Odds are you don’t need to be convinced that small groups are pretty important to reaching your goals on campus. As a campus leader, most likely you were part of a small group on campus as a student that had a significant impact on your spiritual growth. Small groups are tremendous places to build redemptive relationships where you pray for one another, study the scriptures and encourage others to stay strong in the Lord. There’s a reason the author of Hebrews said, “Don’t give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing.”

The question that every campus ministry leader needs to answer is: How do I structure our small group system? As a movement, we are going after a specific goal (Winning, building, and sending college students), so it’s important that we give purposeful thought to how our small groups are structured to contribute to that end. In this article, I am going to present a simple way to give order and purpose to your campus small group system that I believe allows for the maximal development of students.

First, I want to lay out some design principles for small group structure, some rules of effective small group design, if you will.

**RULE 1: GROWTH TAKES PLACE OVER TIME**

In their book *Guidebook to Discipleship*, authors Hartman and Sutherland say this, “There needs to be an atmosphere established, a place where people can get involved for different reasons and join at different points to express their involvement. It is a place to reside where they are able to move at their own pace. The Holy Spirit is able to mature them as an individual at their own pace of involvement.”

Basically they are reiterating what Henry Cloud talks about in terms of growth taking time. Because growth takes time, our small group structure needs to honor that and offer environments, or stages, where people can grow with others at the same point and not be rushed.

In other words, in your movement people are at different places in their commitment to Jesus and their commitment to being a lifetime laborer. You have some seekers and some older students ready to really go for it in ministry. In the same way that you first need to learn to walk before you run, I believe that our small group system needs to take into account the fact that people are at different places and offer different types of groups that account for that.

**RULE 2: JESUS PRACTICED SELECTION**

In the Gospels we read that Jesus selected 12 men to be with him and to train in ministry. These were the men on whom he was going to entrust the evangelization of the globe. This principle is best explained in Robert Coleman’s classic book *The Master Plan Of Evangelism*, which needs to be the next book you read if you have not done so already.
Jesus told His men: “Here is where I am going, come along.” He didn’t chase after people. He offered an opportunity to grow and then let people vote with their feet (and some decided not to follow, see John 6:66).

When you select well, you avoid the scenario where you are leading a group that feels like pulling teeth. You know the kind I’m talking about...The kind of group where you have to call and remind them to come each week, where they never come prepared and, God forbid if they ever take a step of faith! Now, there is a place for people like that in our movements to grow and develop, but when we practice selection, we are offering a challenge for the student to strive to.

So, our small group system needs to be “selection based.” In other words, you don’t just want to advertise that “Steve is leading a small group studying Ephesians” and see who shows up. We need to pick our curriculum carefully, then we need to decide what kind of person will benefit most from the type of group we are leading. Then, you invite, or even challenge, students to be a part of that type of group.

RULE 3: YOUR SMALL GROUP STRUCTURE IS YOUR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURE

I would tell our staff and students, “Jesus never commanded us to go and lead Bible studies. His command was to make disciples.” Yes, of course the Word is our textbook and our guide, but the overall purpose of our small groups is not to get to know the Bible better. The purpose of our small groups is to build leaders, to build disciples. More specifically: to build multiplying disciples.

So, you will do more during the group time than study the Bible. You’ll pray, you’ll give them vision for the campus and the world, you’ll talk about reaching the campus together and the needs of your movement.

Also, the group leader needs to keep in mind that the whole point is not to lead a Bible study, but instead to reach a target area. If the point were to simply lead a Bible study, the leader would stop exposing their target area to the Gospel when they have a handful of people in a group. No, small group leaders need to know that leading a small group is simply a bi-product of reaching a target area.

Because of this, we tried to avoid calling our groups (which you’ll see in the next section) or we called them “small groups,” or “discipleship groups,” but never Bible studies.

RULE 4: DON’T BLEND THE GENDERS

This may be a bit controversial, but I’m just not a fan of co-ed small groups. Men and women learn differently...they process information differently...they smell different.

Here’s what I’ve seen happen with co-ed small groups...Let’s say you’re leading a group for freshmen in a dorm that’s co-ed, and you have 10 people coming. That’s pretty cool, huh? Not when you realize that 7 of the people are women and 3 are men. You make that a men-only group and the leader is going to be very motivated to share their faith and find some more men for the group. A group of 10 feels pretty good, but a group of 3 feels pretty lame. What I’m trying to say is, the co-ed structure can lure the leader into a false sense of success.

And, let’s just say it: I don’t think you’re going to have a lot of guys confess their addiction to porn or masturbation in a coed small group.

RULE 5: CONTENT MATTERS

Let’s face it, while all scripture is God-breathed, not all scripture is going to have equal weight in transforming lives and making multiplying disciples (think “Esau was a hairy man” vs. “I am crucified with Christ”). And, as a ministry that is committed to the basics, it’s important that we “dance with the one that brung us” so-to-speak when it comes to the small group content we choose.

Hopefully you’ve heard enough about the whole idea of “Core DNA” that you get this. A corollary to this principle is: What you teach is what they will teach. In other words, that really cool study on Song of Solomon you are teaching your freshman is what they are going to try and teach to their freshman guys in a year or so. Now, is that what you really want?

That gives you an idea of the basic philosophy behind the structure that I’ll now lay out for you.

HOW WE STRUCTURED OUR SMALL GROUPS

Basically, we had four types of small groups in our
structure. Based on the principles above, we wanted there to be four types of environments, or offerings, in terms of small groups for students to be a part of.

ACCESS GROUP
The first type we called an Access Group (Thanks to Scott Berkey at U of Illinois for that name). If you picture a wedding cake in your mind, this is like the bottom tier of that cake. It’s our intro small group, comprised mostly of freshmen. This is where they ‘access’ our movement as new to Cru or new believers, or just checking out Jesus. It’s also where they gained access to the foundational truths of the faith, or what we might call our Foundational Concepts in Cru.

These groups are open to new people joining at any time and the weekly lessons don’t necessarily build on each other. There is no homework and the leader is not expected to “disciple” any of the students. This is the group where the leader is looking to see who will be a potential multiplying disciple.

The group meets once a week, ideally in a dorm room, or fraternity house of one of the participants (so you are guaranteed that at least one person shows!). The group lasts one hour.

Hopefully you can see what we’re going for here: low commitment, easy entry. If this is all they want to be a part of with Cru, then they at least have been exposed to our mission, vision and values and can do with that what they want.

Also, of course the leader is encouraging the students to be a part of the larger Cru movement and taking advantage of all the events, retreats, training, etc....

We encouraged our Access group leaders to not get in the habit of meeting one on one regularly with the students. You have to be careful because you are setting patterns and expectations here that you might not be able to keep later. We don’t want to set up the expectation that discipleship is having a “personal life jockey” as Bob Francis used to say.

If the leader did have time to meet one on one with their students, we encouraged them to do the following: Get to know them better in one appointment, share the Satisfied booklet with them in another, teach them how to have a meaningful quiet time, and take them out to talk with others about Jesus at least once.

TRAINING GROUP
The second type we called a Training Group. This group is made up mostly of sophomores and juniors who have been a part of an Access Group the year before. This is the next tier of our wedding cake.

In the Training Group, students are committed to learn how to multiply their life. They are committed to learning how to share Christ with others with a view to owning a target area.

The TG is a closed group that is by invitation only. It meets once a week for 1.5 to 2 hours. There may be outside homework and the weekly lessons might build on each other. The leader makes the effort to spend more time with the TG members for some initial discipleship times.

A student in a training group is committed to cru as the place they want to hang their ministry hat and they like who we are and what we do. They are committed to coming to the small group and being a part of the larger Cru movement. They don’t do it out of duty or because they “made a commitment,” but they do it because they like being involved and feel like it’s a great place to develop and minister.

For us, the challenge we had for the Training Groups was that they did not own a target area per se (we did expect and encourage them to be a witness in their classes, at work, etc...). When they met with the leader for discipleship, we wanted them to spend some time sharing their faith together (not each time, but often). The question was, where would they go to do that? We wanted this to be purposeful and not just have them go to the union and share with a random stranger. So, we paired up each TG with an Access Group. The TG was responsible to help the Access Group leader saturate a target area with the Gospel. They also made efforts to get to know the Access Group students and hang out with them. They might even offer to meet with an Access Group member for accountability.

ACTION GROUP
The third type of group we had was called an Action Group. Action group students were juniors and seniors who were committed to leading either Access Groups or Training Groups. These are our top student leaders. They not only lead a small group, but they are in a small group. We want them to be developed, so
having them in a group was very important to us.

A student in an Action Group logs a lot of hours with Cru ministry. They may be involved in evangelism in a target area, discipling others, small groups, and other Cru activities for 10-20 hours a week. But these are the people who leave a lasting legacy on campus. These are the people who have been bitten by the Great Commission bug and wouldn’t stay away if you paid them. These are the people who decide to intern with Cru because they love their women (or men) so much and want to continue to help them develop in the Lord.

An action group meets weekly for 2 hours and is by invitation only. There is usually homework and usually the lessons build on each other. It is expected that the Action group leader meets regularly with the AG students for discipleship and ministry together.

**A FOURTH TYPE OF GROUP**

The fourth type of group is a lot like the first type of group. It is an Access Group for upperclasspeople. We found that there would be some students who weren’t able to commit to a Training Group or an Action Group, so we wanted to offer a small group environment for them if we could. So, it was a lot like an Access Group made up of sophomores through seniors. There wasn’t a whole lot of structure to these groups. Usually we tried to find a community volunteer or an alumni to lead this group. Sometimes it was led by a student who could have led any other group but maybe because of time constraints, could only lead this kind of group.

We didn’t have a fancy name for this kind of group. It was made up of sophomores through seniors and we still tried to infuse it with Core Cru DNA. It was a group with pretty low expectations of the members.

We weren’t always able to offer a group like this depending on the laborers available. The people who were a part of this group declined the invitation to a Training Group or Action group (though usually they did participate in a Training Group the year previous and just didn’t want to go further in terms of their commitment).

**ADDENDUM**

PS: Please know that there is no perfect, or problem-free small group structure. A leader is always making trade-offs when they come up with solutions to problems. Take Wal-Mart for example, they have chosen to value price and selection over store aesthetics and customer service. This type of structure is no different, it has its plusses and its minuses, but I believe it is the most effective when it comes to developing leaders and building multiplying disciples.

**QUESTION AND ANSWER**

Q. Was it always neat and clean?

A. No. While we tried to have tight requirements for the groups, there were often exceptions to the rules. For example, one year I led an Action group of 12 guys. 10 of the guys were leading either Access groups or Training Groups, but 2 just didn’t have the skill set to do that. But, those 12 guys had some pretty tight relational connections, so I wanted to keep them together. Those 2 guys still were committed to the group and to Cru, and they were leading in other areas (e.g. one guy was a web genius and ran our Cru web site). Oftentimes, strong relational bonds trumped the need to have neat and clean groups.

Q. Would you break up people after their freshman year or would you keep the same people together in a Training Group?

A. That all depended on whether or not everyone in that Access group accepted the Training Group Invitation. Those who did not either went into another Access group or found another place to be involved other than a Cru small group. Sometimes relational connections did trump the need to have a neat a clean group, but we always wanted that to be the exception in the group and never the majority of the group members.

Q. Is this Biblical?

A. See 2 Timothy 2:2 for a great pattern of this type of structure. Mark 3:13-14 says, “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to Him those He wanted, and they came to Him. He appointed twelve--designating them Apostles--that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach...” In this short passage you see selection, challenge, and sending.

Again, I highly recommend Robert Coleman’s book, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* for a more thorough look at these principles from the life of Jesus.
Q. How would you go about inviting people to the various types of groups?

A. In the appendix, I have the sheets we used that every small group leader went over with the people in their group. Near the end of each year we asked our small group leaders to have conversations with their group members about where they’d like to be involved the following year.

Q. How would you place people in small groups?

A. After we collected information on every group member from the leaders, the staff men would put together the men’s small group matrix and the women would do that for the women. This usually happened at the end of the school year. It was a long process, but it was so worth it in terms of being purposeful. Many groups stayed together and simply went to the next type of group, but some were split or changed altogether.

Many times we waited until after the summer to solidify the small groups and even the leadership of the groups. You just never know what kind of summer someone will have and it might change their willingness or ability to lead (for better or for worse).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
1. How are our small groups currently structured?
2. Does our current structure allow for the principle of selection? Is it selection-based? Are some groups made up of people who really don’t like Cru and our mission, vision and values?
3. Is our current small group structure effective towards seeing students become multiplying disciples? Are we producing more and more leaders who multiply each year?
4. Are we clear with students about the requirements and expectations of our small groups?
5. Are we purposeful in terms of the curriculum we choose?

Bob Fuhs and his wife Jill are the Los Angeles City Focus Directors for Campus Crusade for Christ. They have been on staff for 16 and 18 years respectively and have led movements in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and California. Contact the author at Bob.Fuhs@uscmb.org