

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several modern glass skyscrapers. The buildings are arranged in a way that they appear to converge towards the top center of the frame, creating a strong sense of height and scale. The sky is a pale, clear blue. The overall aesthetic is clean, modern, and professional.

15 Tips to Help You Grow a College Campus Ministry

Dave Hess

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There is an enormous need for the hope of Jesus Christ on college campuses and in the lives of today's students and *you* can make a difference.

The college campus is arguably the most strategic missions opportunity in the world today. When we reach the students of today, we are reaching the leaders of tomorrow. Between the ages of 18-25, students are making some of the biggest decisions of their lives. Many of the society-shifting movements throughout history (for good or for evil) have begun with young adults.

Whether you are a pastor with a desire for your church to reach young people, a campus ministry leader wanting to improve the effectiveness of your ministry, or a current student with a desire to grow a movement for Jesus on your campus this is for you. Here are 15 tips to help you grow a college campus ministry.

1. Clarify your vision

What's your vision for growing a ministry to college students? *Why* do you want to grow a campus ministry? There will inevitably be setbacks and difficulties along the way, so it's essential that you have a compelling "Why." Questions addressing what to do and how to do it are important, but don't start there. You need to get clarity and develop conviction about *why* you want to develop your ministry.

As Simon Sinek pointed out in his [viral TEDx talk](#), Martin Luther King Jr. gave the "I have a dream" speech, not the "I have a plan" speech. Plans are good, but start with a vision—start with "Why." This will provide needed drive to work on the ministry and will also set you up to effectively rally others to the cause.

2. Pray

Every missions movement that has ever advanced in the history of the Christian faith has been fueled by sincere prayers of intercession. Jesus modeled this himself by regularly spending time in prayer. Before he chose the apostles he spent *all night* in prayer! (Luke 6:12-16)

The Moravians of the 18th century sent missionaries all over the world during an era when few were even thinking about doing such things. This movement was fueled by day and night prayer meetings. The protestant reformer Martin Luther once wrote that, "to be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing." Prayer is essential.

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— *Martin Luther*

Pastor Rick Warren says, "God is looking for people to use, and if you can get usable, he will wear you out. The most dangerous prayer you can pray is this: 'Use me.'" Do you have a desire for God to use you? Pray!

3. Grow your faith

Faith is a vital characteristic for followers of Jesus, and especially for those who seek to make an impact. After his death and resurrection, Jesus told the skeptical Thomas, "Stop doubting and believe." (John 20:27) On another occasion, when Jesus' disciples were unable to deliver a man from the influence of an evil spirit, Jesus challenged their unbelief saying: "Everything is possible for one who believes." (Mark 9:23)

Unfortunately, though faith is vital, there are many misconceptions around the subject of faith. What is faith? Pastor Gabe Bouch writes: "Biblical faith certainly includes agreement with basic theological ideas concerning God's nature and character, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the core components of the gospel message . . . But it also involves a personal confidence in Jesus Christ and his ability to save us. Biblical faith engages the head and the heart."

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— Gabe Bouch in *Lordship: Responding to the Good News of Jesus Christ*

Maybe your faith is weak right now. The good news is that faith isn't static. It can dissipate or it can develop. Your current level of faith doesn't have to be the level of faith that you walk in next year, next week, or even this afternoon! Look to Jesus today. Ask for his help and trust his words.

As you "fix your eyes on him," and see him for who he is, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, your confidence in him is bound to increase. (Hebrews 12:2-3)

Cultivate faith in your soul and then, in faith, take action for the good of students and the glory of God.

4. Assess the opportunity

Whether you are a local church pastor wishing your church engaged more young adults or a campus ministry leader already reaching college students, assess the opportunity in front of you. If you are a pastor, you might consider how close the nearest college campus is from where your worship services are held. If you are already leading a ministry on campus, assess what segments of the student population are not being reached with the Gospel. The proximity of your ministry environments (Bible studies, large-group meetings, etc.) to the students you desire to reach can make a significant impact.

Therefore, if your church is located 2 miles away from one college campus and 15 miles away from another, you would be wise to seriously consider focusing your engagement on the closer campus, even if it's a smaller and less prominent university.

Even while engaging students on the campus, these are important considerations, especially at large universities. Consider the availability of the students you want to serve and the accessibility of a potential meeting location to those students.

Another important element to investigate is the rules of the university campus where you want to engage students. Each campus has different rules and ignorance of these rules can get you into trouble. If you are ministering to college students in your community exclusively through your local church with no outreach on the actual campus itself, this is probably unnecessary. However, if you plan to do anything on the campus itself, it's important that you become familiar with the rules for student activities and promotion of events.

Failure to do this can result in negative consequences. In more extreme cases your group could be blacklisted and prevented from legitimate access to campus facilities and other resources. Such a consequence would be tragic and could hinder your ministry there for years to come.

Lastly, you would be wise to consider how to complement the Kingdom work of others rather than doing things that cause other ministries to feel like you are undercutting their efforts to enhance your own. Aim to reach students who aren't being reached by another church or campus ministry. Attempt to make a valuable contribution to the overarching Gospel ministry happening in your area.

5. Invest in the students you already have

Sometimes ministry leaders make the mistake of wanting to reach “more” when they aren’t really caring for those they already have. If you are setting out to grow an effective ministry to students, it’s vital that you carry yourself in a posture of servanthood. Jesus described his mission with these words: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

In their book *Raving Fans*, authors Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles tell business leaders that one of the smartest things they can do is to serve their customers so well that the customers become “raving fans.” When this happens, say Blanchard and Bowles, the customers will naturally want to tell everyone about the business.

I believe there is a valuable principle here that is relevant to campus ministry. If we serve and lead the students in our ministry well, they will naturally want to share Jesus with others and will be inclined to invite others into the campus group.

6. Identify leaders

One of the first things Jesus did when he began his public ministry was to identify individuals to be with him. As they walked and talked with Jesus, listening to his teaching and witnessing his ministry up close, these disciples were simultaneously learning what to believe and being developed to minister themselves. This is a biblical vision of discipleship.

Steve Murrell has modeled effective disciple-making and leadership development in our time better than anyone I know of. The church he planted in 1984 in the Philippines has grown to over 80,000 through a persistent focus on evangelism and discipleship. In his book, *The Multiplication Challenge*, Steve gives some practical and time-tested advice about what to look for when selecting individuals to disciple. He recommends looking for people of F.A.I.T.H., which stands for: (1) Faithful, (2) Available, (3) Involved, (4) Teachable, and (5) Hungry. By selecting people with these characteristics you are more likely, in time, to produce remaining fruit and position your ministry for multiplication.

Because your time is finite and limited, you will inevitably be forced to spend more time with some people than with others. Rather than being haphazard about this, choose who you will invest that time with. Paul instructed Timothy to be purposeful, in this way, when he said: “the things you [Timothy] have heard me [Paul] say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

7. Develop a plan

While having a vision should precede having a plan, it’s also important to have plan.

Even if it develops and flexes over time, plans help to direct a course of action over an extended period of time. As it has been said, “if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.”

Pro tip: Write down your plan! Don’t just have it in your mind. This process will help you to develop a more clear plan and will enable you to have something concrete (not fuzzy like your memory) that you and others on your team can revisit when needed.

And make sure your plan involves communicating the Gospel and inviting students to respond. This can be done in a variety of settings (individually or in a group environment), and there are various approaches and timing, but in your attempts to meet students where they are, be sure not to leave them where you found them. Bring them to Jesus.

8. Engage more students

If you were a farmer who wanted to have a bigger harvest, one of the things you would need to do is to plant more seeds. Likewise, if you want to see a greater “harvest” for God’s kingdom you need to plant more Gospel seeds. And like a good farmer, you will also need to water these seeds.

Although the most systematic watering process may improve the end result of the seeds that were planted, the harvest is still limited by the number of seeds that were planted. More seeds (if equally well cared for) will lead to more harvest. To lead more students into a life with Christ, engage more students.

9. Leverage your strengths

We all have strengths, and we all have weaknesses. This is true both individually, as well as communally.

As an individual, perhaps you feel you are too much of an introvert and worry about your ability to adequately inspire others. Communally, perhaps you think that your church/group is too small and that your ministry is too limited in scope. (These are merely two examples of perceived weaknesses.)

The fact is that within both of these scenarios, and many others that could be raised, there are also strengths. While making a case for the valuable and unique contribution of introverts to human society, author Susan Cain writes, “Everyone shines, given the right lighting.”

Everyone shines, given the right lighting.

— Susan Cain in *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*

In the case of a small church or new campus group you may not have as many bells and whistles as a larger more established ministry, but it's also less likely that newcomers are going to be lost in the crowd.

Focus on what you can do, not on what you can't do, and leverage those strengths.

10. Establish structures & rhythms

Some ministry leaders seem to love the thrill of spontaneity so much that they make the mistake of not establishing needed structures and routines. (If you're reading this and you cringed when you read the word "routine" that may be you.)

Establishing meeting times and locations as well as clear communication patterns within your student group isn't quenching the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, it provides stability and consistency that make sustainable growth possible.

11. Be willing to start small

When you are starting campus ministry, don't be afraid to start small.

There will likely be times when the attendance at your Bible study or outreach event is underwhelming. In those moments, focus on those who are there, not those who aren't.

Even meeting regularly with one student or hosting one small group Bible study is a great start. Having a vision for a bigger, broader ministry is well and good, but be willing to start small and don't believe the lie that your small beginning is insignificant. "Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin..." (Zechariah 4:10 NLT)

12. Keep Jesus at the center

It's strange, but unfortunately true, that some people make ministry more about their organization or network, their theological tribe, or themselves than about Jesus Christ himself. This is a big mistake.

Colossians 1:16 says “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.” Ultimately, it's not about you. It's about Jesus.

Your campus ministry should have Jesus Christ front and center where he belongs. It's about him!

13. Empower students to reach students

Steve Murrell once said that the problem with many ministers is that they are doing *too much* ministry. What he meant wasn't that a minister shouldn't work hard, but rather that pastors and ministry leaders should focus the majority of their efforts on equipping and empowering others to do ministry rather than simply trying to do more on their own.

It's important to note that this should be done with the posture of true servant leadership, attempting to serve students in your care by further empowering them to be used by God.

Larry Osborne challenges ministry leaders in his book, *Accidental Pharisees*, saying, “We should never *use* the people we have to reach the people we don't have.” Osborne is referring to the significant difference between manipulation and authentic servant leadership. True Christ-like service is marked by love and sincerity, not manipulation. Love people, don't *use* people.

With that said, know this: the best person to engage a student for Christ is another student, so equip and empower students to reach students.

14. Leverage events & processes

Events are useful in the context of a college campus ministry. Events can be exciting! They can attract a crowd, stir up energy, and can help you to generate a burst of momentum. However, if your ministry merely consists of one event after another, it probably won't be as healthy in the long run.

Something more is needed. You need processes. Processes embrace a longer perspective. They aren't as exciting as events, but they typically lead to deeper relationships and better discipleship.

Fortunately, you don't have to choose between events and processes in your ministry. Recognize and utilize the value of both in a constructive way.

15. Keep your heart right

The effort to engage students with the Gospel is work. You can make some incredible friends and experience great joy in the context of ministry, but make no mistake, there is a spiritual battle going on and you are a target.

Your enemy, the Devil, would love to discourage you so much that you want to quit, and he will surely try. But discouragement is not his only tool. When things are going well he will seek to fuel pride in your life. When there are other ministries reaching students around you (or when a student you've poured your heart into leaves to join another group), there is the temptation of unhealthy comparison and envy. Be on your guard so you don't fall victim to these attacks. (1 Peter 5:8)

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

— *Apostle Paul in Letter to the Philippians*

In all these things, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Don't grow weary. Allow the Lord to renew your strength each day as you look to him, and run your race with perseverance. Live and serve in such a way that you honor the Lord through joyful service to him and to those around you. (Philippians 1:27)

As the book of Proverbs tells us, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." (Proverbs 4:23)



About the Author

I'm Dave Hess, a campus ministry leader serving with Every Nation in the northeastern region of the U.S. I lead a ministry team serving students and campuses in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with Every Nation, in partnership with Freedom Church, where I help college students & young adults experience life with Jesus.

Prior to serving students at universities in Philadelphia, I led ministry outreaches at both Florida State University and Florida A & M University in Tallahassee, Florida. Altogether, I've been serving full-time in collegiate ministry for over 15 years. During that time I've also studied at Fuller Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary earning a Master of Arts in Religion.

I sincerely hope that what I've written here has not only informed you, but encouraged you as well. If you were helped by this resource, I'd love to hear from you! What was your biggest take-away? How are you planning to take action to reach college students in your area?

In addition, please let me know if you have questions, or would like to know more about any of the topics addressed here. It's my aim to support you in the mission to reach students with the Good News of Jesus, and your feedback will help me to know how I can best serve you as I create additional resources.

Let's Connect

You can find me on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#), and you can find other articles and a list of recommended resources for college campus ministry on my [personal website](#). You can also [subscribe](#) to receive periodic emails with encouragement, resource recommendations, and tips related to college ministry.



Make a strategic impact on the next-generation

There is an enormous need for the hope of Jesus Christ on university campuses and in the lives of today's students. The college campus is arguably the most strategic missions opportunity in the world today. When we reach the students of today, we are reaching the leaders of tomorrow. Between the ages of 18 and 25, students are making some of the biggest decisions of their lives. Many of the society shifting movements throughout history (for good or for evil) have started with young adults. Will you position your life and use your influence to serve the next generation of leaders by guiding them into a relationship with Jesus Christ?

Whether you are pastor with a desire for your church to reach young people, a campus ministry leader wanting to improve the effectiveness of your ministry, or a college student with a desire to grow a movement for Jesus on your campus, this resource is for you.