Leading a Successful Missions Trip in Your Discipline

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Abstract

The global missions community goes wanting for skilled workers in almost every discipline. However, even students at a Christian institution that emphasizes global engagement remain largely unaware of the impact they can make in missions by leveraging their own academic specialty. In this paper, we draw on our experience leading discipline-specific missions trips as a means to encourage students to reframe their thinking about personal involvement in missions.

We discuss the need for students to experience missions firsthand, and the student outcomes we have observed in intercultural awareness and spiritual formation. A key student outcome is an increased willingness to consider vocational missions service in both internships and full-time service after graduation.

We also offer practical guidance for faculty or staff interested in leading discipline-specific missions trips with their students. Although our experience is with Computer Science missions trips, the majority of the material here is applicable across academic disciplines.

Key ideas: global engagement, discipline-specific missions, integration of faith and discipline, cross-cultural interaction, student outcomes, practical guidance.

1   Introduction

All Christians are familiar with the Great Commission:

> Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.[1]

Unfortunately, many Christians have a very narrow view of the Great Commission as a vocational calling, thinking it applies mostly to full-time evangelists, church planters, and Bible translators. Students share this narrow view. They are quick to assume that missions is only for "super Christians" having skill sets that they will never possess.

Of course, this narrow view could not be further from the reality on the ground. Modern missions organizations are not fundamentally different from any other organization in their need for people gifted in leadership, management, logistics, finance, analytics, marketing, publishing, communication, personnel, training, technology, and a host of other areas. In short, anyone with expertise of use in a secular organization is someone with expertise of use in a missions organization.

An effective antidote to this narrow view of missions is participation in a missions trip. Particularly for college students, who are forming their vocational goals and aspirations, a missions trip

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[1] Matthew 28.19-20, NIV

can provide the impetus they need to expand their vocational planning beyond the almost purely economic goals emphasized by contemporary culture.

2 Types of Missions Trips

All missions trips should:

- Share the redemptive love of Jesus with a needy world.

- Minister to the spiritual and physical needs of the people being served.

- Welcome new Christians into the family of faith.

- Grow the vision and faith of trip participants through service and fellowship.

Beyond these general goals, however, there is considerable variation among missions trips, particularly as found in Christian higher education. In this section, we discuss three types of missions trips: *general-service*, *discipline-specific*, and *vocational*.

2.1 General Service

A *general-service* missions trip is open to students from any discipline. Work in the field—although valuable—is only accidentally related to the academic specialty of team members, although team leaders often have specific expertise. The key advantage of a general-service trip is that nearly anyone can be usefully engaged on the field, regardless of past experience, class standing, or declared major.

Typical focus areas for general-service missions trips include evangelism, vacation Bible school, music, drama, maintenance and construction projects, and public health education (e.g., infant care, clean water, sanitation, HIV).

2.2 Discipline Specific

A *discipline-specific* missions trip is normally restricted to students with a particular ability or those taking particular classes. Trip leaders are usually experts in the discipline. In contrast to a general-service trip, a discipline-specific trip can leverage the common interests and abilities of the team to provide focused ministry and service on the missions field.

Examples of discipline-specific missions trips include: a musical group collaborating with a local evangelistic outreach, a sports team that teaches kids their sport and their Christian worldview, a Christian Education class that helps a local church develop Sunday school curriculum, or an environmental science class that drills water wells and builds cisterns to provide clean water in a remote location.

Note that although participants in such trips have expertise in the same discipline, they need not all be in the same academic major or on the same vocational path. For example, not all members of a choral group are necessarily music majors. Nor must students in a general-education Geology class be planning careers as well drillers.

2.3 Vocational

A *vocational* missions trip welcomes students with a specific vocational calling, allowing them to engage their academic specialty *directly* in a missions context. The specificity of a vocational missions trip is key. In a discipline-specific trip, students from many majors may share an ability in music or be taking the same elective class. However, a vocational missions trip enlists students in the same (or closely related) majors to use *that specific discipline* on the field.[2]

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[2]Another name for this type of trip might be a *major-specific* missions trip.

Examples of vocational missions trips include: business students working on a micro-finance program in a developing country, pre-medical students providing medical services at a mission, or Computer Science students developing computer software for a mission.

A vocational missions trip provides students with the most robust vision for how they could apply their own skills and gifting to serve *directly* in missions as a vocational calling. Take just one example. In our on-line, cloud-based, mobile-enabled, global technology ecosystem, the need in missions for skilled workers in Computer Science (CS) and Information Systems (IS) has never been greater. At Taylor, our CS and IS students have ample opportunity to apply their skills to missions computing while on campus through both class and volunteer projects. But it's when students experience *on-site work with full-time missions technologists* that they develop an understanding and a vision for how they can contribute vocationally to missions by leveraging their own skill and passion.

In this paper, our focus will be on discipline-specific and vocational missions trips. We draw on our experience leading two vocational missions trips.

1. Operation Mobilization (OM), Carlisle, England, 2011. Computer Science students developed features for Open Petra, an open-source Enterprise Resource Planning system that OM uses to operate its mission.

2. Logos Hope (OM's missions ship),[3] Hong Kong, 2013. Computer Science and Media Communications students developed a web-based, database-backed, on-board information system for the ship's company.

3 Success

We're interested in leading *successful* missions trips. Here we consider missions trip success from two vantage points: the *mission* and the *student*.

3.1 Mission Success

At trip's end, the mission should be better off than when the team arrived. To help ensure this outcome, identify a stakeholder within the mission who will help you select an appropriate project in advance of the trip and who will champion your trip within the mission. There are many additional subtleties in leaving the mission in a better state after your trip. We recommend the text by Corbett and Fikkert [?] for a thorough discussion of "helping without hurting."

Of course, measures of success will vary based on your discipline. As examples, our key measures of success for Computer Science missions trips are these:

1. Improved software functionality within the mission

2. Additional skills or expertise gained by missions technology staff

3. Additional tools and resources provided to the missions staff to help their ongoing work

4. Accurate and complete documentation of student deliverables

5. Clear understanding of post-trip interaction with students or our institution

6. Better connections between missions technologists and the "outside world"

7. Missions staff encouraged by exposure to student enthusiasm and energy

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[3]http://www.gbaships.org/

Measures 6 and 7 are surprisingly important. Most missions technologists operate under severe resource limitations compared to their peers in the commercial world. Compounding this challenge, the technology role in which they serve tends to be undervalued by missions outsiders, sometimes even including supporters. For such missionaries, interaction with a vibrant student team that understands intuitively why the missionary's work is important can be a huge morale boost.

3.2 Student Success

For the student, a successful missions trip results in academic growth, cultural growth, spiritual growth, and changed attitudes.

Academic Growth   Criteria for academic growth depend largely on the specific discipline in which students are engaged. For Computer Science trips, we look for the following indicators of academic growth:

- Interacted with stakeholders in the design, implementation, testing, and deployment of a software system. Coped well with stakeholders who: had a different cultural heritage, spoke a different language natively, employed a different style of communication, had different interpersonal relationship expectations, etc.

- Rose to novel changes not normally found in the campus lab or classroom (e.g., limited Internet availability, non-functional mobile device).

- Demonstrated flexibility by working on novel applications (e.g., scripture translation, non-profit resource planning, shipboard operations).

Other disciplines will have other academic success factors. All disciplines will find that success in the missions context will look very different from success in the classroom, in the lab, or in a domestic internship or practicum.

Cultural Growth   Whether domestic or international, the majority of missions trips cross a student's cultural boundaries. The successful student is willing to engage the new culture. Prior to the trip, he or she will devote effort to learn the new culture's history and geography and obtain rudimentary language skills for the area. Real opportunities for growth, however, only appear when the trip is under way. Students grow by embracing the sights and sounds of unfamiliar places, the smells and tastes of unfamiliar foods, and the social practices of unfamiliar peoples. After returning home, a student should be able to contextualize the cross-cultural experience relative to their home culture. Many students have had limited international experience and uncritically see their home culture as "right" or "best." A key success factor is their willingness to escape this parochialism and see themselves in a global context.

Spiritual Growth   For anyone involved in Christian higher education, our ultimate goal is the spiritual formation of our students. Missions trips are often "mountaintop" experiences for students. That's good, but we also want students to experience long-term spiritual growth.

To seed spiritual growth, encourage students to *prepare their hearts* in advance of the trip. The main focus of a missions trip should be the *mission*—it's for the benefit of the unreached people students will encounter. Academic outcomes should take a back seat to the mission itself.

Students have the opportunity to grow in their *flexibility* toward God's providential will. Not everything will go according to their plan—or yours. On our trip to write software aboard the Logos Hope missions ship, we arrived in Taipei, Taiwan, where the ship was scheduled to arrive the next day. While we waited in baggage claim, we learned by e-mail that the ship had experienced

mechanical problems on her voyage from Hong Kong to Taiwan, and had returned to Hong Kong for repairs![4]

A missions trip makes manifest each team member's comfort zone. As one student wrote about his first missions computing trip:

> Students do not understand that their "comfort zone" is intentional, not something to be avoided; while they may be able do anything, some of their skills are better than the rest. Breaking students out of their comfort zone is moot; breaking them into their "ability zone" is paramount. Upon arrival, they will be able to develop and deploy God-given talent.

Thus, one measure of growth is *identifying and occupying* one's "ability zone." Conversely, once their comfort zone becomes clear, students also show growth in their willingness to *move out of their comfort zone.* They have an opportunity to experience the blessed uncertainty of living life with room for the Lord to show up.

Students also exhibit growth by willing *participation in ministry* on the field. On the Logos Hope, for example, every member of the ship's company devotes one day in seven to direct ministry, either aboard or on shore. We found that many of our computing students—natural introverts—were anxious about this aspect of the trip. In a post-trip reflection paper, one student wrote:

> During this trip, I truly loved my opportunity to work along side the crew in the ship bookstore. I was able to experience what it was like to work alongside others from different countries and serve the visitors from Hong Kong. When I first started the day off, I felt a little out of my comfort zone, but by the end of the day I was not only making announcements over the PA system, but I was talking to some of the visitors who came aboard the ship.

By praying together in advance of their missions days, and debriefing together afterwards, we found that everyone overcame their nerves and enjoyed the ministry experience.

Changed Attitudes As mentioned in Section 1, missions trips can help reverse the misconception that missions is the exclusive purview of a small group of specialists. Following a missions trip, students may exhibit one or more of the following new attitudes regarding the relevance and applicability of their discipline to global missions.

- Student recognizes the need for their academic discipline in missions.

- Student works with a missions organization for a college internship or practicum.

- Student includes missions as a live possibility in their post-graduate career planning.

- Student is more willing to support (financially and in prayer) missionaries working in his or her discipline after graduation.

- Student takes a full-time position with a mission upon graduation.

4   Guidance

This section presents guidance that we have found particularly helpful as we have led two international vocational missions trips.

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[4]Yes, we caught up with the ship a couple of days later in Hong Kong.

4.1 Planning and Preparation

1. *Determine the size of your team.* Know in advance the size of your team. Some institutions set a minimum size, below which the trip is deemed "not worth it." The upper limit on team size is more likely to come from your missions partner, depending on the numbers they can house, transport, and feed. Be sure to include yourself and other team leaders in your count.

2. *Choose team leadership.* Choose the best leadership for the trip. It may be just you, or it may be a team. Our school encourages married couples to co-lead trips so that one partner doesn't accumulate significant life experiences not shared by the other. These trips have been life highlights for both of us. We have also found it helpful to have a leader of each gender for a mixed gender team.

3. *Determine the cost of the trip.* Know the approximate cost of the trip before you advertise for participants. Our experience has been that the mission itself will be a great help in this regard. Expect to pay a *per diem* charge for room and board for each team member, as well as a processing fee for administrative overhead at the mission. You will probably have to deal with transportation arrangements and payment yourself. We have had good experiences working with a travel agent who specializes in group travel.

4. *Conform to institutional requirements for participants.* Check on institutional requirements for international travel insurance for you and your team. It will probably be required by your school or missions partner and proves very helpful in the event a team member falls ill.

   If your institution has a policy about academic standing for trip participants (e.g., academic encumbrances, minimum credit hours, minimum GPA, current financial account), be sure to include this information in your invitation to participate. When students apply to participate, check with the registrar or other administrative office to be sure the student meets all institutional criteria.

5. *Identify a method to prioritize interested students.* Know in advance how you will prioritize should more students be interested than the maximum size of the team will allow. Possible criteria include student major, class standing, credit hours, and GPA. Consider whether veterans of previous trips should be prioritized above or below first-timers. Determine whether students need specific skills to be effective on the trip.

6. *Verify passports and visa requirements.* All team members need valid passports for international travel. Be sure passports are valid for six months after your intended date of return to your home country. Check on visa requirements *well* in advance of your trip. If team members hold passports from different countries, be sure to check visa requirements for each.

7. *Meet regularly before departure.* Meet with your team on a regular basis prior to the trip. We have traveled during our January term, so we scheduled weekly meetings most weeks of fall semester. Early meetings should focus on communicating the details of the trip and selecting participants. Later meetings should emphasize logistical details.

8. *Prepare the team spiritually.* Devote intentional time during each team meeting to prepare the team spiritually. Discuss candidly student expectations and concerns. Set an example by sharing *your own* expectations and concerns. Pray for each other during team meetings and throughout the week. Make sure students know that God will use the trip to *stretch* them, but will not *break* them.

4.2   Fund Raising

1. *Identify your institutional policy for fund raising.* Check with your administration regarding institutional policies on tax-deductible fund raising for a missions trip. At our school, a student trip qualifies as a missions trip if at least 50% of time on site is devoted to missions service; such trips are tax deductible for donors. Both our trips to date have far exceeded this criterion (our students wrote a *lot* of software).

2. *Determine which institutional office will process donations.* Work with the appropriate administrative office at your school to arrange for processing of donations, including receiving donations, routing funds to the appropriate account, and sending receipts to donors. Get advice on how to make this process easy (e.g., return envelope, instructions to donors to include in your mailing, etc.). Ask whether you will be assessed a fee for these services; if so, add it to the cost of the trip.

3. *Require participation in fund raising.* All students should participate in raising funds for the trip. Although some students may be in a financial position to simply "write a check" for the cost of the trip, there is great value in placing the team's finances before the Lord and trusting him for the outcome.

4. *Prepare a standard fund-raising letter.* The best way to provide consistent information to potential donors is for you to prepare a one-page fund-raising letter to be used by all students. Leave room on the page for the student to include a brief (but required) hand-written note to the recipient. Students should address the envelope by hand as well. Encourage the student to pray for the recipient while they write the note and address the envelope.

5. *Set expectations for fund-raising letters.* Not only should every student participate in fund raising, but they should all do so to the same extent. Based on advice from our campus office for general-service missions trips, we require that students each send 75 fund raising letters. Communicate a clear deadline for when all letters must be in the mail.

6. *Keep track of progress on fund raising.* Have students submit their letters to you (or your assistant) rather than posting them directly. This practice allows you to track student progress on getting letters sent. It also makes it easier to collaborate with your campus post office for bulk mailing and to charge back postage to the proper account for your trip.

7. *Consider use of e-mail for fund raising.* Students may prefer to contact donors by e-mail. Although this approach is convenient, it lacks the personal impact of a hand-written appeal. If you do allow e-mail funding letters, make sure students include your standard team letter (e.g., as a PDF attachment) and a personal note. Tracking progress is harder with e-mail than paper letters. Ask students to submit to you regularly a record by name and e-mail address of donors who they contacted by e-mail.

8. *Consider on-line giving.* Many potential donors will appreciate an option to contribute to your trip on the Web. Younger donors (e.g., recent alumni) may not ever have a checkbook! Be aware that on-line payment processors levy a fee of 2–3% of the donation amount.

   Your institution probably already has the ability to accept on-line donations and can set up a page for giving to your trip. One advantage of e-mail fund-raising is that an e-mail message can include a direct link to the donation web page for your trip.

4.3   Team Dynamics

1. *Make decisions as a team.* Within the broad confines of your leadership, let the team make decisions as a group. This practice allows them to take ownership of the trip and to hold one another accountable for decisions they've made together.

2. *Encourage open and honest communication.* Make sure everyone has a voice in important issues and in team decisions. Intentionally draw out contributions from quiet students so that the *entire* team is involved.

3. *Hold the teams' feet to the fire.* Give the team permission to enforce team decisions, including the authority to establish consequences. For example, the team may decide that all fund-raising letters must be sent by a given date—under threat of being cut from the team. Because everyone participates in such a decision, everyone is subject to being cut.

4. *Use leadership authority as a last resort.* Your team will be strong if granted broad responsibility for its own governance. However, as the leader, it's your responsibility to step in should the team head in a harmful direction, or as a last resort to resolve an intractable impasse.

4.4 On the Trip

1. *Keep important documents with you at all times.* Keep with you a photocopy of all important travel documents for the entire team, including passports, insurance cards, local contacts, and medical information (e.g., allergies, medications). We travel with a three-ring binder known affectionately as the "Book of Doom."

2. *Prepare to leave from the moment you arrive.* In order for your service to be sustainable, the mission must be able to take over where your team left off when you leave for home. Leave behind documentation, blueprints, operating instructions, and notes on progress. Don't wait until the end of your trip to create these artifacts—you will be too busy preparing to leave. Start creating this information from your first day on site and maintain it throughout the trip.

3. *Meet regularly as a team.* While adjusting to the many changes your team encounters during the trip, it is crucial that you meet together regularly. A team meeting is familiar and helps restore a sense of normality in the group. Talk over challenges, opportunities, successes, and failures with the same candor you established prior to departure. Share prayer requests and pray for each other.

4. *Gauge the state of each team member.* Gauge the degree to which each team member is adapting to the trip environment. One strategy we've employed during team meetings is to ask each student to rate their physical, emotional, and spiritual "health" on a scale of 1–10.

4.5 Back at Home

1. *Complete remaining administrative tasks.* Submit any forms or reports required by your institution after leading a student trip. If fund-raising fell short, deal with remaining costs (at our school, student accounts are billed for any shortfall). Close out fund-raising accounts.

2. *Share your trip with others.* Others on your campus and in your community will be excited to hear from you and your students about your missions experience. Schedule presentations at your school or in area churches to share what your team did and to encourage others to participate in missions. This is your chance to show your *own* "boring missionary slides!"

3. *Continue to interact with the team.* You and your team have participated in what will have been a life-altering experience for many. Provide students with opportunities to process their experience upon returning to campus. For example:

   - Meet as a team a few more times to debrief with each other on the experience. Encourage everyone to share what they learned, what was good and bad, how they see themselves in a new light, what God taught them during the trip, and how they are dealing with

reverse culture shock. As you have done from the outset, continue to pray with and for each other.

- Ask students for a written reflection on their experience. An informal paper or written answers to questions you provide can help students integrate their experience to their lives back on campus.

To encourage post-trip participation, set expectations for students during trip planning. Don't treat these activities as optional—they are *integral* to trip.

4. *Plan for next time.* While the experience of the trip is still fresh in your memory, take time to evaluate all aspects of the trip so that you can improve the experience next time you go. One framework we use is to ask three questions: "What should we *keep* next time?" "What should we *add* next time?" "What should we *eliminate* next time?"

5 Conclusion

Leading vocational missions trips has been a wonderful experience both for us and for our students. We conclude with the story of one student.

As she later recalled, Ashley signed up for our first Computer Science missions trip to "check off the box labeled *missions trip* on my college to-do list." During our trip to England, Ashley saw first-hand the impact she could have on global missions by using her God-given computing and design skills. The following summer, she interned at a different international office of the same mission. When it came time to consider post-graduate employment, Ashley's short list included several missions. Earlier this year, she accepted a full-time position at one of the missions organizations just weeks before graduation.

We trust that as you engage your students in missions, God will grant you similarly successful outcomes as you seek to fulfill the Great Commission.

6 Acknowledgments

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[5]http://www.lightsys.org/
[6]http://cmc.taylor.edu/