



Six Chapter Planting Essentials in the Commuter and Urban Context

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1 – PRAYER

Having an intercessory prayer team upon which the planter can call is critical for the success of a chapter plant. This can take the form of either a local prayer group or an email intercessory team. A planter needs to be consistent in “getting prayed up” and accessing the power of the Holy Spirit to be prepared for daily challenges. The sense of constantly re-starting on commuter campuses with an attrition rate that is beyond one’s control can be rather discouraging for staff. More experienced urban workers tend to be more aware of the challenging circumstances from which many of their students come, whether it be trouble with the law, mental illness, pregnancy, financial challenges, an extended family member’s illness, or responsibility to provide financial support for their extended family. Staff will feel their own need for God and for his miraculous power to be real in the lives of their students.

Receiving training in how to respond to and pastor students in such contexts is helpful. One training resource to consider is the Urban Youth Workers Institute (UYWI), begun by Larry Acosta (<http://www.uywi.org/>). Although this conference addresses work with high school students, the issues are quite relevant to those in the urban commuter context. Finding a local mentor who understands the issues of the community is also beneficial.

2 – VISION

Vision includes helping students understand that God has a purpose for placing them in a commuter setting and that they have a unique opportunity to communicate the gospel in this venue. Often commuter students feel that God can’t use them. Rather, affirm that God has called them there. Being at a commuter school is not just about marking time until the student gets to a four-year campus.

In this context, casting vision for the plant and refining the vision month to month is an ongoing task. At two-year colleges, where attrition rates may be particularly high or where students are absent for weeks or months at a time, it is necessary to recast vision continually, because tactics, strategies and the student body may change each semester or quarter.

3 – OUTREACH

Missional Christians can be challenging to find, and the nature of commuting often means that catching the same non-believing student twice for conversation is an impossibility. So one question planters on two-year commuter campuses tend to wrestle with is this: *“Given the challenge of finding emotionally mature, available missional Christians and the unlikelihood of finding the same non-Christian student twice on a commuter campus, shouldn’t I just focus on evangelism as a higher priority?”* Because a plant cannot be built on the backs of babes in Christ, the planter needs to focus on finding (and developing) missional Christians, especially in the earlier stages of the plant. Granted, targeting missional Christians may seem too limiting to the evangelist, but we want to develop a solidly rooted chapter plant that can have the capacity and structure to reach and care for larger numbers of non-Christian students in the future. The short-term priority of focusing on finding missional Christians with the ability to attract and lead others is not only strategic, but critical.

Another place to find missional Christians is in the surrounding community. Commuter campuses often have the support of many surrounding churches and the investment of local communities.

Identify supportive churches that have Christian students attending the commuter campus and build partnerships with them from the beginning. Is there another InterVarsity chapter or a Christian college nearby with whom you and your students can partner to create the first critical mass at events?

4 – GATHERING

Given the importance of building community within the commuter environment, finding a “gathering place” on campus is the first step to forming a group identity and developing ongoing friendships.

More often than not, commuter colleges do not have adequate places for students to hang out and build community. Hence, partnering with the school administration officials by building relationships, earning favor by following their procedures and assisting the administration when a student crisis arises is important to help secure and create space for meetings. When a group is smaller in size, some groups have found it possible to hold social gatherings in each other’s homes or off site at a local restaurant. But finding an adequate location for both informal hang out times and, later, a consistent place for large group meetings is important. Encourage students to go to one spot in the cafeteria where they can expect to find other group members; this is the place where friendships are formed.

Two-year commuter students may have more pressures in their lives because of home and church demands, but the advantage they have is that they are learning real life skills at balancing social life, work, church and school while still students. These already existing social networks may contribute to and support the missional community. This is an opportunity to grow in living out faith in a community with very diverse needs.

Hence, emphasizing the biblical basis of ethnic diversity and taking the opportunity to foster an attractive and inviting diverse witnessing community on campus can help call students to a greater mission. To provide “something bigger,” consider combining efforts with another geographically close commuter college. It is not uncommon for two or more geographically proximate commuter schools to share a large group meeting so there will a critical mass of students present. One benefit is that when student leaders are few in numbers at one school, there are students to draw upon from the other.

For many commuter schools, the better time to gather is earlier in the day Monday through Thursday from 11 a.m. – 4 p.m. before students leave campus for work or home. Because it may be more challenging for students to commit to more than one or two meetings a week, meetings may include many elements, such as prayer, Bible study and community building, as opposed to separate events for each sprinkled throughout the week and weekend.

5 – STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Impact of Student Turnover

In spite of high student turnover on commuter campuses, the chapter plant may grow very quickly (15 to 40 or 40 to 80) in a course of a semester. But with a high student attrition rate in urban contexts, planters continually need to give students ministry tasks in order to test for availability, faithfulness and skill. One of the uncertainties that comes with fluctuations in attendance is assessing when a group can move to the next stage. One measuring stick is to look at the leadership pool—how many are serving and who may be invited into leadership? The growth of this pool of students tends to be a more reliable determinant of the chapter stage than the number of students attending events. Define many short-term or smaller leadership roles, where students can try out new skills without making a “big” upfront commitment. Involve everyone in some capacity. This will create a sense of ownership of the group. Create many doorways for students to walk through and get involved in the group, and then provide many ways to be a leader.

On urban campuses, a number of students are dealing with intense personal and family problems and may not always be capable of multi-tasking at various levels, such as in a job, school and

ministry. It's important to teach and support these students in some basic life skills, such as being disciplined, going to class, being on time and taking pride in doing excellent work. On the flip side, they tend to be more capable of standing strong through adversity. Even for some students who are full-time, they may not be available to lead. Many are parents who need to work or put more effort and time into their academic studies, preventing them from taking on leadership roles. Planters need to be able to help students make wise life-choices—to prioritize attending classes and forming career goals. Sometimes helping students choose not to come to an event or not to lead is a healthier choice for them.

Just because a school is considered a commuter campus does not automatically mean turnover is higher. Some students take three or more years to finish two years of credit because they are working. Invest in freshmen and sophomores' growth, while encouraging them to take leadership roles. Staff need to continually invite students into growth and leadership.

Early in a chapter plant, identifying student leaders is primarily the task of the planter, as opposed to in latter stages where nominations, applications, interviews and a student committee may be involved in the selection process. Due to turnover, leadership selection may need to occur every semester as opposed to annually. A key question a planter may ask is *"When is a student eligible to serve in leadership?"*

One challenge on commuter campuses is that discipleship issues may appear more obvious. A lot of effort may go into "fixing the students' discipleship issues," and by the time significant progress is made, they may move on. There is no quick and easy formula for addressing these challenges. Staff need to know how to disciple while encouraging leadership simultaneously. In Stages 1 and 2, a good rule of thumb is to look and pray for missional Christians, but care for all who God brings along the way and challenge them to take the next step of discipleship in their lives. However, if the group has only a handful of missional students, while attracting 35 non-missional students, it may be time to refocus on finding missional students and to let go of the 35 (i.e., doing less to maintain care of the 35).

Appointment to chapter roles *should follow the stage of development of the group* in light of *the talents and spiritual gifts present in the group*. Developing a chapter structure based on what can be done *well* is more likely to draw more students than a group singing out of tune. If musical worship cannot be led well, hold off from attempting it. If God brings students who love Scripture and a strong inclination towards manuscript study, develop a small group strategy as the entry point for students. If God brings strong communicators, preachers and musicians, a large group strategy may be the way to go.

Jason Gaboury, area director for New York City, suggests that when there are 20 or more leaders (persons with a commitment to a defined role for a designated length of time), a plant can move to launching the chapter and mission. Here are some recommended numerical leadership goals for chapter growth in urban commuter contexts:

- One strong president and a few leaders on the leadership (exec) team (give students a sense that this is their group, not just the planter's)
- At least five leaders on the leadership team (enough students to carry the ball if some should drop out).
- Several affinity small groups¹ with specific functions—for example, a dance ministry team, evangelistic small groups, large group team, publicity team.
- A goal of 20 leaders.

¹ Note. In general, traditional InterVarsity-like small groups are not common in Pentecostal Black churches. The Bible is usually studied by the whole church body, rather than in individual cell groups, so as not to be divisive.

Power and Authority

In high power distance cultures, those who perceive themselves with less power tend not to speak unless invited into the conversation, and even then they will tend to defer to those perceived as having more authority or power. In low power distance cultures, everyone is expected to articulate his or her needs and preferences.

Students coming from a high power distance perspective will ascribe power and expect an authoritative staff presence. Korean American, Latino, Black and Caribbean students, for example, may refer to the staff worker as their Campus Pastor and expect their staff worker to preach, instruct, correct and be more directive in leading the group. For example, when working with Black students, the staff worker needs to come in as an authority. Staff workers who have the understanding that they are anointed ministers called by God can walk in that authority and can go a long way. They also see that this role warrants responsibilities. How Bible studies are led is key. If staff can effectively imitate the black preaching style, that's a bonus.

Immigrant and 1.5-generation students from high power distance cultures may find it more challenging to work with faculty, administrators and school officials to secure room reservations (particularly in urban systems where space is precious and not necessarily designed for easy access). Student leaders who are conflict-averse may shut down when they feel accused of not having it together, and although these students may never find such negotiation processes comfortable, the staff worker should model for them how to approach administrators, request what the group needs and "work the system" with confidence in a low power distance way. Jason Gaboury recommends that staff take the lead in superintending school administration relationships. This can build trust and strategically bring together campus committees, boards and local serving committees (constituencies outside of the college that are supportive of what is happening) who are peers with faculty and administrative officials and who may call upon the campus president on behalf of the group when there is a need.

While some staff may initially feel uncomfortable carrying authority because they come from a low power distance culture and feel the need to prove their authority, they will be more effective when working with high power distance students if they adjust their style and lead more directly.

Partnership with Local Pastors and Churches

Part of the role of the planter is to partner with local pastors and churches. It is not uncommon for church-committed students to be heavily involved in and leading worship or youth programs in their church. One of the challenges of the planter is to ask students to identify which ministry God is calling them to in this season. It is important to meet with the pastor (whether Black, Indian, Korean, Latino, etc.) to get the pastor's approval and blessing on the students' involvement in campus ministry.

Here are a couple of sample interactions:

With Black pastors of larger denominational black churches, emphasize that InterVarsity wants to mentor and develop their young people to be effective ministers of the gospel on campus. For historic black churches such as AME and COGIC, the perception of InterVarsity is that of a White evangelical community. Spend more time building trust. Their general concerns for students are similar to InterVarsity's—mentoring, leadership development, and empowering their young people to be effective on campus.

With Korean pastors, meet the pastor and try to get the pastor's approval and blessing on the ministry. In this hierarchical culture, it is a huge asset if you have or are pursuing a seminary degree(s) from his list of "approved" seminaries, you are male, or have the endorsement of a respected Korean pastor. If you run into a pastor who is not supportive, it is helpful to communicate that InterVarsity is not competing with his ministry. Describe what we are trying to accomplish in different terms. *"We're not trying to compete with your worship service. We are launching a mission on campus, not planting a church. We don't want all of your students to come*

to InterVarsity. If there are particular students you are investing in and developing, I'll respect your authority and defer. There may be others you are not grooming to be the next pastor or church leader who could be a blessing to our ministry if they have your blessing to serve in InterVarsity."

6 – CATALYTIC EVENTS

Large week-long campus outreach weeks may be an overwhelming task to "pull off" on a two-year commuter campus, unless one invites a neighboring school, friends from the students' churches and other community networks to invest in the event as well. Being able to draw upon already existing networks is a definite plus to working on commuter campuses. In most cases, adjust catalytic events to fit the size and scope of the commuter campus and to the number of core people in the chapter.

Commuter versus residential chapter plant stage progression (# of core students)

	<i>Stage 1</i>	<i>Stage 2</i>	<i>Stage 3</i>	<i>Stage 4</i>
	Core Group Gathering	Preview Gathering	Chapter Launch	Mission Launch
<i>2- or 4-Year Commuter</i>	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-60
<i>4-year Residential</i>	10-20	20-30	40-60	60-80

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[Six Chapter Planting Essentials in the Commuter and Urban Context](#) is posted on the [Collegiate Ministries website](#) with related resources for InterVarsity staff and student leaders.