEL PULLED BETWEEN COMPETING FORCES

In some collegiate settings a variety of groups or churches may be providing Christian activity groups, etc. for students. Sometimes students drop out because they feel pulled between the demands of more than one.

If a student feels pulled between two groups on campus, he or she should be encouraged to choose one or the other after investigating each thoroughly to know well enough what each offers and how they fit his or her needs and personality. Often a student will drop out because of guilt and frustration in choosing or in trying to meet the demands of both groups. Help them not only to feel alright about choosing, but to see the value of it. The difficult thing to do is to put the student's welfare before your desire to have him or her in your group.

Feeling pulled between an on-campus group and a local church is a completely different issue. Every effort should be made by the leadership of the campus ministry and the church ministry to avoid this "pull." Decisions can be made not to use the same student leaders. Ministry schedules can be planned to dovetail around each other. Each can drop some activities that are repetitive or some of these can be done jointly.

When there are choices, students will choose. Until all the students on your campus are reached, students should not have to feel "fussed over."

7. DIFFERING BELIEFS FROM THOSE STATED

Students may become involved in a ministry for a variety of reasons, but then drop out because their own beliefs are at odds with those they see taught or represented. When students are correct in their perception of a difference that they are uncomfortable with, their dropping out may be correct. No ministry can be all things to all people. Your ministry must have certain basics on which it stands. Help those students to find a group whose beliefs are consistent with their own.

However, make sure that students are not reacting to a small group in your ministry who do not represent the beliefs or basics of that ministry.

8. STRONG INVOLVEMENT PATTERN NOT SET

Some students drop out because they never quite get the habit established or they never get into a routine. This can be avoided to some degree by watching for new students who start missing activities and letting them know by phone or note they are missed. It is important to find the line of tension between interest and scolding. Some groups have sign-up lists at each program or service for the purpose of following up on those who have missed some number of times. Other groups have everyone assigned to care-groups or families with a student leader who checks on each student in his or her group with some degree of regularity. The idea is to help students establish a pattern and keep it. However, sensitivity is a key; students have the right to drop out or not come to some activities.

How students feel after their dropping out determines the possibilities of their coming back. Was their absence missed, cheered, accepted, or seen as a sign of their lack of commitment therefore, good riddance? There is a time to accept the fact they have dropped out of your ministry. However, at this point, attempt to keep your relationship to them warm. If the circumstance of their dropping out changes, it will be easier for them to come back.

Any ministry has dropouts. Any good ministry has dropouts. An extra strong ministry may have seen more dropouts because students have been attracted for a wider variety of reasons. The issue is how we understand the problem and work with it.