

Eight Quick Tips for Starting a College Ministry

By Bob Hetzler

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A few years back a pastor friend of mine asked me to help start a college ministry for their church. I didn't hesitate since I had been involved in youth ministry for a number of years. My thinking was that college ministry was not any different than overseeing a youth group except that they were a few years older.

We started with a big social event in the summer time so we could invite the incoming graduating senior class from the high school group. There was lots of food, swimming, get acquainted games, and tons of fun. About half way through the evening, I shared the vision for the group, got a few laughs, and ended our time in prayer. Most of the students stayed just to hang out and have some fun. We had a huge turnout of about sixty students that night. We anticipated a great summer of fun, ministry, and success.

And then it died.

I was blindsided. I had no idea what happened. We started with sixty energized college age students and within a month, I was left with a few volunteer staff eating bags of Doritos and playing one-man volleyball. I was at a loss for an explanation. I was frustrated and angry with the students. I had this sense of helplessness to do anything. Worse is that I felt like a failure. How could I have so many successes with youth, only to totally bomb with my first adventure into college ministry? Especially, when I knew so many of the students who had come to our first event?

That was over ten years ago and I have learned a lot from that summer. It has helped to have been employed at a Christian college for six years and to see God create in me a heart for college age. You need that love of God for any group you are serving but you especially need His love as you help young people navigate through their post-high school years. It is not easy helping this age group make the transition from teens who are so dependent on others to emerging young adults who will some day run companies, raise families, and lead churches.

George Barna has estimated that about 8,000,000 adults in their twenties have left the church in the past decade (*Revolution*). Josh McDowell, in his book *The Last Christian Generation*, shares how the church is not losing a generation but has **already lost** this age group and if the church does not respond to this crisis, we will soon see the demise of the Church here in North America. I hear more pastors and leaders from churches and Christian organizations asking how they can turn the tide of young adults leaving their church. Not all have left Christianity. Some have gone and started their own churches. These churches are younger and more connected to their culture. Others have started small communes or house churches. However, many have left Christianity sensing that the Church no longer is relevant to them or their friends. What can be done? How do you reach this post-modern: post-Christian generation?

The question hit me hard while I was on staff at Grace College. Seeing how many students (Christian and non-Christian) were feeling disconnected with the Church, I began to seek out answers. I started meeting with others who ministered with college age students, asking questions about what they saw, taking notes, and talking with students wherever I went. It did not matter if they were a Christian or not, I wanted to know what they were thinking. As my time at Grace ended, I returned back home to California and continued to seek out those who worked with college students. One of the earliest contacts I had was with a college pastor named Chuck Bomar from Cornerstone Community Church in Simi Valley. I called to see if we could meet over lunch. I just wanted to pick his brain about college ministry. We had a tremendous time sharing our passion for college age. As I listened about his ministry, I started to think maybe there were others like him who had a love to help local churches to reach out to the lost of this generation and to disciple young people in their church.

Over the past year, I have met, called on phone, or exchanged email with a number of pastors who serve college students. One of the questions I have been asking is, “How do you start a college ministry?” What are those key essentials that make for a God-successful ministry? As I compiled the notes here, this is what I have found. I call them my “Eight Quick Tips for Starting a College Ministry”

Eight Quick Tips for Starting a College Ministry

1. The Key is Leadership

Along with our Lord leading the group, whoever leads the ministry can either sink it or make it steam ahead. There are probably two key qualities for leading a college ministry: being relational and being authentic. Chuck Bomar, of Cornerstone Community Church, is emphatic in that, “the leader **must** be relational.” Brian Rottshcafer of **ROCKHARBOR** adds that he or she must be authentic, “be honest and real...don’t bleed on them but show your scars.” If you are going to start a college ministry, you have to build your group through authentic relational leadership.

2. Stick to the Word

You think it’s about the hype? At **ROCKHARBOR** they try to stay away from being too topical and focus on getting into the Word, “We like to do book studies because they keep us on the right track without getting into agendas,” says Rottschcafer. Long Beach Grace attracts many students from the surrounding arts community with a very traditional service. When you ask the students why they come, many will tell you they like the depth of pastor Lou Huesmann’s teaching. As one student put it, “I got tired of the wishy-washy, emotional stuff I was getting. I want depth.”

3. Build Through Relationships

This was touched on in *The Key is Leadership* but it can't be overstated. College – age students are relational. “It’s what drives them,” says Bob Wriedt from Grace Community Church of Seal Beach, “It helps them in forming their identity.” If you like to hang out (meaning: you are fine just sitting and drinking something caffeinated, talking about girls, sports, future, or dirty laundry) then you might be a great candidate to lead college students. College age want to be known and want to know if you’re in it for the “job” or if you really do care. Trust comes in inches and you need to earn it before you give insight into their lives.

4. Engage in the Culture

“Culture means more to them than Church dogma,” says Greg Stump, a Resident Director at Biola University and college leader at his church. College-age students don’t want to run away from their world but to wrestle with it. They desire for their faith to help them to decide for themselves about critical life issues. When Greg’s friend was starting a college ministry at the church, he asked Greg for his help. One of the first things their college group did was to go to Borders and Starbucks to ask other college students what they thought about the Church. They didn’t get too many positive responses but it did encourage the group to seek out how they could better share their faith with others and serve their community.

5. Nurture A Community Environment

Brian Rottschaffer points out that, “community is not about pleasing you but it’s about serving others.” **ROCKHARBOR** is a large church with over 2,000 in their college group and around 1,500 in their community building Life Groups but it’s not about the size. They realize like other smaller college groups that community just doesn’t happen because you get together. It takes time to develop a group of young people to see outside their own world. That is why Life Groups do local service and border ministries and support ministries at their church.

6. Identify Your Core and Influencers

Josh Rollins, a young adult leader from Columbus, Ohio, notes that every group will start to have a core emerge from within the group. They are the ones you can always count on being at any event the group puts on. But not every core person is an influencer. You need to identify your influencers in your core to help establish the group. Remember, that your college ministry will reflect those who are influencing your group.

7. Be Consistent

Hey, they’re college age. It is the first time for many new things, like making choices about their time and money, shaping their identity, and forming new relationships. So have patience. You need to be consistent with them. Do not start a midweek study and then drop it after two weeks. They need an anchor, even if they don’t say so at this point. So, be consistent, even if they are not.

8. About Programming...

It was unanimous among college pastors that to set up a “program” at the beginning was killing the college ministry before it got off the ground. College ministry is pretty low maintenance and if you like a lot of structure, multiple meetings, charts, visional graphs, etc., then you probably need to look for another place God might have for you. Those things might come later but not at the beginning. “I started with a piece of paper with four names on it and we just had them over to my house for a bar-b-q and games,” says Bomar. “We hung out with them and just got to know them and now we fill out our main sanctuary. We didn’t grow because of programming. For us, programs are death.” And that seems to be the consensus with college pastors.

These “quick tips” are not meant to be the final say in starting a college ministry. They are mostly my own thoughts and insights from observing college groups and interviewing the men and women who are involved with college students. My desire is to help churches who want to begin a college ministry but do not know where to start. I hope some of these tips will give you a good place to begin and encourage you to develop your own insights into college ministries.

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