



Getting Students to Show Up: Practical ideas for Any Outreach Event—from 10 to 10,000
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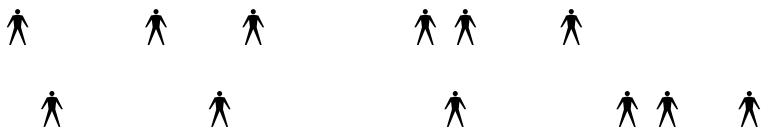
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where it all begins



Getting students to show up. That's where it all begins.

We can't always assume students will be there when the doors open. Some have no interest in coming through those doors. Sadly, some students don't even know the doors exist. In the last few decades, it's become harder and harder to get non-Christian kids to simply walk through the front doors of our ministries.

When I graduated from college, I volunteered for a church with the same dozen kids who showed up to our little program every Sunday. A church down the street had 200 students each week. Another church around the corner had just three students show up regularly. Why? And more importantly, what about the 1,485 teenagers on the campus down the street—the ones who weren't going to any church? Who was reaching out to them?

At that time I started wondering how we could reach those students. I'd quickly dream up events and programs for that purpose, but every time I gave the idea any further consideration, I was overwhelmed with questions:

- How do we invite unchurched kids to church?
- Why would they want to go to church?
- What are we doing that's worth inviting non-Christian kids to attend?
- Do we need to invite them or go to them?
- Is on-campus ministry the answer?
- Can we even do on-campus ministry?
- Is a big outreach event the answer?
- What kinds of events would really draw unchurched kids?
- How can we pull off an event like this?
- Should we start a weekly outreach program?
- What kinds of outreach programs work?
- How do we plan outreach events?
- How do we get non-Christian kids to even show up at these things?

I soon discovered there isn't just one answer to all of these questions, unfortunately.

But that was my problem—I was looking for “the” answer. Instead of finding my own answers, I was trying to find a quick fix for a huge need. That's like trying to find one accounting principle for eliminating the national debt. It isn't that simple.

That's when I met my friend, Jim.

Jim networked with youth workers from around the city. He introduced me to guys who ran teen centers that reached students who were looking for a place to just hang out. He introduced me to a family that ran a sports ministry reaching students on campus after school. He introduced me to churches that ran different outreaches reaching different types of teenagers. I must have met 50 different people running 50 different types of ministries reaching 50 different kinds of kids.

Which one was “the” answer?

None of them.

All of them.

And that's when Jim said to me: *Diverse ministries reach diverse groups of kids*. No one had “the” answer. But all of these ministries had answers. And slowly, my questions were being answered.

I discovered that if I put in the groundwork, some students would show up at church. Some students would show up at events. Some would show up at weekly campus programs. Some preferred off-campus programs. Some would show up in homes, some in garages, and some in teen centers. Some only responded to elaborate programs, and some didn't care, just as long as it was a place to hang out.

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT SHOWING UP

Getting students to show up was only the beginning. Many of these ministries not only shared Christ with students, but they also plugged them into the local church body, disciplined them, and equipped them to reach out to others.

After we get teenagers in the door and reach out to them with the truth, then we can apply what we've learned in all of the other youth ministry books we've read: Discipleship; student leadership; worship; prayer; planning the purpose for our youth group; small groups; mission trips; those diagrams shaped like pyramids, pies, and targets with numerous key components of ministry; and the three-column charts representing three different elements of ministry (e.g., evangelism, discipleship, and service). These are all great tools to help us help teenagers grow in their faith.

I've seen some incredible ministries with a simple, two-fold approach: **Outreach** and **spiritual growth**. Everything these ministries did was about one or the other. They not only ran outreach activities and events and won people to Christ, but they also provided opportunities for students to grow in their faith through one-on-one discipleship, weekly programs, and in-home fellowship groups. Students at these churches were being reached for Christ *and* growing in their faith.

But none of these good things will necessarily get students to walk in the door. So we're back to square one: *How do we get them there in the first place?*

It all starts with groundwork that helps us initiate first contact. That's what this book is all about.

LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES

A wise person once said, "Learning from our mistakes is a good thing." But a wiser person added, "Learning from someone else's mistakes is even better."

Many of the chapters in this book provide you with an opportunity to learn from the countless programming mistakes that I and other youth workers have made over the years. You may feel a little of our pain just reading about them, but

hopefully you'll do more than that. My desire is that you'll learn to *steer clear* of these blunders and avoid experiencing the same consequences firsthand.

No worries—I won't just abandon you to hash out these poignant yet catastrophic tales. I've also provided some helpful planning methods, along with examples of programming successes. You'll get a glimpse of outreach programming that *gets students to show up*.

I pray these failures and successes—along with a few tidbits of knowledge I've learned along the way—may be of some assistance as you plan future outreach programs, activities, and events that will make an impact for the kingdom. Enjoy!

—*Jonathan*