

## *Chapter 7*

# CONNECTING WITH THE UNIVERSITY CULTURE

by Jim Musser

I once attended a conference for campus ministry planters where I sat next to a man in his early twenties who had just completed his first year at a university in Texas. He asked me how he should go about getting connected to the University, by which he meant getting his ministry recognized by the school, and learning how things work on campus—from how to reserve a meeting place to how to find a faculty advisor. I found it to be a strange question from someone who had been on campus for a year. But the more I thought about his query, the more it made sense.

You are likely reading this book because you have become interested in campus ministry through your experiences with it as a student, or perhaps through a campus ministry internship. You undoubtedly experienced times of deep conversation with other students or your campus ministers over coffee; small groups in which you bonded with other students through your mutual love for Jesus; and life-changing mission trips and retreats. These experiences led, in some part, to your decision to pursue campus ministry as a vocation, as it did for the young man mentioned above.

What he didn't realize when he started out (and you may not yet realize either) is that campus ministry involves far more than the personal interactions you have experienced. A lot had been done behind the scenes--of which you were not aware--that helped make your experiences possible. You may imagine yourself on campus studying the Word with students while sipping your favorite latte; having a room full

of undergraduates singing praises to the Lord and hanging on every word of your message, and sending students out equipped to proclaim the Gospel to campus and to the world. But first, like any good missionary, you have to start gaining an understanding of the culture into which you are entering. You have to figure out how things work, what the rules are, and who the key people are to assist in the success of your work. Long-term success for any campus ministry depends on figuring out how to operate effectively within the campus culture and structure.

This chapter examines how one goes about connecting with University culture, which is very different from student culture. The culture on which we will focus is the one of the administration and faculty. Student culture changes rapidly, with the entering and exiting of thousands of students each year, but University culture changes more slowly, with some faculty and administrators remaining on campus for decades. The reader should note that this culture varies dramatically from campus to campus. On a few, there will be such hostility toward followers of Jesus that you will not be allowed even to organize a ministry on campus (which is more likely at private schools than public universities), while small numbers of others will excitedly welcome you to their campuses. The responses of the vast majority, however, will range from suspicion to tolerance regarding what you are trying to do. At universities where the culture is hostile, you will have to work outside the campus, be willing to pay for using facilities if you wish to meet on campus, and seek innovative means to connect with students because you will not be allowed access to the same resources the University

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offers other organizations. On the majority of campuses, learning to connect with the culture will be a key strategy for success.

So how do you do that? Here are some ways:

### **Network with Other Campus Ministers on Your Campus**

A valuable shortcut to learning the ways of your campus culture is to connect with your new colleagues who will likely have a wealth of knowledge and wisdom to offer. Almost every campus has a group of campus ministers who meet together on a monthly basis and is usually recognized by the University and often relied upon to deal with the particular needs of students or the University itself. For example, the group I was involved with at the University of Kansas was often called upon to deal with religious groups that had elicited complaints from students or parents. And at Appalachian State University, where I currently serve, our group of campus ministers was called upon one year to assist in dealing with the effects of multiple suicides on campus.

Becoming a part of this group will immediately provide a connection to people who are connected with the University. They can provide you with a wealth of information on how things work, who many of the "players" are on campus, and what benefits may be available to you as a campus minister (e.g., identification cards, passes for parking, access to the university recreation center, use of the library, etc.). This group is likely your access point to any of these benefits, as most universities use these groups as a means to screen campus ministers and approve any benefits. This group will also often invite University personnel to their meetings, such as the Dean of Students or the Director of the Counseling Center. These can be excellent opportunities to



get to know influential people on campus, as well as meeting great resources for your ministry.

It was in our campus ministers' group at App State that I met the Dean of Students. Over the years I have gotten to know him and when I received a note from a student threatening to harm others and himself, he immediately took my call even though he was in a meeting. Knowing him paid off in a very big way for the University, for the student who received the help he needed, and for our ministry which gained additional respect in the eyes of the University.

This group, while not likely to consist of only Christians (Muslims, Buddhists, and advisors of any other religious group are generally allowed to be members), will provide you with the opportunity to meet a few brothers or sisters in Christ with whom you can develop relationships of mutual encouragement. Campus ministry can be a lonely endeavor sometimes and you will need all the encouragement you can get! But that is a topic for another chapter.

### **Get To Know Key Administrators**

I mentioned the Dean of Students above, and he/she is a key person with whom to become acquainted. First of all, seeking out the Dean communicates, "I want you to know who I am, and I don't have a secret agenda." Remember, many administrators, and particularly deans of students, are suspicious of religious types due to actual negative experiences they've had, or sometimes based on the stereotypes in their minds formed by the media or from looking out their windows at the preachers on the campus lawn. Taking the initiative to introduce yourself can allay some fears. This is also the person who is ultimately responsible for the students in your ministry. You may need

him/her in a time of crisis in a student's life or in the unfortunate circumstance of a student or parent complaint against you or your ministry. The more familiarity the Dean has with you, the more helpful he/she can be when the need arises.

Another administrator you need to get to know almost immediately is the one in charge of the clubs/organizations on campus. This person can help you navigate through the myriad of steps required to become and remain a "registered" or "recognized" organization. Without this status, you will have no free access to buildings and meeting rooms in which your group can meet. Every university is different in what they require. Most, however, will require a small group of students to start the process since clubs are for students. They will also likely require you to develop a constitution (Note: this will be different from your ministry's by-laws since it will need to include such things as a non-discrimination clause, selection process for student officers, etc.), which will then be submitted to a committee of students and/or staff for approval. For assistance, ask other ministers on your campus for copies of their constitutions to get an idea of what will pass muster with the powers that be.

The Reservationist is also a key administrator with whom to get acquainted. Most universities are short on meeting space and demand for rooms is high, so knowing this person can help you when you need space to meet. I can recall numerous times on both campuses I have served when knowing and having a good relationship with the Reservationist has served my ministry well. One time there was a mix-up with a reservation for our large group meeting. We arrived ready to set up and another group was already meeting there. I called the Reservationist and he quickly found us a different room in which to meet. Another time, an intern was to have made a reservation and, unbeknownst to

me, didn't. When I arrived, the room was dark and locked. Finding out we didn't have a reservation, I called the Reservationist, explained the situation, and he agreed to open the room for us. Knowing the Reservationist at your school can save you a lot of headaches!

If you are interested in doing ministry among international students, getting to know the director and staff of the International Student Office is crucial. Increasingly, Universities are wary of Christians interacting with students from other countries out of fear of proselytizing, so the better they know you and your ministry, the easier it will be for you to meet and minister to internationals.

### **Get Acquainted with Christian Faculty**

While getting to know a variety of faculty is good, it is important that you first become acquainted with Christian faculty for several reasons. First, to become registered as a club on your campus, you will need to have a faculty advisor who will be your group's

representative to the University. If there is a problem or complaint that comes against your ministry, the faculty advisor will be your liaison with the University. Having someone you know and who knows you can be crucial if this ever occurs, as it did with my

ministry a few years ago. A new professor filed a complaint about the noise of our large group meetings. Our faculty advisor was required to attend a meeting to sort out the issue and she helped defend our ministry against unfair charges and

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was successful in negotiating a solution because she was well respected on our campus.

Secondly, Christian faculty can be a great resource for your students. If they are struggling with a certain professor regarding matters of faith, a Christian professor can be helpful in counseling them on how to approach the situation. If they have an interest in a particular field and you know a faculty member teaching in that department, you can refer them.

Finally, you can be a source of encouragement for Christian faculty and they for you. Being a follower of Jesus Christ at an academic institution is difficult and Christian faculty often feel alone and isolated. For them, having someone on campus who is also a believer, but who is not a professor or an administrator, can be a significant encouragement because they can freely speak with you about matters of faith or struggles they are having. In the same way, knowing Christian faculty can be a source of encouragement for you because they understand working with students—both the joys and challenges. They also may be able to understand you and your work better than others in your church or community. My wife and I are best friends with our ministry's faculty advisor and her husband. They have been a great source of encouragement over the years, rejoicing with us when things are going well and empathizing with us when we are struggling.

If you are wondering how to meet faculty who are Christians, you can start with your colleagues on campus. They will likely know some professors who follow Jesus. You can also inquire of your local church contacts. It is likely some faculty attend their churches.



## Enroll as a Student

If you want to know about your campus, you ask students. They can give you information on all kinds of things related to the University—best professors, locations of buildings, best places to eat and the best food at those places. They know because they live it every day. So one way to become more knowledgeable about your campus is to enroll as a student, either by just taking various classes or enrolling in a degree program.

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After two years leading my first campus ministry, I still didn't feel like I knew the campus system as well as I needed. I had met some administrators and some faculty, but I just didn't have a full sense of how the University worked. So, I decided to enroll in a Masters program in something I was interested in—counseling. It was a way to learn about the campus from a student perspective, as well as make more inroads into the culture. An extra bonus was that it added to my skill set as a campus minister. My main purpose was to get better acquainted with the University system, so I chose the six-year plan for completing a two-year degree. One class per semester was more than enough to handle on top of my full-time responsibilities, but it was a great way to expand my knowledge of the various University entities, as well as giving me additional opportunities to meet more faculty and students.

## Make Yourself a Valuable Resource to the University

You are coming to campus with particular gifts and skills. You may have thought going in that you would use these solely for the benefit of your ministry, but you would do well to consider how they might benefit the campus as well. Another way to gain greater access to the University culture is to become a valuable resource within it. To do this, you must assess the various needs that exist on campus and then determine if you have the ability to meet one or more of them. If so, then put yourself out there. Offer to participate on a panel discussing cultural and religious diversity, to participate in training residential assistants on the religious resources available to their students, or to teach a Freshman Seminar class. Offer to pick up international students from the airport. Offer to help house visitors to campus, such as an international choir or guest faculty. Of course, your opportunities will depend on your qualifications and your reputation on campus.

My colleague at Christian Student Fellowship at the University of Illinois-Springfield, Gretchen Magruder, has used her violin skills to assist a needy University Orchestra, giving her the opportunity to meet students, faculty and staff, with whom she would likely have had no contact otherwise. Mike Armstrong, director of Christ on Campus at the University of Arkansas used his financial skills to serve as a paid consultant in the University's Treasurer's Office, as well as serving on University search committees for two different departments.

During my tenure at the University of Kansas, along with several other campus ministers, I was asked by the Dean of Students to serve on a judiciary panel investigating a religious group on campus about whom there had been many complaints. My colleague, Dave Embree, director of

Christian Campus House at Missouri State University, has served as an adjunct professor in the Religious Studies department for many years. And, until recently, there had been a long-standing tradition at App State for the campus ministers to assist with Freshmen Move-In at the start of each school year.

Becoming a resource to the University is another way through which you can heighten your impact on campus. Even with little experience, you can focus on smaller things, like providing rides and hosting, and then move on to bigger things as you gain more experience and acquire further knowledge and expertise.

### **The Importance of a Good Reputation**

An important thing to realize in building your network on campus is it will be for naught without a good reputation. What various administrators and faculty think about you as a person and how they view your ministry will go a long way in determining how effective you are in navigating the University culture for the advancement of the Kingdom. This does not mean you have to, or should, compromise on your beliefs or faith practices. Rather, it means being known as someone who has integrity and is kind. Although they may not always agree with you in matters of faith, politics, or other issues, if you have integrity in their eyes and treat them kindly, that will make your efforts on campus much easier and more effective. (Note: If you are working amidst a University culture that is hostile, this may make no difference whatsoever, just as it didn't for Jesus.)

"So how do I go about doing that?" you may ask. Good question! I believe the first place to start is to play by the rules and be good at keeping them. Now I know we

campus minister types can have a natural bent toward rebelling against convention, and you may tend towards that, but obeying the rules is important to establish yourself as trustworthy and may come to benefit you down the road when you mistakenly (or intentionally) break one. For instance, rooms are reserved for particular times. Students typically pay no attention to this fact. As purveyors of grace, it can be easy to allow your students to show up early to set up (because of their enthusiasm) and to stay late (because of the great fellowship taking place), but this is not what you agreed to and you cannot expect the University to give you a grace period each week. Doing so will just frustrate those in charge and damage your reputation

Once, I became aware that the individual overseeing the building in which our ministry meets was upset because our students were showing up early to set up. I had thought they had been given permission, but the student managers who oversaw the building were clocking in early and letting our group inside. They were using our students to justify a little additional time on the clock.

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Once I found out, I went to the man in charge and we re-established the time we were to arrive and depart. And when a student manager once again said it was okay to come in early, we declined in order to keep our word and maintain our reputation as a ministry that is cooperative.

I have known a number of campus ministers and ministries that had good connections with the University, but had less than positive reputations, not because of their beliefs, but because of the way they conducted themselves. When I was at the University of Kansas, there were several ministers and ministries that drew the attention of the University, but for all the wrong reasons. I have made it a point to develop



and cultivate the reputation my campus ministry and I have on campus. And I have found that the little things are important.

I make it a point to personally thank the administrators with whom I have contact for the work they do to make my ministry possible and for their care of the students within my ministry. I thank the Reservationist for reserving rooms for us and express appreciation for his work at least once a year. When I see the Dean on campus, I thank him for his work and tell him I am praying for him because I know his days are filled dealing with students in crisis.

I have found these little things can add up to a lot in one's working relationships with University staff. They help smooth over whatever rough edges exist or might be created. They can create opportunities for you to assist the University. And, more importantly, it is the biblical thing to do to treat others right and well.

### **Know the Culture**

Deep conversations with students, to impact their lives in eternal ways may be why you believe in campus ministry. After reading these words, I hope you see now there is a lot that has to happen to make that a reality on today's University campus. There is a lot of connecting with administrators, faculty, and your campus ministry colleagues, and there is a good reputation you must build in order to make your ministry effective. As campus ministers, we are missionaries to a particular culture—the University. Like any good missionary, one of our first priorities must be to get to know the culture and for the people in the culture to get to know us. And hopefully what we see are people who are loved by Jesus, and what they see are individuals who conduct themselves like Him.

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