



Chapter Planting in an International Student Ministry Setting

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Ready–Set–Go! You have “spied out the land” and as you write that four-page report of your findings, you realize, “The majority of international students on my campus are non-Christians—how will I build a chapter with no or few ‘missional Christians’? My students have many practical needs—what will it take to meet them? How can I make this work? How can I juggle the complexity of my ISM plant?”

The following paragraphs have been written with you in mind. They offer an overview of various ISM ministry models, observations on special dynamics of ISM chapters, and pointers for using volunteers. Our prayer is that this information will add to your chapter planter’s toolkit to assure that your ISM chapter will flourish through its many seasons of growth.

Ministry Models

Planting an ISM chapter is reminiscent of an International student who for the first time orders a salad at a MacFastFood: “What dressing would you like with that?” “Dressing?” “We have ranchfrenchthousandislanditalianhoney mustard.” Bewildering options or thrilling choices? In ISM it’s definitely the latter.

We all want the same “salad”—an international chapter that is characterized by *community, hospitality, evangelism, partnership and student leadership development*, as summarized in the ISM Vision Statement below:

*In response to God’s love for all people,
our vision is to establish and advance student-led international witnessing communities that
welcome international students and scholars,
introduce them to Jesus Christ and
help Christians grow as his disciples on campus and in the world.*

Yet, we have not just one but several ministry models that have proven to be efficient and effective in reaching Internationals. These models reflect the diversity of the international populations we serve and the variety of our ministry contexts. And here’s the exciting part: you get to choose (after prayerful consideration with your coach and supervisor) the one that best suits the needs of your campus.

Let’s take a look at the options. We have:

- *Classic international witnessing communities (IWCs)* with mostly international leaders, a model especially appropriate for grad students and postdocs. Examples of this type of chapter can be found at the University of Houston, the University of Kentucky–Lexington, and at North Carolina State University.
- *Integrated chapters* with many American leaders, a model often used with short term internationals and undergrads. This also includes undergrad or grad fellowships that incorporate significant numbers of internationals. These types of groups are present at the University of California–San Diego, the undergraduate chapter at North Dakota State University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the graduate group at Rice University.

- *Collaborative chapters* that come in two “flavors”:
 - Partnerships with other *parachurch* organizations and *churches* to offer a large or larger number of services and activities including a student-led fellowship for internationals. This collaboration may include only a handful of churches and groups (for example Case Western Reserve University) or may be an extensive, city-wide network (as is the case at Portland State University).
 - Clusters of ethnic-specific fellowships that come together periodically for worship, fellowship and special events on campuses with large numbers of internationals.

So how can you decide which one is right for you? As you write your initial campus assessment consider the availability of your target group, their openness to mix with others and your general ministry context. The questions below will help you explore these variables.

Availability

How long will students be around and how much time and energy can they give to launching a ministry? Here are some specific questions you can ask:

- *What is the academic standing among your students?* Are the majority undergraduates, graduates or postdocs? This will determine their length of stay and availability to be involved in the chapter. Some may stay for a few months, others for years. Undergraduates tend to have more discretionary time, while graduate students and postdocs face more demands. If you have many short-term or overwhelmed graduate students, you may need to start by building a core group of American students or community volunteers.
- *What is the family status among your students?* Are the students on your campus predominantly single or married? Do they have their spouse and children with them? This will affect not only the students’ availability but also their real and perceived needs. Spouses of students often have language and social needs that are best met in separate gatherings. Families with children require that the chapter be open to accommodate the little ones. Your campus fellowship may not be able to meet all their needs, and you may want to look to volunteers or area churches to serve those needs.

Openness to Mix with Others

While most Internationals state that they would like to build friendships with Americans, not all feel comfortable in a mixed group setting due to their limited English proficiency. Outreach to Hindus and Muslims tends to be more successful in ethnic specific groups without religious practices that are perceived as “Western.” Also, if you have a dominant ethnic group within your chapter, you may experience that your fellowship takes on the appearance of an ethnic specific group and may prevent others from joining. You may also want to think of how to create a setting where non-Christian internationals feel at ease in a group of Christians. Many internationals express that they feel especially comfortable in a home as opposed to an on-campus setting.

Ministry Context

It’s important to get to know and understand the campus culture as well as the resources and challenges ahead. Here are some questions to help you get started:

- Are there other InterVarsity chapters, parachurch organizations, or churches on or near campus with a vision for reaching out to Internationals? What are possible ways to partner with them? Are there any community volunteers to help with the practical needs of your students, or any American students who have a vision and desire to serve in an integrated chapter?
- Does the school have a large or small international student population? It is unlikely that a campus with 200 international students will develop multiple ethnic-specific chapters, whereas an integrated or classic IWC could do well.
- What are school officials’ attitudes toward Christian ministries? In ISM, the International Student Services Office has the role of a gate keeper. Pre-evangelistic, service-based activities (airport pickups, tours of the city for newcomers, temporary housing, English practice, to name a few) will gain the trust of the International Student Office; and once a

cooperative relationship has been established, the International Student Office can refer students and be instrumental in gaining the trust of other campus agencies. A word of caution: most international student offices are very wary of Christians working with international students. They think you are there for one thing only: to proselytize. Make sure that you have honest publicity (no picnics as “fronts” for an evangelistic talk). Serve international student genuinely and make your events known with no hidden agendas. Please check the Code of Ethics adopted by NAFSA: Assoc. of International Educators on the Web at <http://www.nafsa.org>.

As you are in this explorative stage, you may also want to consider a peer visit to a campus where the model of your choice is flourishing, especially if you have no experience with that model.

Also keep in mind that the ministry model descriptions presented above portray student fellowships that are already established, while you are just starting out. The models should serve as a long-term goal so you can develop an incremental building plan and make course adjustments as needed.

If you want to learn more about classic IWCs and the kinds of internationals who are attracted to the various types of fellowships described above, read the article *Witnessing Communities: an Introduction* located at <http://cms.intervarsity.org/ism/article/1727>.

A Dynamic Process

Suppose you have chosen a ministry model and are ready for the 4 Stage Launch Process (see Section 1 in the *Chapter Planting Manual* for a description, <http://collegiateministries.intervarsity.org/chapter-planting/chapter-planting-manual-version-3>). Just like NASA, you carefully prepare for the countdown but in the process encounter factors that require you to deviate from protocol. Likewise, in your ISM plant you will likely have to adjust chapter planting protocol by rethinking your core group, timeframe, numbers and ministry activities.

Getting Started

Let’s say you plant a classic International Witnessing Community (IWC). As mentioned above, you may have to work with a limited number of Christian internationals and it may first be necessary to disciple them and give them a vision for reaching out to their peers. Alternatively, the plant may begin with a few North American Christian students and a few internationals in leadership, along with a plan to phase the North Americans out of leadership as soon as possible—unless of course your classic IWC turns into an integrated model, in which case you work to develop strong partnerships among the leaders. Remember, it’s a dynamic process. And it takes time.

If your goal is the collaborative model, allow for even more time to build trust among leaders of different groups and churches and to work out the details of collaboration.

In addition to adjusting the time frame, you may also have to adjust the target numbers down, in order to reflect the limited pool of international Christians and a smaller international student population in general.

Role of Volunteers

Volunteers are necessary ministry partners for you. They are part of the Christian community you are developing to help you extend welcome and love to the international students on campus. Remember how in light of your students’ various practical needs you asked yourself, “How will I possibly meet those?” Well, you don’t have to. You work with a team of volunteers who are called by the Lord to partner with you in this area. While your students are here for a limited time, your community volunteers are with you long term—they may even outlive your colleagues and supervisors. Many international students are in need of airport pick-ups, short term housing, and help with English. Your volunteers have cars, homes, and language proficiency. International students arrive as guests; volunteers serve as the local hosts.

Where will you find volunteers? Churches are a perfect place to find them. Some of them will have served overseas in their professional careers, others have short term mission experience, and a few even speak another language. InterVarsity alumni with a love for the world make good ISM volunteers.

Volunteers are an integral part of your ministry. The time invested in building a group of volunteers who share your vision and who pray and partner with you will pay off by resulting in qualitative and quantitative chapter growth. In addition, you will probably find that your volunteers become not just your ministry partners but also your friends and a part of your family—your international student ministry family. Do not forget to have regular time (preferably once a year) to celebrate your volunteers and appreciate their influence and impact on international students.

Vision

As staff for a new ISM plant, you will need to articulate your vision for the kind of ISM ministry you are starting. What kind of community are you forming on campus? What is compelling and attractive about this community? Think of three audiences as you prepare to communicate your vision: a student group, a local church and a mix of Christians from different campus groups.

Ministry Activities

You've got your dream team and are ready for action. Read on for a few ideas to design your student leadership training and effective ministry activities.

Leadership Training

Internationals don't have a corner on the market when it comes to hesitancy to lead, but their reasons may vary from their American counterparts and include time constraints, self-perceived language deficits and worldview differences about leadership. Leadership training is crucial in planting an authentic *international* chapter and in preparing internationals to be world-changers here in the U.S. or upon return to their home country. Try the following ideas to encourage and build leadership:

- Get people involved in "one-shot" serving at first. Encourage them; tell them what they did well. Give up your desire to see things done perfectly. This is about developing people, not perfection.
- Provide training and support. Prepare Bible studies with leaders beforehand, but then have them lead the discussion. Follow up with constructive feedback.
- Refuse to do things such as leading worship, so students are "forced" to step up to the plate. For cultural reasons, some may defer to the staff or anyone they perceive as senior to them. Delegate and assign specific tasks to group members. Don't wait for people to volunteer.
- As staff you may need to "authenticate" internationals as leaders before the group by publicly expressing confidence in them.
- It doesn't hurt a classic IWC to have one or two North American student leaders, given they are culturally sensitive, do not dominate discussions and do not outnumber internationals on the leadership team. It is your responsibility to train North Americans to develop genuine partnership with internationals.
- The frequency, length and content of leadership meetings should take into account the needs of internationals and not necessarily reproduce an undergrad InterVarsity model. Do what works for your students and the chapter plant
- The Acts studies outlined in the *Chapter Planting Manual* are a goldmine for use with Internationals. A high percentage of the missionaries and leaders in Acts were bi-cultural people as a look at their names and study of their backgrounds reveals. This fact can encourage internationals who have been in the States a while. Even though being bi-cultural can be painful, God can use it greatly! And persons such as the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius and Lydia remind internationals that they can take the gospel back home and impact their families with it.

- In addition to developing student leaders, you will also have to envision a plan for training, retaining, and caring for community volunteers as they are an essential element of a successful NSO and a flourishing ministry.

Prayer

- Take a prayer walk across campus, focusing especially on the International Office and any international dorms.
- Encourage missional students to start praying for their non-Christian friends as soon as possible. You can model this by praying for these friends, with a reminder of confidentiality, of course.
- Be or get prepared to deal with students in spiritual bondage due to personal or parental idolatry. Prayer ministry training is highly encouraged.

Outreach Events

- Pre-evangelistic, service-based activities, such as airport pickups, tours of the city for newcomers, temporary housing and English discussion groups, are a crucial element for reaching internationals and for gaining the trust of the International Student Office.
- Many internationals are ready to study the Bible to improve their English and to learn more about American culture. Don't be afraid to ask them. Sign-up sheets for I-GIGs at campus orientation events have been very successful in recruiting internationals for Bible studies.
- North American students should be encouraged to participate in international student and country group associations as well as "campus friends" and "conversation partner" programs, both to grow in the cross-cultural skills as well as to gain access to the people the plant seeks to reach.
- Volunteers can be part of a university's "friendship family" or "international friendship" program. Especially at the beginning of the plant, volunteers can work through such an established structure before your ministry has gained momentum to offer its own friendship family program. Or you may decide that you want to continue to partner with the school's program.
- Holidays with a Christian background are a good time for pre-evangelistic and evangelistic events. They are also a good time to foster partnership with volunteers, area churches and other ministries.

Gathering Events

It is normal for ISM chapters to have a significant percentage of non-Christians. The usual range is 35 to 65 percent, and therefore every meeting should have an evangelistic element. To meet the needs of both seekers and believers, the following large group format is often adopted:

- *A joint meal* with food that internationals enjoy. Students can take turn cooking or volunteers can be encouraged to become "culinary missionaries."
- *Worship*, using songs in several languages
- *Small group Bible discussions*, some targeted for seekers and others for followers. These small groups also offer an ideal setting for training Christians in leading evangelistic Bible studies.
- *Short prayer times in small groups* where seekers are encouraged to ask for prayer or pray themselves and can witness others drawing before God.

Here are other considerations for gathering events:

- Create an environment where internationals can have a genuine conversation beyond "Where are you from?" and "What do you study?" Remind group members to take time to listen to a person's English and hear their story.
- Encourage students to invite newcomers back. Have enough greeters to engage newcomers and assign students to personally follow-up visitors.
- Arrange for group members to give people rides. Many internationals don't have cars and may be unfamiliar with the area.

- Create a sense of family and have plenty of fun. Interactive events make a group attractive to non-Christians. But be aware that your idea of “fun” may differ from your students’ expectations.
- Because most internationals study so hard, Friday night is ideal for both large groups and outreach events. Often the large group and small group meetings take place on the same night, starting out as a large group, breaking up into small groups, and concluding with large group fellowship.
- Delegate up-front responsibilities to internationals as this demonstrates that this is an international group, not a North American group for internationals—a key distinction.
- Share responsibility. The retention rate of seekers tends to increase if they are given a job in the fellowship. Possible “jobs” include keeping a birthday list or meal schedule, sending weekly email reminders, maintaining the group’s website, or participating in the worship team. Be creative in creating new jobs and niches for people.

Catalytic Events

A “catalytic moment” is when the lights go on in people’s minds. Missional students and faculty start to grasp the vision and begin to understand the idea of building a witnessing community. While catalytic *events* can be planned, catalytic *moments* often cannot; frequently they are serendipitous, engendered by the Holy Spirit.

Here are some ideas for creating catalytic events that will lead to catalytic moments:

- To accommodate the schedules of busy grad students and volunteers, a “Vision Day” as opposed to a weekend retreat may be as effective. Every effort should be made to get everyone in the core group—volunteers as well as students—to attend.
- Some fellowships have found “Urban Dips,” weekends doing urban ministry together, to be powerful evangelistically.
- Yearly evangelistic weekends with international speakers and internationals leading in all aspects of the retreat can be effective harvest events that also deepen commitment to the group. These seeker retreats can start out small and grow over time. Consult the Blue Ridge, Southern California or Cleveland ISM staff for ideas.

This brings us to the end of our somewhat extensive yet by no means exhaustive reflections on planting an ISM chapter. All that’s left is to welcome you into our ISM staff family. The ISM Department at the National Service Center and ISM staff around the country are available to answer further questions you may have. Our prayer is that the preceding paragraphs have clarified your theoretical framework for your ISM chapter plant and provide practical ideas to get you on the way.

Some Words about Planters for Coaches and Supervisors

After all these words about the “whats,” the mechanics and principles involved in an ISM chapter plant, a few words about the “who,” the chapter planter, seem in order. Here are some unique features of ISM work and ministry:

- *Hard work and long hours:* ISM involves becoming family to internationals, which means a lot of night, weekend, summer and holiday work. Sabbath (often Monday) must become a non-negotiable discipline for the staff to survive long term. Flexibility on the part of supervisors in occasionally excusing ISM staff from certain meetings can relieve a little of the time pressure.
- *Pressure from students to always be the leader:* Because certain internationals may want to defer leadership to the staff for cultural or academic reasons, some planters could be tempted to do too much of the work themselves, thus not developing leaders. Planters must be encouraged to push through resistance and get students to lead. This is so important that it bears repeating.
- *The need for good training and growth from experience.* The article *A Director’s Toolkit for Supervising ISM Staff*, which can be found online at:

http://www.intervarsity.org/staff/ism/resources/download.php?article_id=5835&version_id=7856, is a helpful collection of materials and is a must-read for ISM planters, coaches, and ADs. It is a collation of materials about ISM staff life and ministry that represents the experience of many staff, including several planters, over a number of years. The *ISM Staff Rhythm*, *ISM Staff Year at a Glance* and sample volunteer guidelines are especially helpful.

The qualities that suit a planter best are outlined in the *Chapter Planting Manual*. Because ISM ministry carries its own unique demands, here are a few characteristics needed for an ISM planter:

- *Teachability and humility*. Internationals often bemoan the superior attitude of Americans.
- *Cross-cultural experience* and solid knowledge of *cross-cultural communication* principles.
- *Strong relational skills* and the *ability to listen*.
- *Ability to build trust* and *form partnerships* with community volunteers, university officials and staff of other organizations.
- *Ability to engage internationals* including those with limited language skills and develop them as leaders.
- *Perseverance*. This work can take longer than an undergrad plant. You may even find yourself rebuilding your chapter from year to year if you work with short-term international students.
- *Flexibility and Ingenuity*. An ISM staff worker has to play many roles and interact with people from many cultures. Demographics of the international students at a given university and in your chapter can change from one semester to the next. What worked last year may be a flop the next, but it may also open opportunities for trying new things.
- *Prayerfulness*. Many internationals carry personal or relational baggage, including bondage, requiring preparedness for spiritual warfare.
- *Hospitality*. ISM work is relational and based on community and hospitality. Meetings may take place in the planter's home. While it is not necessary to rival Martha Stewart in the art of entertaining it is essential to open up one's home, to be willing to share one's life and, where applicable, to have a supportive spouse and family.

InterVarsity Resources

- ISM Website: <http://www.intervarsity.org/ism>. Hundreds of resources for staff, volunteers, and students reaching out to internationals including:
 - Articles on organizing new ministries: <http://www.intervarsity.org/ism/cat/39>
 - Foreign language Bibles, tracts, and multimedia sources: <http://www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/5342>
- ISM Staff Library: <http://cms.intervarsity.org/staff/ism/>. Dozens of resources just for InterVarsity staff.
- InterVarsity Store ISM Section: <https://store.intervarsity.org/staff/books-video-training/international-students>. Several ISM resources at staff prices including:
 - *Crossing Cultures Here and Now*: a booklet by Lisa Espineli Chinn. These 24-page booklets make great gifts for volunteers and students who are considering making friends with internationals.
 - *I-GIG Guide* (International Groups Investigating God). A step-by-step guide that internationals can use to lead outreach Bible studies.

InterVarsity Press Books (www.ivpress.com)

- *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures* by Patty Lane. This excellent book is not just for beginners.
- *Passport to the Bible* ed. by Fred Wagner. Twenty-four Bible studies written specifically for international students.

Additional Resources

- ACMI (Association of Christians Ministering among Internationals): <http://www.acmi-net.net>
- Connect with ISM workers in other organizations, find resources, and attend the annual training conference at the end of May each year.
- *Figuring Foreigners Out: a Practical Guide* by Craig Storti (Intercultural Press). "The ultimate self-instructional cross-cultural training manual."
- *Foreign to Familiar: a Guide to Understanding Hot- and Cold-Climate Cultures* by Sarah A. Lanier (McDougal Press)
- IFES (International Fellowship of Evangelical Students): <http://www.ifesworld.org>. Connect students with InterVarsity's sister groups in 150 countries.
- Open Doors: www.opendoors.iienetwork.org. Statistics on international students studying at US campuses.

Resources for Specific Peoples

- Chinese: Ambassadors for Christ (AFC): <http://www.afcinc.org>
- Japanese: Japanese Christian Fellowship Network (JCFN) <http://www.jcfn.org>
- Indians/Hindus: Institute of Hindu Studies at the US Center for World Mission <http://www.uscwm.org>
- Indians/Hindus: Rethinking Forum <http://www.rethinkingforum.com>
- Iranians: Farsi Christian Resources <http://www.farsinet.com/ici>
- Muslims: Answering Islam <http://www.answering-islam.org>
- Muslims: Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies <http://www.ciu.edu/muslimstudies>

[Chapter Planting in an International Student Ministry Setting](#) is posted on the [Collegiate Ministries website](#) with related resources for InterVarsity staff and student leaders