

Compass, Telescope & Tour Guide:

Lessons Learned in Student Mobilization

Claude Hickman

God has allowed us to have an enormous amount of contact with students over the past seven years. After 150,000 students and 1100 campus meetings I feel like we're finally learning some things about mobilization. Students are changing quickly and so are the influences on them, such as media, parents, peers, and music. Here are a few glimpses of what we've learned.

Over-choice

"Over-choice" is a term that Alvin Toffler coined and that Paul Borthwick has applied to this generation of students. I couldn't agree more. Some students won't ever find their way to the right path God has for them, not because of disinterest or disobedience, but because of debilitation – the paralysis caused by too many options.

Many students enter an Urbana missions convention with 800 agencies all promising them the biggest and best opportunities, all doing meaningful work, all with a great brochure and a free Frisbee. They leave with a plastic bag-of-options feeling kind of paralyzed. I assume many dump the whole bag in the trash at O'Hare Airport on their way home because they feel too overwhelmed to make a decision.

With the whole world before you and a passion to reach it, where do you dive in? The problem is not the number of agencies or opportunities – it's really in this generation's theology of God's will and sovereignty. Many have an understanding of God's will to be this magical *one* path: if you miss it, there's no second chance and you are forever doomed to regret missing the destiny you were meant to have. Choosing one path seems like leaving behind several other great options. That is why keeping your options open is such a high priority and why fitting yourself somewhere into God's global plans seems like an overwhelming task.

We must help students in several ways:

1. When it comes to short-term opportunities, agencies, churches, and student ministries can assist students by offering clearer descriptions and fewer options.
2. We can explain that with the help of the Bible, prayer and godly counsel they can make decisions confidently and without fear that they're going to thwart God's will for their life.
3. We can give students principles – a compass instead of a map. Urbana can give them the maps, but mobilizers need to give them the compass. I think the biblical theology of God's purpose for the nations and every believer's responsibility to live a strategic "world-Christian" lifestyle can be the "magnetic north" that this generation needs. Mobilization should include less of our "favorite mission-trip" stories and more of God's One Story. (For example, take a look at materials on www.thetravelingteam.org or at Jeff Lewis' Bible study, *God's Heart for the Nations*.) A map will only take you places other people have already explored and marked out. A compass will lead you to your destination, but you may have to pioneer the path yourself. That is the kind of Pauline vision (Rom 15:20) required for this generation to finish the evangelization of the world.

Authenticity

This generation can smell advertisements, hype or agendas quickly. They are not impressed by

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the best marketing or gimmicks. Mobilization must move away from the feeling of “selling” and more toward an attitude of “inviting.” We must be authentic and invite others to the life we’re currently living.

Students might idolize the worship bands and speakers that bounce across the country in tour buses and airplanes, staying just long enough to brush a few hands on their way to their next gig – but students would trade all the superstars for a father, a transparent, loving person whose life they can watch, enter into, and learn from. They desire people close enough to rebuke them for error and to hold them accountable to their convictions.

Real is cool. You don’t need to get square-toed shoes and a Von Dutch hat. If you haven’t noticed, the “reality television” show is crushing everything else because students are sick of “actors.” This generation wants spiritual mentors who give them the freedom to be “in process.” Since we’re *all* “in process,” sharing our struggles in the World Christian journey is the greatest way to win attention and respect from students. They recognize the courage it takes to be vulnerable, and they will run to those types of leaders.

In mission mobilization we must become tour

guides instead of travel agents trying to sell students a ticket to a place that we’ve never been. If you no longer struggle with praying for the world daily, then at least talk about a time in your life when you did. Authentic mobilization involves less of the “you go” and more of the “come with me” in our communication and interaction with students. Watch Dorothy in the *“Wizard of Oz”*: she’s magnetic, not because she is the strongest and bravest, but because she’s taking the journey herself, come what may.

Making Long-Term Commitments “Incrementally”

In the past, missions commitments were for a lifetime: “Who will come forward and commit their life to missions?” Today young people are making smaller, incremental commitments back-to-back, sometimes leading to 10, 30, or 40 years of service. If we look broadly and add up the smaller segments of commitment, we see that this generation is capable of being committed to a *vision* for a lifetime – but maybe not to a *venue*.

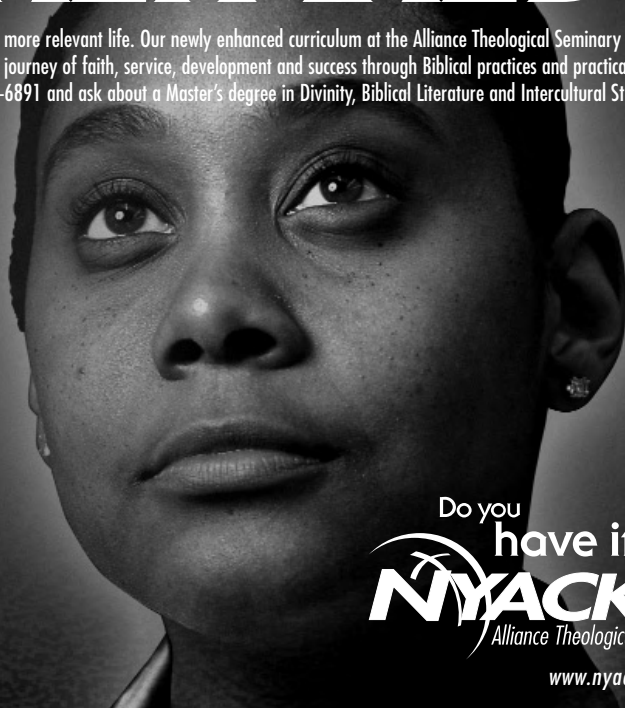
We can glean at least two important lessons from these observations. First, we must allow students to be “in process,” and we must offer various points of entry as well as progressive steps. Some

students go overseas for a summer or a year and check off overseas service from their to-do lists for a lifetime, assuming they’ve done their duty – especially when their sending agency or ministry offers no next steps for them to take. This is why our goal in The Traveling Team has always been a holistic one – to raise up World-Christians who are praying, giving, going, welcoming internationals and mobilizing others. If students only see missions as going, they will not see the strategic lifestyle choices that can keep them involved during seasons they are not overseas.

Second, thorough *follow-up* is essential to mobilization. The Traveling Team places a high value on follow-up in all that we do. After we speak

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to a group we will re-visit the campus the next day to meet one-to-one with students. Each student that we meet with individually gets several follow-up e-mails from us personally, a follow-up e-mail from our office once a month, an e-mail from agencies that we partner with, and guidance through the “12 lessons” on our website as continued development. In one month that student may get 11 “touches” from us, 11 reminders to keep moving in the process. It’s like physics – it takes the greatest amount of energy to get an object moving from zero to one, but once it’s rolling, momentum takes over. The job of mobilization is usually taking people, especially students, from zero to one. Students can go from zero to one, but it requires consistently-applied energy and follow-up to keep them moving. If it takes 3-5 years from initial exposure to a “missions decision,” then where are the people coaching these potential world-Christians along the way? A few people must say, “I’m going to invest my life in mentoring a few faithful men or women into a world-Christian vision.”

I’ll Go Anywhere As Long As You Go With Me

The importance of community among students is something that is radically changing the dynamics of short- and long-term work in missions today. Television gives us a great insight into the shared values of a generation. Shows like *90210*, *Friends* and *Seinfeld* in the last decade demonstrated that young adults can go through anything in life as long as there is a small community of relationships to provide social strength.

I think that this generation is asking the question “*Who* is going?” long before they ask “*Where* are we going?” I’m not talking about peer-pressure but a deeper need for a team or community.

For example, mission agencies that offer team approaches and clear descriptions for summer trips are seeing an increase in student participation. Though this may take more effort for agencies, the payoff can be great. We recently saw



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an agency put together a one-year team to India as prelude to what they hope will be long-term work there; the team came together quickly, and two married couples from the team have committed to lead that work long-term.

The Telescope

Because of “overchoice,” I’ve begun to give students a principle-based approach to finding direction from God on their journeys. The process encourages decision-steps in an important order to ensure meaningful Great Commission decisions and to protect against selfish distortions. I call this approach *the telescope*.

In this telescope the first lens we look through is *leading*. (When I say *leading* I do not mean that some feel “called” to missions and others are not called. We missions mobilizers get on-edge when you start using this kind of language because we maintain that everyone is called to be on mission with God in reaching the nations. We are all commanded to *go* – leading just tells us where to *stop*.) Two main “leading” factors to start with are 1) a religion group or 2) an area of the world. Many times the decision-lens of leading must be discerned by experience, which is why every believer should determine to take at

least one meaningful short-term mission trip in his or her life. God clarifies in the midst of obedience, not beforehand.

We get clearer direction from the second lens of the telescope, namely, by asking what service is *strategic*? The strategic lens is what ensures that we are not “building on another man’s foundation” and that we are “finishing the race and completing the task” of reaching the unreached peoples of the world.

The strategic lens asks questions such as “Where in the area or religion group (first lens) is the most strategic place I can be used?” or “Where is the greatest need for the gospel or greatest opportunity for its spreading?” (You might feel the Lord “leading” you to Fiji – “Yep, I can see myself there.” But that might not be the most strategic in reaching the unreached. I may want to work among Muslims, but just because there are Muslims in

Kansas doesn’t mean that’s the most strategic place to reach them or that it will impact the unreached peoples of the Muslim world.) *Leading* is gained mainly by experience, and *strategic* may be gained by education.

The third lens I call “*gifting*.” This is the question “Can God use my talents, career, degree, or skills to serve in this strategic area where I feel Him leading me?” Right here is where most students err because they want to flip the tele-

Students may be tempted to look through the telescope backward.

scope – they want to look through the lenses backward. Steve Hawthorne once related to me a long conversation he had with a young lady seeking various ways she could use her Spanish-language skills among unreached peoples. After Steve had exhausted his knowledge of possible unreached people groups in South America, etc., he finally challenged her, “Why don’t you stop telling God what you want to do for Him – and begin by asking God what He wants you to do?” Students can’t look through the telescope backwards or they get a very narrow, limited view of how God may want to use them.

Finally we encourage students to look through the *agency* lens: what mission agency or sending entity can train and send me to this area, whether using my academic degree or not? Once again students may be tempted to look through the telescope backward if they know of only one agency (which many do). It’s good to prompt students to become familiar with several agencies so that direction is based on choice and not default. 🌐

To read a fuller version of this article, go to www.thetravelingteam.org/2000/articles/mobarticle.pdf

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