

# College ministry moves into a post-pandemic world

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When COVID-19 caused global shutdowns in spring 2020, Baptist Student Ministries on university campuses had to adapt quickly to discipling students remotely. And they still are discovering what campus ministry looks like as society emerges from a global pandemic.

“At that point [in the middle of the spring 2020 semester], they all became online students,” said David Griffin, BSM director at East Texas Baptist University.

“It was a difficult road to navigate, and they were really preoccupied with being back at home and trying to finish their coursework. ... But at the same time, we knew God was in control.”

In many cases, students left for spring break and didn't return to school until the fall semester.

“Being able to go ahead and do our spring break mission trips was a real blessing, not just getting to do the trip, but also the community it fostered, and it helped us move into the next year,” said Joel Bratcher, BSM director at Texas A&M University.

“Had COVID started in September or October it would have really been rough,” he continued. “But because the groups had already formed, we were able to pretty much maintain them, and then we were able to select leadership for the next year. We had to do it all on Zoom, but because of the relationships being there, that really helped us a lot.”

BSM serves both at state universities and private schools, including

universities affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The way BSM is incorporated into the university varies by location. At private universities, the organization typically relates to the spiritual life or student life office.

“Different Baptist schools are very different contexts. ... Each has its own way of doing things—the way they’ve structured their student life areas [and] incorporated the BSM. There’s a lot of contextualization to BSM ministry, no matter where you are,” said Daniel McAfee, BSM director at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

## **Adapting to maintain contact**

Across the board, COVID changed the way students interacted with one another. Despite the efforts of campus and ministry leadership, student engagement levels reflected that change.

“Their schedule had completely changed. So, when they used to be free on Tuesday nights ... they were no longer free on Tuesday nights when they went home. The pace of life changed for them,” Griffin said.

To ensure public safety, everyday life became dramatically different, and that included the varied ways students connected with others. BSM groups had to adapt expectations and methods to maintain contact with students.

“The numbers did go down, but I would still say there was a fair amount of engagement,” McAfee said. “We just kept going. ... I think [students] enjoyed the connection point to be able to participate weekly.”

When universities reopened in fall 2020, BSM was able to reconnect with students in new ways. Griffin described how ETBU approached the new semester.

“When we came back, we really tried to carry on quite normally, and we

offered a lot of the same sorts of things that we were doing before the lockdown, but at limited capacity,” Griffin said. “Masks, of course, changed our interactions. ... And I do think it was harder to connect with freshmen in that year.”

## **‘We needed to engage more intentionally’**

As restrictions gradually lifted in the spring and the following semester, BSM leaders recognized the importance of reaching students who had not connected as much as others due to the lockdown.



Like their peers around the state, BSM participants at East Texas Baptist University have found ways to reconnect with the general student population after the COVID pandemic. (ETBU Photo)

“Coming back, we needed to engage more intentionally” and reintroduce BSM, Griffin explained.

Some students “may not have heard of BSM and what we do, because we may not have had as much interaction as we would have wanted in the

COVID year,” he said.

At Texas A&M, leaders and small groups of BSM student volunteers responded to the changes brought on by COVID by addressing the issues they saw in their peers, Bratcher said.

“Some of our students have had to deal with personal health issues directly related to COVID or their family members have, too,” he said.

“I think that the pandemic helped us realize how much people really do need each other and that real relationships and community is huge for all people, and that’s especially true for students.”

## **Lessons learned**

When McAfee reflected on the lessons his BSM learned from the pandemic, he mentioned community, but he also emphasized a shift in perspective and a need to surrender to God.

“I would say that the pandemic served as a reminder that we do not control nearly as much as we think we control, or even that we would want to control in this life,” McAfee said.

At Texas A&M, Bratcher said, the chaos brought about by COVID reminded him why it’s important for students to have a well-established faith.

“It reinforced my commitment to trying to do good discipleship with our students and teaching them to be servants and to be willing to put their needs second to other people,” he said.

Griffin also stressed the importance of establishing a faith foundation, and he reemphasized the mission of BSM.

“We are trying to reach anyone and everyone,” he said.

In a world still recovering from such a dramatic shift, it's impossible to know where anything is headed next, BSM leaders acknowledged. However, the flexibility and resiliency of campus ministry organizations offers a light as they move forward.

"Yes, we're coming out of the pandemic, but because we're still so close to it in a historical way ... we don't know where society is, where college students really are," McAfee said.

But he sees hope for the future.

"We've started noticing some differences ... even if we can't quite put our fingers exactly on what they are. We're just seeing some positive things this semester, and that has been encouraging," McAfree said.

Ministry among university students is more than offering "right inputs" to produce "right outputs," he observed.

"That's just not the way God works," McAfee said. "It's really up to him to capture people's hearts, imaginations ... to help them to know that they're loved and that he has a plan and purpose for them."