How to Get Students Engaged and Keep Them Engaged

Assumptions:

1. We all love and trust God, we all love students, and we all want students to love and trust God.
2. You are pursing Jesus and a life of faithfulness in your own life.
   a. While this is a single point in the intro, it may be the single greatest predictor of your group's spiritual health.
   b. *I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified.*
      1 Corinthians 9:27
3. Not all of us have control over every detail of our programming. (IE, some of us can't make programming changes to things, so we'll have to adapt and be creative.
4. The work it will take us to disciple students is hard, but it's worth it.

My Story:

1. Many years of full-time student ministry, now a church planter/HS teacher.
2. Two teenagers at home, one young adult at college.
3. Feel very "in-touch" with student culture – Christian/non-Christian/anti-Christian. (Not talking about music/media/tech; talking about hearts.)
4. Never been more convinced that the local church is the place God designed for students to get what they really need to survive/thrive today and tomorrow.

General Thoughts:

- GETTING students engaged:

1. **Students make conscious choices about how they spend their time.**
   a. They do what's important to them. If what we're doing isn't important to them, it won't be a priority.
   b. It's easy to tell ourselves we have to be cooler/hipper/funnier/etc. to reach engage students. The truth is, we can't out-cool or out-hip or out-funny culture; we can give students the healthiest versions of what culture can't: identity, community, and purpose.
   c. **IDEA**: Ask students what they spend their time doing, then ask them why that's how they choose to spend their time.
      i. You might discover a group that is highly anxious with all the changes, so your best way to engage is to do something fun/relaxing.

      ii. You might discover a group that is struggling with an issue that you can address Biblically.

      iii. You might discover what your group most connects with.

         1. VCNO – Spring DNOW, Summer Mission Camp, Fall ???

           a. Old School Lock-Out!

              i. 7pm – Food/group-building games at church building

              ii. 10-12ish – Trampoline park – parking lot snacks/game

              iii. 1230ish-230ish – Bowling – parking lot snacks/game

              iv. 3ish-5ish – Indoor Rock climbing – parking lot game

              v. 530ish-630ish – Breakfast @ iHop

              vi. 7am – Pickup

KEEPING students engaged DURING programming:

2. **Students will be engaged with programming that is relevant to them.**
   a. Relevance may be different for every student, based on their personality, spiritual journey, etc.
      i. You can't be all things to all people at all programs/events. Prayerfully set your focus and ruthlessly program to achieve it.
   b. **IDEA**: Ask a few active students and a few fringe students to help you evaluate a program/event.
      i. What did they like/dislike?
      ii. What would their unchurched friend think (if appropriate)?
      iii. What could you do different?
      iv. What could they do different? (This question can lead to some great discussion about consumerism and leadership.)

> **BONUS: Students can have long memories about bait-and-switch.**
> a. If you plan an outreach and say, "Tonight all we're doing is playing games and hanging out," then you add a 5-minute Bible study, they might remember that the next time you plan an outreach.
>   i. If they bring a friend by saying, "It's just playing games and stuff," then you do something different, you hurt trust between you and your student AND between your student and their friend.
> b. If you plan a deeper Bible study or a specific study, then a bunch of time doing the same fun stuff you do in your normal programming, they might remember that the next time you plan something like that.
>   ii. If they've got a ton of homework, and they put it on hold to come to something extra that you're doing to help them deepen their faith, then you do something different, you hurt trust between you and your student.

3. **Don't underestimate the power of student leadership.**

a. Vice-President Kamala Harris' inauguration was incredibly significant for girls, especially African-American and Asian-American girls. They could finally see someone who looked like them at the highest levels of leadership.
   i. How many kids paid attention to the inauguration before this one?
      1. President Obama … why? Same reason 😊
b. In your church, when students see people who look like them in leadership, they know it's a place they can belong and find purpose.
   i. When students lead, quality sometimes goes down a little, but participation goes up a lot.
c. One of the keys to unlocking relevance for students is to invite students to lead as much as possible.
d. **IDEA**: Constantly ask yourself, "How can I invite students into leadership in this program/event?"
   i. Many students are already ready.
   ii. Other students are close.
   iii. Your role is get them ready.
      1. I do it, you watch.
      2. I do it, you help.
      3. You do it, I help.
      4. You do it, I watch.
      5. You invite someone else to repeat the process.
e. Please don't only focus on popular, outgoing, funny, musical, athletic students for leadership. Instead, pay attention to the students who are experiencing Kingdom life change and help them develop their voice.
   i. The students (and types of students) you put up front will communicate tons about what you value.

4. **Make room for relationships in everything.**
   a. With adults …
      i. Most important quality in your leaders – authenticity
         1. NOT a buzz word
         2. Don't try to be cool, unless you're naturally cool
            a. Most of us aren't, and that's OK, because most students aren't either
         3. Instead, encourage leaders to be themselves
            a. If we've done a good job of building our teams, we'll have diversity in our leadership that allows us to connect with a greater diversity of students.
            b. Hopefully we're helping our leaders become the best version of themselves as well.
   b. With other students …
      i. Most connected yet disconnected generation ever.
         1. Students are lonely.

        a. Less socially competent.
        b. Technology is a SHIELD (hide) and a CRUTCH (survive).
     2. Parents are (generally) overprotective.
     3. COVID has compounded it all.
  ii. Make space for genuine conversations and relationships to form.
     1. MUST be a priority in all programming.
     2. Love God, love people.
 c. **IDEA**: Before you finalize any program/event, find places to purposefully add time for relationship-building. … How are you doing this now? How can you do it more?

- KEEPING students engaged AFTER programming:

5. **The most compelling research about student engagement points to relationships between leaders and students.**
  a. Short-term engagement
    i. One of the first questions students ask when you announce a program/event is, "Who else is going?"
    ii. Don't "go after" popular students with the hope of leveraging their influence. Instead, pay attention to the students who are experiencing Kingdom life change and help them develop their voice.
      1. The students (and types of students) you put up front will communicate tons about what you value.
  b. Long-term engagement
    i. Students will attend once or twice because your programming is awesome.
    ii. Students will continue to attend because they develop meaningful relationships with adult leaders and other students.
    iii. **IDEA**: How can you make sure every student gets a regular, personal contact from you and/or your team?

Secret Sauce

- There is no "secret sauce." God's spirit isn't predictable or programmable.
- Be faithful in every area of your life (constant repentance), disciple anyone who'll let you, and live a life others want to have. THAT is engaging.