



Reaching Out to Students All Year Long

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Just a few weeks ago an article appeared in a campus ministry newsletter that reinforced a frequently heard truism: "if you don't reach students in the first month of school you're probably never going to reach them." That has not been our experience at the BCM in Terre Haute. For the last five years we've had only one or two weeks a year in which new people have not come. To be sure, every effort ought to be made to reach every possible student in those first few weeks when their minds, relationships, and faith are being challenged and changed.

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For us however, outreach cannot be seasonal. It must be constant. When Rose arrived as a freshman on her college campus in Mississippi she already knew she was going to be a part of the BSU. In many places where Baptist Collegiate Ministry is strong and well-known, some students will still come to campus already looking forward to being a part of that ministry. Unfortunately, that is not the case here. In fifteen years of doing campus ministry in Indiana we can recall only five students who have actually come looking for us, and most of them were from out of state! We have to go after everyone we have.

The process begins in the summer. We ask churches from around the state to send us the names of their college students. (Some do. Many don't.) We get names of Baptist preference students from one of the universities. (The others tell us they can't give us this information, which really means they don't want to bother with it. It is legal to do so if students give the information voluntarily and allow it to be released.) You might be interest to know that of all the Baptist preference students we receive, only about three to five percent are from Southern Baptist Churches. Most are from the various other kinds of Baptists in the Midwest.

These names form the core of our prospect list. Writing the notes by hand is tedious and time consuming, but we've often heard from students that it makes a significant impression amidst the sea of computer-generated material that they get from the university during the summer. These students also get postcards from two or three of our student leaders. In these summer communications we make sure that we mention Collegiate Week at Glorieta, avail ourselves to help them move into their residence hall, and we tell them about the first few activities of the fall. We also begin to pray for each individual on the list.

When the dorms open, we help students move in and give them information about BCM. For those whose names we've gotten, we make personalized welcome signs and post them on their doors. It took three years to find out how to get room numbers quickly enough to do this, and we have carefully cultivated a relationship with the staff person who supplies us with this information. On the day before and on the day that classes begin we have BCM information tables set up on campus. A week or so later, we participate in the student organization fairs at each campus. The display table includes the most recent scrapbook, lots of pictures, book-marks and brochures. Recently we have also had a video with clips of mission trips, worship, retreats and parties. In addition to all of our regular meetings, we publicize the Welcome/Kick-off picnic, held the first weekend after school starts. We staff the tables with students for obvious reasons.

Each student receives a brochure and a handwritten note from us.

At this point we begin a two-prong strategy. One is to reach those whose names we have. Our prospect list includes those whose names we received in the summer, people who signed up at our tables, and anyone from the previous year who's ever come to BCM even one time. We never remove a student from the prospect list unless they leave school or ask to be taken off. (One of our most wonderful students didn't come until second semester of her junior year!) Our goal is for students on the prospect

list to hear from us at least once a month. We make cards to send at Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day and Easter. We also send a newsletter. How often depends on whether or not we have a council person in that position.

To serve on BCM Council a student must commit to make at least one visit per week, or at least average one per week. During the fall semester our goal

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is to visit each new student. Then in the spring semester council members are each given a list of twelve people from the overall prospect list to pray for and contact that semester. We talk about how to visit, and sometimes will use council time to do a visitation blitz. Visiting is not easy for our students. It's something they have to learn to do and be kept accountable for. We realize that they may have to go with one of us several times before being confident enough to strike out on their own. This past semester we had an exceptional president who would, of his own initiative, say to the council, "Tell me about your visits this week."

The other aspect of our outreach strategy is to reach "the unknown student." None of our schools allows us to go into the dorms and start knocking on doors. To reach "the unknowns," we have tables set up in the union and in the dorm lobbies where students are lining up for lunch. These tables do not look "religious." Among the outreach tables we set up are:

FREE STUFF - That's what the sign says. On the table we have bookmarks, devotional books, Scripture portions, New Testaments, etc.

HALLOWEEN - We give away candy and a handout titled "Trick or Treat" based on John 10:10.

CHRISTMAS - In a small box we put Christmas candy and a short piece about Jesus being God's greatest gift. We wrap it in Christmas paper and ribbon. We cover the table with these little gifts and just give them away. This is an especially fun table to work!

VALENTINE'S DAY - We give away candy with some kind of tract or handout about God's love.

EASTER – We give away Easter candy attached to an Easter tract.

BIRTHDAY CAKE – We have four sheet cakes, one decorated for each season of the year. The sign on the table says “Happy Birthday,” and when people inquire we tell them that we’re celebrating everyone’s birthday! We give them a piece of cake and a birthday card which talks about spiritual birth.

(This idea came from Carolyn Teague.)

At all of these tables the things we give away have a sticker on them with information about BCM and our meeting times.

We also look for university functions at which to have a presence. We have an entry in the homecoming parade, and give out candy and a tract written to tie into the parade theme. At the multi-cultural fair, we have a table to give away Bibles, Scripture portions, tracts, and tapes in other languages. We even showed up with a table at an alternative music festival!

There is, of course, a third kind of outreach that happens without any plan or organization. And, frankly, it is the best kind of all! Students come to BCM and they love it, and as a result, they bring their friends. That’s the way most of our new people come. It underscores something we all know: The best invitation to anything is an authentic conviction that it is good.

For this reason, we are very intentional about making our two major functions, “Tuesday Night Together” and “Brothers And Sisters In Christ” the type of setting where the students who come feel good about bringing their friends. With our Council people and Care Group Leaders we frequently emphasize obvious things: welcoming new people as soon as they come in the door and sitting by them through the evening. But we also try very hard to make people feel welcome and accepted in other ways. In leading most of the large group Bible studies, Roger works hard to weave the redemptive work of Jesus into the everyday concerns and struggles

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of college life. His primary intent for the saved in the group is to help them understand (thank you, Milt Hughes) that life in Christ is a journey, a long one, and people on the journey get tired, doubtful, encounter ups and downs and every kind of challenge. But we don't journey alone.

To the visitors, skeptics, those compromised by sin who are there, we let them know that God is not intimidated by hard questions nor by the perplexing issues they might be dealing with. In the context of many messages they frequently hear it said that God specializes in "turning trash into treasure." We affirm the cynical observation that "crud happens". In fact, we let them know that God agrees! We work to make the message of the Bible crystal clear: By entrusting our lives to Jesus Christ, when the "crud" comes along we do not have to be overcome by it, live in it, be obsessed by it. Because we always expect to have new people, our ongoing assumption is that they have never adequately grasped that what happened on a cruel Roman cross, an innocent Man executed, happened to give us victory over the "crud"!

We also laugh a lot in our fellowship so it is easy for the visitors to see that we are indeed "jars of clay", a bunch of "cracked pots" in whom the glorious Lord Jesus abides. We have a strong conviction, based on experience, that even if they leave the first time still doubting God, at the very least they will have felt accepted, will have laughed, and will have seen that these Christians might be more "real" than they had previously thought or experienced.

So, someone might say, why work so hard to do all that other stuff (the visiting, the letters, etc.) when most come because friends bring them? The only answer we can give is that we believe God calls us to be always reaching out. When we have been faithful in doing that, God has brought students, even if they weren't the ones we visited! We have seen it happen in our BCM and in our church, and we've heard others recount similar experiences. When we go out, God brings people in.

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