



Testimony of an ISM Chapter Planter

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Having planted an international chapter at UCLA and coached two other international chapter plants in the Los Angeles area, I read the Chapter Planting Manual with a great deal of appreciation for the wisdom contained within. I wish it had been available when I was dreaming with God about new worshiping communities of international students! There are, however, a few key ways in which planting an international student chapter differs from other forms of chapter planting. These differences change how a chapter planter approaches an international chapter plant. Here are a few thoughts within the framework of the planting manual.

Non-Christian Involvement

By and large, ISM chapter planting follows the four stages described in the manual. However, the boundaries between “chapter launch” and “mission launch” are a little blurry. You will find that a much higher percentage of non-Christians will be involved in your chapter plant from the very beginning. Your core may be 50 percent or more non-Christian! Your most enthusiastic inviter may be someone who has yet to become a follower of Jesus. I’ll never forget the welcome party we threw the first week of school for international students to launch our chapter at UCLA. A Chinese scholar, who arrived in the States the week before, helped us set up and joined us in prayer afterwards. It was his first-ever prayer experience.

International students may have a natural affinity for one another, especially by country groups, but need to be encouraged to expand beyond the horizons of their country or language groups and also to realize the spiritual nature and foundations of the group. Otherwise, your chapter can easily turn into just an “international club.” Non-Christians need to be reminded that the focus of this group is to seek God, and the Christian students need to be inspired by and equipped for the vision of the chapter. The communication of vision takes on even more importance in planting international student chapters.

Rapid Transitions

Although some international students are at your campus for four years of undergraduate education or longer for a PhD, many are there as exchange students, English language-learners or masters-level students who are on campus for a much shorter-term. This affects how you plan for the development of a group. It is important to invest in these short-term students, but the stability of the group will be compromised unless there are a few students who will be present for more than six months. Seek out and intentionally develop these students. The planter must be prepared not to see the fruit of his or her ministry—the person who “harvests” three years later may be in another country or state. The planter must also be ready to “re-plant” and major on the basics at regular intervals. The timeline for this kind of ministry is more similar to that of work on community colleges than it is to work at four-year schools.

Cultural Complexity

After almost every encounter during the first months of working with international students, I would develop a headache. I never get headaches normally, and I don’t even own any pain relief medication! I later realized that the strain of being cross-cultural to so many different kinds of people was affecting me physically. As one ISM staff put it, “You might have a meeting with an African student after prayer with a Japanese student, before doing a GIG with a group of Indian students.” Each group requires a different set of lenses and communication skills. The chapter planter must be prepared to deal with great levels of cultural complexity. It pays to become culturally savvy in at least the top two or three cultures of your target population. Additionally, the international student population ranges from 18 year-old freshmen to the 35 year-old scholar, and your ministry may also include students’ spouses and families. A wise chapter planter will be flexible to shift his or her strategy depending on the doors God opens. For example, some

of our best discipleship and outreach opportunities were with spouses of students, something we never anticipated beforehand.

Vision

Vision needs to be nuanced for and communicated to multiple target audiences at each stage of chapter planting—to area and regional staff, potential staff partners, donors, church volunteers, American students in an existing chapter, the university's administration or international student office and, of course, to the international students themselves. Vision may also need to be communicated more frequently due to the rapid transition of international students.

Outreach

Easy-invite events for internationals will almost always involve food and/or getting off campus to explore the city. Think in terms of meeting practical needs as well: airport pickups, trips to Target and grocery stores, etc. Other successful events have included joining or throwing cultural holiday events (such as Chinese New Year). Many schools have an orientation just for international students in which you and others on your team may become involved. There are also certain dorms and apartment complexes toward which international students are drawn. Consider becoming a permanent feature there or asking students or volunteers to move there.

Gathering and Building

Develop a rhythm of outreach by planning for several key periods of sowing and reaping. International students are looking to plug in all year—not just in the fall. International chapters usually do not suffer from a lack of visitors but rather a lack of retention. Develop a workable follow-up plan that involves your core. Holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter are good front doors to your fellowship, naturally lending themselves to meaningful encounters and spiritual conversations. It is also important to plan opportunities for commitment to the community, to spiritual growth and to Christ at regular intervals during the year. Never underestimate the catalytic power of overnight retreats and conferences.

Student Leadership

Expectations for leaders may vary depending on the availability of the international student. A married PhD student will have much less time to be involved than a single undergraduate student. However, I cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of involving students right away in the responsibilities of the chapter in order to build ownership and to relieve the burden on the chapter planter. An alternate scenario is that the chapter planter becomes too dependent on American students or church volunteers in the group, and the result will be low ownership by the international students. Even non-Christians can easily set up chairs, reserve rooms or pass out Bibles without stepping into positions of spiritual authority over others.

Mistakes I've Made

1. Trying to do it all myself—not delegating to volunteers and students and not taking initiative with supervisors and mentors.
2. Discounting the contributions international students can make even in a relatively short amount of time. Some of our best leaders were only in the U.S. for a year.
3. Underestimating the pressures on international students—culture shock, academic stress, parental expectations and newness of the Christian faith—when inviting students into positions of responsibility and spiritual leadership.
4. Underestimating the emotional and structural toll of constant student transition—this affects both the planter and the students “left behind.”
5. Underestimating the logistical demands of planting and running an ISM chapter, including tasks such as organizing weekly dinners for the whole chapter.

[Testimony of an ISM Chapter Planter](#) is posted on the [Collegiate Ministries website](#) with related resources for InterVarsity staff and student leaders.