



Mobilizing African Students



Imagine you've just found out there are 30 new African students or volunteers ready and willing to come to campus for evangelism and discipleship. Many have years of ministry experience before coming to the States and some have been commissioned by their churches to come to America.

Unfortunately, these students and volunteers are hindered by a few barriers. Lack of trust, fear of not being good enough, and worry that their contributions will be meaningless or even ignored — may be keeping them from jumping in to help reach international students. Would you invest time and resources into onboarding these volunteers so your ministry could reap the benefits of their partnership for years to come?

For the sake of this document, when we talk about African students, we include African volunteers as well. Here we will unpack some cultural, communication and ministry differences that will make it easier to understand our African brothers and sisters and empower them for leadership in God's kingdom.

1. *Communal Values*

The African church and African believers provide a special insight into Imago Dei, the image of God. Africans value community and others above themselves, and often sacrifice without a second thought to serve others. Whether it be church or family, past achievements are remembered, cherished, and repeated. Opinions and words are tightly guarded to bless those around them. Elders are respected; every grandmother is your grandmother. Ask your friends what they cherish from their culture. Learn from them, be challenged in your relationship with God and believers, and celebrate God's marvelous work within Africans.

Doing activities including and celebrating everyone is important to many students from Africa. Because of the great emphasis on being with family or friends, they don't mind waiting or enduring other inconveniences so everyone can be together. They



often put a greater priority on the present moments with loved ones than on the schedule of when those moments start and stop. Remembering specific details regarding their family members can go a long way and be a source of meaningful conversation.

“The nail that sticks up gets hammered” is a saying you may find students adhere to. African students often don’t want to speak up publicly if they don’t

feel confident the rest of their community agrees with them, or if they think

their feedback would cause the leader to lose the respect

of others in the community. Because of this, getting

feedback from Africans can feel tricky to Americans. Explaining why you need feedback or what you intend to

do with the information can build trust so the students feel

comfortable giving their input.

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For better results, solicit feedback privately outside of regularly scheduled meeting times. A way to gather feedback anonymously within groups is to pass out notes with prompts, collect students’ answers, and read them collectively. If you have a larger group, put African students together in groups of three to five and have one spokesperson represent the discussion and opinions of their group. Once all perspectives are gathered and acknowledged,

students will trust their leader to make a decision incorporating everyone’s input. If a leader continually makes decisions that disregard a student’s ideas or concerns, trust will crumble and the student may withdraw within the relationship or group.

Often, when African students think about the best way forward, they are thinking about the past as much as they are about the future. When asking a student to lead a Bible study, the student might ask, “How have you done it before?” African students want to honor past leadership teams and decisions, which are valued highly in their home cultures. Give student leaders a brief history lesson about your local ministry, explain your expectations for what needs to be maintained, and where they have flexibility to change.

Reciprocally, we should ask students about their past ministry experiences and what they can teach us. Evangelism, discipleship, and leadership may have a different structure than what we are used to in America. Don’t forget to ask about their family history and faith. Questions about their ministry experiences and how far back faith goes in their family yields fruitful discussions and collaborations.

2. *The Role of a Leader*

Whether you are 19 or 91, being an American and leading international students is something that makes students from Africa look up to you. Good leaders often take on a familial role in followers’ lives. Back home, students don’t have to think about what to eat when the leader is around. Spiritual leaders are the parental figures you think to call at 2 A.M when your car breaks down. If your friends ask you for money every week, you can certainly ask your spiritual leader to lend you some money in an emergency. Americans may be uncomfortable with these expectations, but African students hold presumptions to varying degrees when we declare ourselves spiritual leaders of international students. Ask God for wisdom to determine your boundaries and how to lovingly and kindly communicate that with your

African friends. Helping one person is not committing to helping everyone to the same extent. Corrie ten Boom said her job was to simply follow (Christ's) leading one step at a time, holding every decision up to him. The way you respond with boundaries or giving can bless students as they also feel the burden of helping all of their friends and family back home.

Inviting someone into your life and not just your events is a crucial element in discipleship and coaching. Make sure that not every hangout is structured. Find out your friends' rhythms, and pass by with a kind word or a snack where you know they will be studying. Invite them to your home, take them to church with you on Sunday, and let them be a part of family gatherings. You will find conversations become deeper and more meaningful in one-on-one or small-group settings.



3. *Indirect Communicators*

Have you ever asked someone to meet you for coffee and they said they might come but never did? You probably experienced an indirect communicator trying to tell you no. In some cultures, it is extremely rude to say no, especially to your leader. Try giving someone options like, "Would you like to meet me, or maybe you need some time to work on homework?" Students feel more freedom with indirect questions like this because they can give you an affirmative answer.

One common area for indirectness is finances and topics involving money. Some students are on tight budgets, and the reason they do not come to a meeting, especially one involving cost, is money. If a student gives you indirect answers about attending a conference, ask if they might consider attending with a 50% scholarship. Students experience regular financial requests and pressure from friends and family back home since being in America is equated with financial success. Plan to meet somewhere

without cost unless you are prepared to pay for their food, as many African students will interpret an invitation as your provision for a meal or drink. As you grow in familiarity and engage in discipleship, be sure to address conversations around budgeting through a Biblical lens while honoring family expectations about finances. The upbringing of many Africans and Americans is vastly different so be sure to ask questions to understand their experiences before offering advice.

Once you've settled on the cost of the conference or event, be explicit about what to bring and not bring, and the breakdown of costs involved that are not covered by their fee such as transportation. The student might not bring something Americans view as a packing staple because they assume the leader would take care of that for them. Then they will suffer the whole retreat because they want to save their leader's reputation and not make them feel like they failed to provide.

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4. *Evangelism*

Indirect communication can be applied to evangelism. Talk about the Bible and their faith directly, but when asking about a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ decision for Christ, be cautious to use a more indirect approach by asking questions such as, “In your opinion, what are some things people love more than God?”

Ask them “How are you feeling about your relationship with God?” and if they think they might want to consider receiving Jesus in the next few days. Text them after some time has passed to see how they are doing. A few days later, check to see if they have decided to accept Jesus. They should feel the relationship is secure, so they can safely give an honest answer without losing your friendship.

“Africans sometimes experience cultural and ethnic barriers as they engage in evangelism.”

As you are getting to know a student, ask about when they started to follow Jesus. A lot of Africans are very similar to cultural American Christians: they grew up in church and might label themselves as having always been a Christian. Find out when they made a personal decision for Christ, and if they never have accepted Jesus personally, challenge them to consider doing so.

Most African students will be far down the Engel scale¹ during evangelism. They aren’t wondering if God exists and they may have heard about Jesus their whole lives. If they aren’t already a Christian, they could genuinely consider accepting Christ in the first few weeks of meeting you.

Let’s imagine you shared the Gospel with a student and they either accepted Christ or were already a Christian. Now they are excited for mentorship with you. African churches regularly do evangelism, so invite your friends to join you. Inquire about their experiences back home and give them feedback on how they can connect culturally with American, Asian, Arab, and other students. Africans sometimes experience cultural and ethnic barriers as they engage in evangelism. They may notice the people they are pursuing have a preference to hear from those who are lighter skinned. Ask questions about how they experience cross-cultural ministry and provide support as needed. Encourage them often that a cultural outsider can reach internationals in different and perhaps deeper ways than staff can. When done often, this encouragement will set them up well with confidence to engage in lifelong cross-cultural evangelism.

5. *Discipleship*

As African students might appear on a fast track through your ministry, a staff team may wonder when it is appropriate to give them leadership responsibilities. A disciplined student who is faithful, available, and teachable should be ready to lead on their own after a few times of watching you lead, along with opportunities to lead with your assistance and feedback. Some green flags for leadership include humility and a genuine and relevant testimony that shows the active work of the Holy Spirit in their life. Leadership red flags include being overeager for the titles and clout of leadership, bossiness, vagueness about details of their life, arrogance, and obsession with their image. Make sure you’ve had time to observe how the student is with

¹ An explanation of the Engel scale can be found here: www.eauk.org/great-commission/what-is-the-engel-scale

members of the opposite gender. You may observe higher communication levels, more physical touch, and extra playfulness with the other gender which is normal back home but often labeled close to inappropriate in American circles. Some Africans are wrongly perceived as flirty to American Christians, but respect for personal and Biblical boundaries should be evident even in friendly male-female friendships.

Another important topic to cover in discipleship is sexuality. African students are often uncomfortable discussing sexuality and surrendering their passions to God, as this is a taboo topic back home. You don't need to avoid this taboo, however, as Africans probably expect Americans to bring it up. Covering Biblical relationships and sexuality is relevant and helpful in discipleship. For singleness, explore topics surrounding their family expectations and their own personal desires, while emphasizing trust in God with their journey. If they are married, connect them with resources to strengthen their marriage and provide opportunities for them to ask questions that may be uncomfortable to talk about with family and friends back home.

Discuss how they can discern and live in God's will for their life, and how to properly balance their family's expectations that may diverge from God's will. There might be a priority or decision they consider to be 'from the Lord' which is only their family's personal opinion. Honoring God may at times require his people to go against the norms of their upbringing. This can weigh heavily on a student and takes time to find peace with the friction it may cause within communities (Matthew 12:48-50).

6. Church and Theology

In an African students' relationship to the church, students feel a wide range of barriers to church involvement in America. It is challenging to navigate cultural barriers, and they may not feel like they 'fit' in the ways they expected. There is often a large cultural gap between black Americans and African



students, so students may feel distance from the group they most closely resemble here in the States. Urge them to invest in a church home and encourage them to be "iron sharpening iron" (Prov. 27:17) so that they can challenge the American church with their strengths, and be challenged in their weaknesses.

As a parachurch ministry, we recognize there are differences between our ministry and the local church. Highlighting the responsibilities of both, along with the differences and limitations of a campus ministry, may help clarify a student's need for both to play a role in their life. For example, a student's desire to do children's ministry is a good thing, but it doesn't fall under the scope of Bridges' ministry. A student might have different norms for evangelism, and you can help them determine whether the capacities of a local church or a ministry like Bridges may be better suited as a place for their service. A parachurch ministry might give women a bigger role than the student is used to in their home country. Discuss those differences, and what respecting leadership looks like back home when your personal opinion no longer aligns as directly with your home church.



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7. Uplifting Africans

Use every opportunity to affirm African students who want to help reach other international students. There is a long history of European nations conquering and colonizing Africa, and white colonizers believed black Africans were less human and of lesser value. This horrible lie needs to be combated with the Biblical truth that all humanity is created in the image of God. If you are a staff member who is white, remember your words may carry weight due to this historical background. Be intentional to encourage and support African students. Remind and demonstrate your trust in them, affirm their input as valuable, and encourage them to help you reach students you are not able to reach on your own. Approach leadership from a place of curiosity and be judicious when you share your opinion. Don't be afraid to share what you want explicitly; just remember if you are the first to share, students may defer sharing differing opinions. When you do ask for their feedback and they give it, please take it seriously and communicate the status of what you will do with the feedback. Since a strong opinion from an African student may come across as more soft-spoken than Americans realize, keep your ears especially perked for any feedback you are receiving from an African student and treasure it so you can build a foundation for better lines of communication in the future.

African students are eager to help with the Great Commission. As you do your best to learn about African culture and mobilize African students, recognize that you may make mistakes along the way. Continue to press ahead and know that African students are quick to forgive when reconciliation is pursued. May God bless your ministry and campus with brothers and sisters in Christ from the continent of Africa who will stand alongside you to Welcome, Win, Build and Send students for the glory of our Savior.

Take time to explore a student's theological influences and church backgrounds. Some differences of opinion include women's leadership in the church, speaking in tongues as proof of having the Holy Spirit, spiritual warfare, laying of hands for healing, and more. If your friend appears to attend a 'health and wealth' church, possible topics that might need to be addressed include the prosperity gospel, demonization, and the role and work of Holy Spirit. As you recognize theological differences, continue being curious and initiate questions to discover why such values are important and the root beliefs behind them (Ex. fear of the unknown, love of money, etc.). The difference could merely be terminology. Watch a video of their church service. If you discover that some differences are irreconcilable, deeply anchor your teaching to the Word of God. Share the variety of opinions² held globally and historically on different topics, and trust that the Holy Spirit will work as you give the student time to wrestle with the truth in God's Word and continue your friendship with them.

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² See this article for more on opinions, persuasions, and convictions: www.cru.org/us/en/about/partners/the-differences-between-convictions-persuasions-and-opinions.html

8. *Etiquette Reminders*

In addition to the tips dispersed through the document, here are some dos and don'ts that will help with mobilizing your African students:

DO ask about their faith journey and how they came to know Jesus.

DO help students see God as their loving Father. Recognize that some Africans may tend to view him as distant, and have a hard time emotionally relating to this characteristic of God.

DO make space to discuss doctrine if the student seems interested and if time allows. Africans don't always make clear distinctions between denominations because there's a strong desire to move towards African ecumenism, which promotes unity among Christian churches. (1 Peter 3:15, 16).

DO create space for Africans to engage with other Africans without staff presence.

DO give context training on how to share the gospel and build relationships with those from other nations.

DO share with them how their walk with the Lord has encouraged or challenged you.

DO ask about their ministry experience back home and how they might like to replicate some of those practices here. This allows them to take ownership.

DO consider how to expose them to new leadership opportunities.

DO help them understand and navigate within the established leadership framework.

DO ask what clarification they need on how and why ministry is done in the States and at their local ministry.

DON'T underestimate the power of being indirect.

DON'T ask for their feedback if you're not willing to act on it. If you choose not to use their ideas, be sure to communicate the reasons why.

