

Campus Ministry

These are the first of several articles on how our different outreaches are responding to the Covid 19 realities as they return to campus ministry. We asked:

- What is the school's approach to letting students back on campus, how classes are delivered, and any other major changes in how things are done?
- What is working best for your outreach to new students?
- What is the biggest shift (emotional, relational, mental, worldview, openness) that you have seen among students and what difference does it make?

The University of Central Florida

from Br. Adam Neri in Orlando, FL

The overall effect of doing ministry in these times is that while our tactics are changing to meet the needs, the heart of our core convictions and the “why” of our ministry is stronger than ever.

The UCF campus has mainly freshmen on site. Fewer than 10% of their 69,000 students live on campus and these are mostly freshmen. Less than one quarter of classes are offered on campus. The rest are online. While a large portion of our students

are present in person, there is a significant percentage that never returned to campus after the COVID outbreak.

In preparing for our campus mission at Catholic Campus Ministry at UCF, our staff had a driving spiritual conviction: Isaiah 43: Fear not... I have chosen you... This is my initiative....I am doing a new thing.

We set out to balance prudence about restrictions and precautions with ways to stay on the offensive.



We decided to maximize technology where possible, not because it is our forte, but because it is our reality. We are finding ways to do what our ministry instincts tell us is possible.

An example: doing one event that is live in one room and streamed to others in different rooms in the same building, and simultaneously to a virtual audience at home, with all groups able to interact with each other. Community is essential to us, and students need to not only see each other but also have the opportunity to engage each other. While technology has its limitations, we have found that we are able to do the things that characterize our way of life—worship, solid

teaching, fellowship—while serving our local and remote populations.

Another shift we made was to deploy our students differently. We started fire-teams of small groups of students working together in doing outreach. These small groups deploy all over campus and into apartments and houses to take the Gospel to as many as possible, according to UCF guidelines. We have engaged them to find resourceful and effective ways to do ministry to their peers, rather than leave the initiative primarily with the staff. For this to be effective, we also pushed leadership down to the ground level. It has both challenged us all as a community and emboldened student leaders to emerge who may not have previously had the chance. And it's working! Our students are reaching new people weekly in clever and creative ways.

We have found students on campus to be receptive. They have the typical attitude of being “open to something new” but it isn't quite like before. There are many who aren't mainly looking to throw off caution and do “wild and crazy.” While there still are plenty who want the “typical college experience,” many others are more open to examining faith and truth and belonging.

Even more, we have found that new students are hungry for community. They have lived in enforced isolation for most of the last six months but being on campus isn't much better.

The University of Michigan

from Steven Maier in Ann Arbor



The approach of the University of Michigan to Covid-19 was to only allow single rooms in the dorms, most of which are occupied by freshmen. Classes are 75% online. Masks are required on campus at all times. A lot of people are outdoors (as long as the weather holds.) Meals are brown-bag and can't be eaten in the cafeterias, but tents and tables have been set up. Campus housing socializing and events have been severely restricted. There is no dorm life. Students are hunkered down in rooms by themselves and many are isolated 24/7. Most students are cooperating, some are complaining.

But we have a lot to be grateful for. The infection rate has been very low. Those who have temperatures or just don't feel good self-quarantine, which has allowed the university to keep students on campus and within easier reach.

How do we share the gospel when people are afraid to share the same air? Our

response in UCO has been to restructure. We can't do large group meetings, which eliminates many of the events our students normally can invite new people to attend. It has forced us to rethink our "reach" work and actually do relational rather than invitational evangelism. As a result, most of our students are learning how to do mission in a more personal way. We hope this will allow the Lord to better equip them to do this for the rest of their lives.

Before, we led with "Would you like to join a bible study?" Today, we're going out on campus in "small communities" of less than ten people and playing games, or just having ice cream together where students are and inviting others to join us. Over time, these groups will transition to more personal sharing and an eventual pattern of studying scripture together.

We still have to do the inviting, but it isn't to join a bible study, it is to join in what we are doing right here and now. Many of our encounters with students have gone something like this: They walk by and slow down. Their eyes say, "I really want to join you. Life on campus is so isolated. There are no natural environments for me to make friends." But when we ask them what their names are, their mouths say, "Well, I, uh..." We jump on that response. "Hey, we're about to start a new game. Sit down and join us!" The offer is quickly taken up. The incoming freshmen are hungry for friendship and don't

have many places to find it. Call it social distancing if you want but it's really social demolition.

As staff, the main thing we are doing is helping our students bring others into their "small community" relationships.

I'm seeing our first semester sophomores learning how to do mission in a way I didn't until I was in my senior year. They do the initial work and then have to figure out the next five steps—all of which are relational. We already see that they will need to know how to go deep on their own. It won't be something they hand over to the seniors or staff to do.

We also have more relationships now with people who have never heard the gospel and have no interest in anything spiritual, but they are human beings and want friendship. On a lonely planet humans crave human contact.

In some ways, the biggest cultural shift isn't taking place among "them"—it's taking place among us! We are learning to reach out to a far more non-believing crowd than ever. We are learning to love the strangers in our midst. It also means we have to win the right to be heard more than ever, and we still don't know how we will do high impact events that lead to deep conversion when we can't do events, but God has led us into this new place and isn't about to leave us stranded. A new season brings new graces.