



Annual Assessment Report: Non-Learning
Academic Year: 2015-2016

Date of Report Submission:**Name of Department:** Catholic Campus Ministry**Name of Contact Person:** Rob Gilmore**Name of Person(s) completing report or contributing to the project:**

Danielle Vaclavik, Graduate Assistant, Chief researcher and report author

Olivia Hollman, Undergraduate Research Assistant

Rob Gilmore, Coordinator of Faith Formation for Catholic Campus Ministry, Assessment Project Manager, report co-author

Type of Assessment: Needs**I. Abstract**

Catholic Campus Ministry (CCM) performed a needs assessment for the Catholic Small Groups Initiative, which is in its second year at DePaul University. CCM examined the needs students identified as their rationale for joining a Catholic Small Group and if they felt those needs had been met. Six focus groups were held with students who participated in the Catholic Small Group Initiative as either a group facilitator “leader” or group participant “member”. This program has made contact with over 100 DePaul students over the course of two years. Groups met weekly for about one hour throughout the academic year.

Five student needs were identified. Students expressed a need and desire for 1) safe spaces to explore faith, 2) reserved time for faith, 3) becoming more confident talking about scripture/faith, 4) opportunities to explore how the Catholic faith relates to them, and 5) a faith community/sense of belonging at DePaul University. The experiences of group members and leaders were seemingly similar.

The majority of students reported that their needs were solidly met by the Catholic Small Groups Initiative. Responses suggest that this initiative is a successful strategy to reach a wider breadth of students and to meet student needs.

Students whose groups remained active for at least two consecutive quarters tended to have more “met” needs than students whose groups disbanded (for varied reasons) after a quarter or less.

Students expressed 4 factors related to unmet needs: 1) inconsistent Small Group weekly content, 2) communication issues, 3) group leaders being over committed, and 4) leaders lacking sufficient logistical support and training.

Implications of these findings and recommendations to strengthen the initiative’s success are discussed.

II. Assessment Question

1. What are the needs of DePaul students who join Catholic Small Groups, and are their needs being met?
2. What are the needs of DePaul students who become Catholic Small Group leaders, and are their needs being met?

III. Introduction & Context

University Context

For several years prior to launching the Catholic Small Groups Initiative, Catholic Campus Ministry sought innovative strategies for outreach looking at ways of lowering barriers to entry and reaching a wider breadth of students.

The Evangelical Catholic organization provided a framework for an outreach strategy that would allow students who had never set foot in CCM to become deeply connected to our community through a Catholic Small Groups model of evangelization. Information pertaining to Evangelical Catholic can be found at www.evangelicalcatholic.org/. This model also allowed for students to be empowered in peer to peer ministry. Through adaptation of this model, it was hoped that implementation of the Catholic Small Groups Initiative at DePaul could provide the more effective strategy to reach more students in a meaningful way.

This initiative is distinct from other CCM programming in that it is a student initiated and student led strategy for faith outreach and engagement. It also takes place in spaces that are where students gather in the routine of their daily lives rather than requiring them to enter the CCM office, chapel, or other designated “faith spaces” on campus.

These efforts support both the Catholic Campus Ministry mission and Vision 2018.

Most especially the Catholic Small Groups Initiative seeks to implement the CCM departmental mission and is supporting the department’s goals in the following ways:

“CCM supports and strengthens the religious and spiritual lives of DePaul students through the lens of the Catholic and Vincentian traditions. We prepare students to lead and actively engage in the mission of the Church by:

- forming a variety of faith communities which teach students to follow Jesus Christ as the model and method of ministry.”

Catholic Small Groups are based around preparing students to actively engage their faith and the mission of the church. They are faith communities which engage Jesus Christ through the gospels as a model and method of ministry.

“CCM will augment/enhance:

- Students’ awareness of DePaul’s commitment to institutionalize its Catholic identity.
- Catholic students’ personal capacities for engaging the Catholic faith tradition.”

Students can engage with DePaul’s Catholic identity through Catholic Small Groups and they are personally able to engage with their faith tradition in a more capable way.

“I. Department Learning Outcomes

1. Students participating in Catholic Campus Ministry programs will integrate central elements of the theology and spirituality of the Catholic-Vincentian tradition into their daily lives and choices.”

“3. Students participating in CCM Programs will utilize a Catholic-Vincentian faith perspective to guide their daily lives and choices.”

One of the opportunities students receive by participating in Catholic Small Groups is to integrate their faith with their everyday lives, most especially by connecting the gospel message to their lives.

Catholic Small Groups are supportive of Vision 2018 most especially in “Goal 3: Strengthen our Catholic and Vincentian Identity”

“Objective 3a: Elevate our distinctive Catholic and Vincentian identity across the university. Expand and deepen engagement of all students with DePaul’s Catholic and Vincentian mission.”

Catholic Small Groups are available to all students to engage with DePaul’s Catholic and Vincentian mission.

Catholic Small Groups are also supportive of Vision 2018 “Goal 4: Foster Diversity and Inclusion”

“Objective 4b: Build a vibrant university community.

Improve communication, reduce barriers and enhance opportunities for collaboration among members of the university community.

Strengthen the sense of community, affinity and institutional pride among all DePaul constituencies—students, alumni, staff, faculty and friends.”

By meeting in locations associated with typical student gatherings, this has reduced a barrier to participating, especially amongst students who are unsure of how their presence will be perceived in an unknown space. This enhances student opportunities to meet each other across the university community. Catholic Small Groups also have been shown to enhance affinity for DePaul through fostering a greater sense of belonging.

Anecdotally (and this is part of why we wanted to look at this initiative for assessment) we have heard from student participants “I wouldn’t still be here at DePaul if it wasn’t for the relationships I made in my Small Group” This would suggest implications for supporting student persistence which is a divisional focus for Student Affairs. Additionally, “Outreach” was the agreed upon focus of our CCM department this year, and Catholic Small Groups were an important part of that strategy.

Supporting Scholarship

Within the Roman Catholic Church there is a newly emphasized mandate to the Baptized of the Roman Catholic Church called “The New Evangelization”. The New Evangelization is an umbrella term given to efforts which seek to spread the Gospel message in novel and accessible ways. It is a renewal, affirming the ancient teachings of the Catholic Faith through the mediums used in the modern world. (See Appendix F for more detail)

This New Evangelization is the context within which the model of the Catholic Small Groups Initiative has come about. The Evangelical Catholic organization developed a model of outreach (Evangelical Training Camp, 2014) and evangelization to answer the call of the New Evangelization to renew the Catholic Church’s commitment to the Gospel message. The Small Group ministry model was developed over years as a way to “Reach More” (The Evangelical Catholic, mission statement) by creating groups that are “incubators for conversion” (Evangelical Catholic Training Camp) so that people can draw closer to Jesus Christ.

Students were trained in the Evangelical Catholic model of Catholic Small Group facilitation and in conversation with Catholic Campus Ministry staff adapted the model in ways they found would be most beneficial to the DePaul University context. This was the context for the Catholic Small Group Initiative at DePaul University.

The Catholic Small Groups Initiative is important within the context of U.S. Catholic ministry in higher education because it seeks to promote certain principals that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has asked campus ministries to embody. In the pastoral letter “Empowered by the Spirit” A Pastoral Letter on Campus Ministry (Issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Issued by

the NCCB/USCC, Copyright © 1985, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc.) states that students are to be formed in six main areas:

- A. Forming the Faith Community
- B. Appropriating the Faith
- C. Forming Christian Conscience
- D. Educating for Peace and Justice
- E. Facilitating Personal Development
- F. Developing Leaders for the Future

The Catholic Small Groups Initiative at DePaul University seeks to give students significant opportunities for formation. Our findings showed student's needs being met in a few main ways which uphold the principles of formation suggested by the USCCB,

- 1) Safe spaces to explore faith -A) Forming the Faith Community
- 2) Reserved time for faith – C) Forming Christian Conscience
- 3) Becoming more confident talking about scripture/faith – F) Developing Leaders for the Future
- 4) Exploring how the Catholic faith relates to them – B) Appropriating the Faith
- 5) Faith community/sense of belonging at DePaul University –E) Facilitating personal development

In my estimation, it is safe to conjecture that exposure to Jesus' model of ministry through reading the Gospel and discussing it within the context of community, will, to some degree, accomplish principal D) Educating for Peace and Justice. (See Appendix F for more detail on how these principles relate to Catholic Small Groups Initiative)

The methodology of Catholic Small Groups as a model of ministry which is growing across college and university campuses throughout the US was recently chronicled as a necessary and effective practice in an America Magazine article "When Smaller is Better: Small Faith Communities and the Future of the US Church" by Joseph Graham Healey May 24th 2016 "Faith sharing groups by any name constitute a grassroots effort whose success the Catholic Church in America can hardly afford to ignore if it holds any aspirations of remaining relevant to the lives of millions of young adults."

Utilizing a ministry model that is growing in across colleges and universities in the US, situated well within the New Evangelization of the Catholic Church, forming students in the principles that the US Conference of Catholic Bishops is asking campus ministries to attend to, and providing for student needs within the framework of our department's mission and DePaul University's strategic vision, the Catholic Small Groups Initiative is a well-positioned response to what we as the Catholic faithful are to be about.

IV. Data Collection & Methodology

Data Collection:

According to 2015-2016 freshmen class summary, 39% of incoming DePaul students identified as Catholic (Enrollment Summary, 2015) upon entering their freshman year. These students may access spiritual support, community, and religious services through the Catholic Campus Ministry (CCM) department. CCM strives to provide a wide variety of Catholic programs to appeal to the wide range of interests of students. One current offering is a student outreach and evangelization initiative, Catholic Small Groups.

Catholic Small Groups, typically made up of 4-10 DePaul University students, meet once a week to discuss the Gospel and how it relates to their lives. Groups are "led" by DePaul student volunteers. Typically groups are co-led by a pair of students, though some groups are led by one student or three leaders rotated leading responsibilities. The 2015-2016 academic terms are the initiative's second academic year being implemented at DePaul University.

This needs assessment targets those who have participated in the program as either leaders or group members.

Data for this needs assessment were collected using paper surveys and focus groups. Paper surveys were distributed and collected at the start of focus groups. Paper surveys were administered to both group leaders (Appendix A) and group members (Appendix B). Focus group protocols were created to assess the needs of students participating in Catholic Small Groups as group members (Appendix C) or group leaders (Appendix D). Six focus groups were held (3 for leaders and 3 for group members) in March and April of 2016. Focus groups were led by the primary evaluator (graduate assistant). Focus group questions focused on areas related to spiritual growth, catholic identity exploration, peer relationship development, sense of belonging, and leadership development which aligned with the intentional aspects of the small group program. Focus groups were recorded for data analysis purposes.

Students were recruited for the focus groups in-person or through email. Twenty DePaul students are currently leading or have previously led a Catholic Small Group. A total of eight student leaders volunteered to participate in the assessment project. There are 35 students who were identified by Catholic Small Group Leaders as having participated in Catholic small groups this year as group members. Seven of these group members participated in the group member focus groups.

Data Analysis:

Data from the focus groups in audio format was analyzed using qualitative open-coding. The coding team, consisting of the primary evaluator (a graduate assistant) and secondary coder (an undergraduate student), listened to all focus group recordings and noted statements that reflected student needs. Demographic information collected using the paper surveys was analyzed using SPSS 16 to calculate means and percentages. After compiling a list of need statements for each focus group, need statements were grouped into themes. This process was done with responses from each of the six focus groups.

Participant Consent & Confidentiality:

Formal written informed consent was not obtained from students because data will only be used for internal DePaul University review of the Small Group program. Verbal consent was obtained from participants during recruitment and again before the recorder was turned on at the focus group. At both points, students were informed of the purpose of the evaluation and informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could leave at any time. They were also informed that their responses were confidential and only the evaluator and the coding team would see their identified data and that their data would be de-identified before it was given to Catholic Campus Ministry or Student Affairs.

To protect the confidentiality of the students, only the evaluator and a secondary coder listened to the audio recordings. After the focus groups, the recordings were downloaded onto a protected W drive folder and then deleted from the recorder. Focus group participants were also reminded to not repeat anything they heard during the focus group to their friends or to CCM staff. In addition, no names were used in the coding team's notes and all identifying information about participants was removed during data cleaning. While it is possible for the coding team to identify participants from their voices on the recordings all reported data is de-identified. When the evaluation is complete all audio recordings and identifiable data will be deleted.

During the focus groups, participants were asked to talk about their needs as students. In response to the focus group questions (Appendix C and D), students shared information about their faith journey, friendships, and personal struggles with faith and with finding belonging at DePaul University. No sensitive or identifying information was collected and all stories were voluntarily given. Stories that

were deemed by the research team as overtly unique were censored to protect the confidentiality promised to focus group participants.

V. Data & Results

Student Demographics

(See Appendix E)

A total of 15 (8 leaders and 7 group members) students participated in the focus groups out of 55 students (35 group members and 20 leaders), yielding a 27% response rate.

Group Members: Of the 7 group members 57% ($n=4$) were male. The average age of group members was 20.71 ($SD=3.3$). Fifty-seven percent ($n=4$) of group members participated in a DePaul Catholic small group for the first time this year. Of the focus group participants, 86% ($n=6$) were heterosexual. Seventy-two percent ($n=5$) were White. Seventy-one percent ($n=5$) of group members spoke English as their primary language (students also spoke French, Korean and Spanish. Eighty-six percent ($n=6$) identified as Catholic.

Fourteen percent of group members ($n=1$) were juniors, 43% ($n=3$) were sophomores and 43% ($n=3$) were freshman. Fourteen percent ($n=1$) of the group members were first generation college students. Small group members took an average of 14.62 ($SD=3.8$) credit hours. Forty-three percent ($n=3$) of students took the majority of their classes on the Lincoln Park Campus. Fourteen percent ($n=1$) of group members identified as transfer students. Eighty-six percent of students ($n=6$) neither had a campus jobs nor worked for the CCM office.

Group Leaders: Of the 8 leaders 6 (75%) were female. The average age of group leaders was 20.38 ($SD=1.2$). Six leaders (75%) had led groups last year. Of the focus group leaders, 88% ($n=7$) were heterosexual. The majority of leaders were White (63%, $n=5$). Seventy-five percent ($n=6$) of leaders spoke English as their primary language and 25% ($n=2$) spoke Spanish. All leaders ($n=8$) identified as Catholic.

The majority of leaders, (63%, $n=5$) were sophomores. Twenty-five percent ($n=2$) of the student leaders were first generation college students. None of the leaders were transfer students. Small group leaders took an average of 17.25 ($SD=2.1$) credit hours. Half (50%; $n=4$) of students took the majority of their classes on the Lincoln Park Campus. Small group leaders worked an average of 13.75 hours a week at campus and non-DePaul jobs ($SD=14.6$; $range=0-43$). The majority of leaders (87%, $n=7$) were employed by DePaul University. Twenty-five percent ($n=2$) of group leaders are employed by the CCM office.

Student Needs

(For additional student quotes regarding student needs see appendix G)

While leaders and group members were initially analyzed separately, leaders, when asked about their experience as “leaders” said they were not “leaders” but just “more active group members” and did not feel their experience was different from that of the group members. This interpretation of leader’s role as group members is supported in the needs expressed by both group members and group leaders. Both group members and group leaders, when asked about their experience reported the same core

needs, suggesting the experiences of group members and leaders were similar. For this reason the shared themes will be assessed and discussed together instead of separately. Student group members and student leaders identified 5 needs associated with their decision to join a Catholic Small Group: 1) safe spaces to explore faith, 2) reserved time for faith, 3) becoming more confident talking about scripture/faith, 4) exploring how the Catholic faith relates to them, and 5) faith community/sense of belonging at DePaul University. Leaders expressed an additional need: a desire to “give back” to their community. “Met” needs tended to be reported by students whose group remained active for at least two consecutive quarters. Students reporting “unmet” needs tended to be students in groups that only lasted one quarter and/or disbanded mid-quarter. Thirty-eight percent ($n=3$) of group member focus group participants participated in small groups that lasted for at least 2 quarters, the majority, 62% ($n=4$) of group members were in groups that disbanded after 1 or less than 1 quarters.

- **Students Seek Safe Spaces to Explore Faith**

Students expressed a need for safe (non-judgmental) spaces to talk about their faith. While they did not feel physically unsafe expressing their faith on campus, they would not mention their faith on campus outside of spaces that they deemed as particularly safe. Several students mentioned fearing that they would be seen as weird or silly for expressing their faith within their friend groups or in classes.

“My faith was a personal thing; I needed a safe place to explore it with others. I was already a religious person and faithful. It wasn’t searching for [my faith] but feeling comfortable embracing it [publicly]... I felt the cool people don’t go to Mass or talk about their faith.” – Group Member

Students felt their need for a safe space had been met by Catholic Small Groups. When they share their opinions in group, their thoughts and experiences were respected by the leader and other group members.

- **Students Need Reserved Time for their Faith**

In addition to wanting safe spaces to explore their faith, students said that they joined small groups to create a “set-aside” time in their week to talk about and explore their faith. Students wanted to continue to grow in their faith in college but knew that if they did not carve time into their week it would not happen. “[For me] it was important to set aside time to take a moment and reflect.” - Group Member

Students described small group as “weekly appointments” and “mini-retreats in the middle of their week.” Students also stated they appreciated the group aspect of small group because it gave them a sense of accountability. Regardless of their best intentions, they “knew” they would not sit down with the scripture each week on their own.

“[I joined because] I wanted to commit myself more. [Small group] is like a weekly appointment.” – Group Member

- **Students Want to Become More Confident Talking About Scripture/Faith**

Students stated that they joined a Small Group because of a desire to be more confident and knowledgeable about their faith and the scripture. Knowledge and familiarity with the Bible varied drastically among Small Group students. Some students had very positive experiences with the Bible and were looking to expand on their existing knowledge. Other students, while raised Catholic, did not have very in-depth or positive experiences with scripture growing up and were looking to become more knowledgeable.

“I like when we talk about the gospel stories in modern terms. The bible growing up was so holy that you couldn’t change the wording... it just *was*. You couldn’t do anything with it.” – Group Member

Students felt that their need to learn more about the Bible and to become more confident when talking about their faith was met at Small Groups. “I feel more solidified and informed [in my faith] and surrounded by a community that feels the same, I know I’m not alone.” – Group Member

Students especially saw the pay off when they attended Mass each week. Students discussed the thrill they got when the priest would touch on an idea they had covered in Small Group.

“It’s cool too, there have been a couple times this year with small group where what has been said in the homily had been something we talked about and it was a fun feeling... it was really rewarding to know that the conversation we had was something along the lines of something a priest would think.” - Leader

- **Students Desire Opportunities to Explore How the Catholic Faith Relates to Them:**

Students also felt they were lacking opportunities to explore how the Catholic faith related to them and to their daily life. Their Catholicism was something that took place on Sundays but they did not feel a personal identification with the religion or necessarily capable of living it out in their own lives.

“In high school, [the bible] was taught as unalterable history not as a way to live your life.” - Group Member

Students talked about “lightbulb” moments in small group when this need was met. They saw the connection between the ancient text of the Bible and their lives as 21st century college students.

“Seeing that Jesus and the people in the Bible went through similar struggles as us makes me feel less alone.” – Group Member

- **Students are Seeking a Faith Community/a Sense of Belonging at DePaul**

Another common need students discussed was their desire for a faith community at DePaul as well as lacking a general sense of belonging within the broader DePaul community. These sentiments were especially true for students during their freshman year at DePaul. Students had come to college and realized that making friends was a lot harder than they thought. Faced with this need, they joined Small Group as a way to connect. Students felt Small Group provided an answer to this need.

“I was trying to get a handle on how college would go for me. I was feeling out of place and I could at least go there and feel safe and get people’s perspectives on life.” - Group Member

“Freshman year was really rough, I wanted to meet people and get myself out there. Going to small group and taking that first initiative helped build a foundation of belonging here at DePaul.” – Group Member

Deeper than just finding people to hang out with, these Catholic students were looking to connect to other people of faith. Many said they had friends but not friends with whom they felt they could share their faith.

“I wasn’t finding people that had the same values and morals as me but I hadn’t been in CCM yet.” - Group Member

“[Freshman year I kept thinking]: I am alone. I am the only one who thinks this. I am weird.” – Group Member

“For me, the reason last year that I joined small group was to help find a community that I wanted to be a part of. So I feel like making those personal relationships was the driving force to why I started and why I continued.” - Leader

However, not all students found the community they desired through Small Groups. These students said that the need for community had not been met at Small Group because their group disbanded during or at the end of Fall Quarter.

“I wanted to meet more people at DePaul [that’s why I joined Small Group]. But that wasn’t fulfilled. We just stopped meeting after Winter Break. I never got to form friendships.” - Group Member

For those whose groups continued past Fall Quarter and/or were in groups during the program’s first year, felt that their need for a faith community and a sense of belonging was fulfilled in Small Group.

“Small group was a tie to the community for a commuter student [like me].” - Group Member

Many students said the types of discussions they had in group created a unique bond that was different from their other relationships on campus.

“The conversations that come up in small group are about what really matters in life not the superficial coverings that a lot of conversations are.” – Leader

“Small group is different because it is small because people know each other; “like are we still praying for this or are we moving on to pray for something else this week.” They know what is going on in my life.” – Group Member

- **Leaders Want to Give Back to their Community**

When asked why they had decided to become Small Group leaders, leaders explained that they wanted to “give back to their community.” Leaders had benefited from past small groups and, because of these positive experiences, wanted to help create those experiences for others.

“I think I like being able to offer a space where people can share about their faith and grow in their faith and share about their lives maybe what’s going on and have some feedback and empathetic responses from those around them.” - Leader

Leaders also talked about how the fact that Small Group physically takes place outside of the CCM office allows leaders to expand CCM’s ability to reach people that might not necessarily walk through the doors for other CCM programs. Leaders enjoyed being able to bond with these students and provide for their spiritual needs.

“There are people that don’t necessarily see everything going on in the office as something they want to be a part of, or like I know there are a couple of people in my small group that come to small group and come to Mass but other than that they don’t go to other programming and I feel like I wouldn’t have met them if it wasn’t for that intentional [Small Group] space.” - Leader

The leaders said, while they liked giving back to the community, they did not want to make it sound like they were not getting anything out of the experience. They were able to take part in and benefit from the atmosphere they created.

”For me it’s a combination I think, like I don’t know if it is 50/50 or 60/40 its like pretty close to equal amounts growth for myself... but at the same time I love giving... I really like being able to give this gift to other people. I think [I really like giving] because I think it makes the world a better place and when we share it it’s a beautiful thing. So there is that combo... It’s kind of a mutual thing.” – Leader

Barriers That Could Prevent Catholic Small Groups from Meeting Students’ Needs

The majority of group members and leaders reported small group experiences meeting their needs. Some group members and leaders also expressed those needs not being met. “Met” needs tended to be reported by students whose group remained active for at least two consecutive quarters. Students with “unmet” needs tended to be students in groups that only lasted one quarter and/or disbanded mid-quarter. Leaders and group members identified 4 factors associated with unmet needs: 1) inconsistent Small Group weekly content, 2) communication issues, 3) over committed group leaders, and 4) leaders lacking the necessary logistical support and training.

- **Inconsistent Small Group Weekly Content**

Group members in groups that disbanded as well as group members who quit attending active groups, explained that they had joined to learn about the gospel and to talk about their faith. However, when they attended group, the gospel was not discussed or was not given the amount of attention they had expected. When the scripture was not discussed enough or at all, students felt their need for spiritual growth was unmet.

“I joined [small group] to learn about the gospel. We didn’t talk about it for even half the time.” - Group Member

In addition to being disappointed that scripture was not emphasized in Small Groups, students also expressed confusion on “what” Small group actually was. Group members discussed how their leader “never seemed to do the same thing every week.” When the students were craving structure and an environment that they could count on to be consistent, they wished their leader would keep at least a basic framework each week. Instead, these students never knew what to expect when they showed up for group each week.

“He never seemed to do the same thing every week. We always talked about the gospel at some point but there was just too much other stuff going on. He had good points [about the gospel] but then he would try to do an activity that was totally unrelated.” - Group Member

- **Communication Issues with Group Members and Potential Group Members**

Another barrier to meeting needs was communication. Group members discussed having communication issues with both their group leaders when they were in a group as well as having a hard time getting information from CCM about small groups when they were trying to join.

Within Groups: Group members said they were not always sure week to week if they were having small group because it was not uncommon for their leaders to cancel meetings last minute. They mentioned they understood that sometimes things come up but clarified that their leader would often cancel group by word of mouth. Communicating with the group like this was ineffective and group members would show up for group only to realize everyone else had gotten the message. This caused frustration and even caused students to drop out of their groups.

“He had to cancel all the time because of sports...I mean I get that, but like, you have a phone, send us a freaking text. You know? I have a life too. Just let us know so we can go work on our own stuff. Don’t make us figure it out on our own. There were a few times I showed up and no one else did... I got the message eventually. I stopped going after that. I don’t think they meet anymore anyway.” - Group Member

Similar issues also caused problems during quarter transitions. Leaders who did restart in the winter planned to restart at the beginning of Lent (a decision made during training at the beginning of the year). However, it varied group to group if leaders told their groups about this plan. Group members came back in the winter expecting to have meetings and were confused and some felt hurt when they did not. Group members from these groups said they were sad group had stopped but were

more hurt that their leaders had not talked to them and explained what was going on. Their need for a structured and emotionally safe space to make friends and explore their faith was not met when group leaders did not keep open clear lines of communication. This also impeded the forming lasting friendships. Some group members from groups that disbanded without a discussion said they felt abandoned and that the earlier bonds made had been betrayed.

“I don’t understand why it was too hard to have a conversation? We never had a discussion [about stopping]. But when I came back in January I never heard from them again. It sucked you know? I thought we were friends. It was like they had dropped off the face of the Earth.” - Group Member

Advertising: Students talked about a lack of advertising for small groups and a lack of understanding among CCM front desk staff about when groups were meeting and how to join. Many of their concerns revolved around outreach and advertising of small groups. These concerns usually came from students who joined small group during the winter or spring quarter.

“They had, from what I heard, all these announcements at Mass last quarter. But I didn’t start coming to Mass until February. I get that I was a little late to the game, but they mention Food for Thought like every week why don’t they do that with small group?” - Group Member

- **Over Committed Group Leaders**

Both group leaders and group members cited the busy schedules of leaders as a barrier to meeting the needs expressed above.

Leaders who had to discontinue their groups expressed that they had come into the program with the best of the intentions and wanted to give back to their community through leading a group. Many were also greatly honored that they had been nominated as potential leaders by their peers and wanted to live up to those expectations. However, when the school year started and their schedules got busy they were not able to give Small Group the attention it needed.

“I was nominated to be a leader by people in my group last year... that meant a lot. I guess I never felt seen in CCM. I didn’t feel wanted. So when I got nominated I didn’t want to let them down. It felt like I was finally becoming part of the CCM community. Even after we stopped meeting I didn’t want to tell Rob. I just kept telling him we were working on it. I felt like I had let everyone down.” - Leader

These busy schedules led to leaders frequently canceling group meetings because it conflicted with their academic/work/sport schedule or coming to group with little or no preparation. Group members discussed that they felt unwelcome in group when it was clear their leader was “too busy to be there”, “wasn’t present”, or “didn’t want to be there”. Group members that had these experiences did not investigate joining other groups when their group was discontinued.

“I joined to make friends. I thought of [the group leader] like a big brother. When he stopped returning my texts [in the winter] about group I stopped going to group. Friends are people you hang out with. They weren’t my friends.” - Group Member

- **Lack of Logistical Support and Training**

Many leaders expressed that they did not receive the support they had been expecting from CCM when they started leading. Three support focused needs for leaders were found: 1) logistical, 2) training, and 3) spiritual.

Student leaders whose groups never got off the ground or did not last long term, spoke about having trouble getting in contact with their co-leader(s) to set up a time for the weekly meetings and/or finding a place to hold group meetings. These issues were not necessarily caused by incompatible

schedules or a lack of meeting locations but by a diffused sense of responsibility in the decision making and planning process.

“[I wanted to lead in the winter but] we needed a new time. There were too many of us [too many leaders] and I never knew what any of them were thinking. I think they quit but I could never get a clear answer from any of them. If they weren’t going to make an effort, you know, I wasn’t going to either.” - Leader

Leaders also discussed feeling ill equipped to prepare materials each week for group. Two levels of training were provided for leaders: 9 of the 20 leaders attended a 5 day training camp and the other 11 attended a 3 hour training meeting at DePaul at the beginning of the academic year. Three other one hour trainings were held during the year but were sparsely attended by group leaders. Leaders from both groups expressed concern about their ability to put together materials each week and desired additional training and/or refreshers throughout the year. When asked to specify which areas of the program they would like this additional training in, leaders pointed to help planning materials and coming up with ideas for discussions in group, as well as regular check-ins with CCM and other leaders.

“I would sit down to get ready for group and I wasn’t sure where to start. We learned about this at ETC but I just needed more help. I scheduled a meeting with Rob. We met, but that really didn’t help. I just wasn’t getting it. I need someone to sit there and walk me through it but he already had too much on his plate... the rest of my leaders weren’t much help either.”
– Leader

In addition to group related support, leaders’ commentary on why their groups discontinued suggest that personal spiritual issues among leaders was a barrier to success as a leader. Not all, but many leaders who discontinued leadership mentioned low points in their personal faith leading up to discontinuing their Small Group leadership role.

“I wasn’t really sure who I was as a Catholic anymore. So I guess it was hard trying to teach that to others when I wasn’t sure of it myself.” – Leader

Discussion

Findings collected for this needs assessment suggest that there is a great need for programs like the Catholic Small Groups Initiative on the DePaul campus. Catholic students, especially freshman and sophomores greatly need programs that provide safe spaces to explore their faith, create reserved time for their faith during the week, provide opportunities to practice talking about scripture and faith, and foster a sense of community and belonging.

Responses from both leaders and group members suggest that Catholic Small Groups have the ability to meet these needs when implemented as intended.

The current intended model of meeting format offers a short time at the beginning of the meeting to socialize based around a question that tangentially relates to the scripture which is to be discussed. After this social discussion, a short time of prayer including group member intentions is shared, followed by a reading of the scripture. Students are then asked to discuss the scripture in a three step method of 1) Observing what is going on in the scripture passage, 2) Understanding what the point/meaning/significance of the scripture passage is, 3) Applying the scripture passage to their personal life situations and experiences. This discussion is followed by a closing prayer where group member prayer intentions are once more prayed for by all members in the group.

Student needs were most often met in groups where the group leaders provided consistent meeting formats, were transparent in their planning and decisions, had the time to commit to the group, and where group leaders felt adequately supported and trained. In groups where one or more of these barriers existed, participants tended to express that they had less helpful experiences and more

frequently reported “unmet needs.” These groups also tended to disband after a quarter or less whereas helpful experiences and “met” needs were most often reported by students whose group remained active for at least two consecutive quarters.

Data saturation was reached during data collection. Data saturation suggests that sufficient data was collected to draw conclusions and make recommendations. However, the study’s sample is limited to leaders and group members that responded to the evaluation team’s requests to participate in focus groups. Of the 35 group members and the 19 leaders emailed about the focus groups, no one responded. In person invitations were used to recruit after email invitations were ineffective. The evaluation team was limited in recruiting participants that they knew and to whom they had regular access. Therefore, it is possible that there are unaddressed experiences from those students the evaluation team was unable to contact. While this is possible, the evaluation team feels confident in their sample’s ability to represent the many varying experiences of small group participants (e.g. 1st year vs 2nd year in group, male vs female, year in school, stopped attending or still attending, group disbanded vs still active).

This project has shown Catholic Campus Ministry that this particular outreach strategy and evangelization model is effective when implemented as planned. Understanding this, it means that the department needs to utilize this tool to engage with students who might otherwise not be reached or retained through traditional programmatic ministry models. This contributes to how we form our student leaders and what purpose we charge them with. The peer relationships seem to be especially effective for meeting one of those needs, “finding a sense of belonging at DePaul University”.

Contributing to a sense of belonging at DePaul University and building affinity for the University is something Student Affairs as a whole is very interested in. This can shape students’ wellness, learning, persistence toward degree completion, as well as alumni support. Recognizing that this is a model that has proven its capacity for affinity building and sense of belonging amongst students, we can see that this project greatly contributes to the work and goals of the division.

VI. Recommendations & Plans for Action

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the assessment team makes the following recommendations to help leaders facilitate in a manner which most effectively meets student needs. The implicit recommendation is that Catholic Small Groups should be invested in, strengthened, and continued. The Catholic Small Groups Initiative is an important outreach strategy providing an environment which meets multiple student needs. Additionally the following recommendations will enhance the Catholic Small Group Initiative’s ability to meet the needs of students most effectively.

Recommended Adjustments to Enhance Leaders’ Effectiveness

- Emphasize consistent weekly content: Leader should create an overarching meeting structure and stay consistent in its usage. This structure would be standardized across groups since the initiative is meeting the needs of students when properly implemented. It is recommended that the structure taught in the training be emphasized and utilized by leaders.
- Have transparent and frequent communication: Miscommunications and a lack of transparency were at the root of many small group unmet needs. It is recommended group leaders create group messages either on Facebook or through texting to communicate with their group members. Group messages provide a pre-established medium for sending out group information such as last minute cancelations as well as reminders about group meetings. Leaders who used group chats this year also used them to check in with group members about weekly attendance, to schedule group get-togethers, and to build a group bond outside regular meetings. All these contributed to meeting student needs.

- Take an active role in group transfers: If leaders find themselves unable to continue their roles mid-quarter or during quarter transitions, they should be transparent with their group about their reasons for stepping down *before* ending the group so group members do not take the leader's actions personally. Part of this discussion should include the leader taking an active role in connecting group members with other groups since students do not seem inclined to search out groups after their original group disbands.

Recommended Adjustments to be made by the Catholic Campus Ministry Student Leaders and Professional Staff to Enhance the Catholic Small Groups Initiative

- Incorporate more extensive advertising into outreach efforts: Both students who joined Catholic Small Groups and community members who were unable to join a group, expressed a desire for more frequent and more informative advertising. Students would like to see posters and flyers hanging in CCM, around campus, and in the Student Mass Connection. Both leaders and group members thought a handout kept at the front desk or a poster/white board hung in the CCM office that showed which groups were active, when and where they met, and the contact information of the leader(s) would make getting involved or switching groups easier. This centralized information would also make it easier for front desk workers to provide information to students that walk in.
- Emphasize the time commitment during leader recruitment: Leaders often expressed surprise when they were unable to fulfill their role as a group leader because of other commitments. It is recommended that when advertising the position, CCM should emphasize and define the time commitment needed prior to a leader assuming the role.
- Schedule more frequent trainings/check-ins: Many leaders expressed a desire for more frequent training and support meetings with Rob and their fellow group leaders. However, when leaders felt overwhelmed, or unable to succeed they did not reach out to CCM. This suggests that regularly scheduled trainings where leaders can discuss and troubleshoot problems they are facing may help increase the longevity and success of groups, especially for less proactive leaders.
- Provide spiritual support for leaders: Many leaders discussed having personal spiritual "lows" or "dark periods" during the school year that made it difficult for them to lead group. It is recommended that steps be taken to support leaders' spiritual needs throughout the year through one-on-one and/or group check-ins about leaders' personal faith.

Action Plan

Based on the findings and recommendations made, Catholic Campus Ministry will happily invest in the student led Catholic Small Groups Initiative. For the upcoming year, Catholic Campus Ministry has decided to focus on the theme of "Radical Hospitality" and sees Catholic Small Groups as a way of offering this important tenet of the Catholic faith. By placing this as the overarching theme that we are focusing on, we are already taking action to emphasize our commitment to the Catholic Small Groups Initiative.

Catholic Campus Ministry has reformulated the student leadership structure. In doing so a top tier position was created for a student to be an "Affinity Group Coordinator". One of the roles of this student will be coordinating the Catholic Small Groups Initiative. By having one centralized place for this initiative, many of the recommendations for strengthening Catholic Small Groups can be accomplished.

With this reformulation of the student leadership structure there is also an ongoing spiritual formation and leadership training which the Catholic Small Group leaders will be invited to attend on a monthly basis beginning in September 2016. There will also be area affinity group meetings conducted by the student Affinity Group Coordinator on at least a twice a quarter basis. Catholic Campus Ministry has also committed to using department resources to provide clear, consistent and widespread advertising of the Catholic Small Groups.

Providing for recommended adjustments

- Through the enhanced advertising and centralized coordinator of the initiative, we hope to meet the recommendations concerning transparent communication.
- Through ongoing “Affinity Group” area meetings and monthly student leader formation meetings, we hope to meet the recommendations concerning more frequent trainings, check-ins, and providing greater spiritual support for leaders.
- By having a student coordinator selecting Catholic Small Group leaders there will be an opportunity to emphasize the time commitment for leaders, as well as clearly communicating the expectations of how a leader will conduct their group. This will meet the recommendations for leader recruitment and recommendations for leaders to enhance their Catholic Small Group.

Timeline for implementation

The student Affinity Groups Coordinator has already been hired. Over the summer beginning July 1, 2016 this student will recruit Catholic Small Group leaders based on recommendations from current Catholic Small Groups. The Affinity Groups Coordinator will gather the day, time, location, and contact information of Catholic Small Groups and work with the graphic designer to make clear promotional materials inviting students to Catholic Small Groups. Just prior to the beginning of the 2016-2017 academic year, the Affinity Coordinator will convene a meeting of Catholic Small Group leaders and begin training for the leaders.

One barrier may be student availability prior to the academic term. This first “launch” may seem a bit rushed but with a streamlined structure should work well to train leaders and recruit participants in a well communicated manner.

Sharing the results

Participants (as well as those who were invited to participate but did not respond) in the assessment will receive an email summary of the findings, recommendations, and action plan during October of the fall quarter.

Student leaders will get an overview of the findings during their student leader training prior to the fall academic term.

Catholic Campus Ministry staff will review this assessment project in-depth during a staff meeting in mid-August 2016. Each professional staff member will also receive a copy of our departmental report.

The Assistant Vice President of University Ministry (Mark Laboe) will also be given a copy of the report via email in August prior to Catholic Campus Ministry student leader training. A short amount of time will be spent in the University Ministry area meeting in October 2016, giving a summary of each of the area departments’ assessment reports.

In mid-July 2016 Mission and Values will also be given a copy of the report and a summary will be included in the final grant report for the Vincentian Endowment Fund grant that was awarded in relation to this initiative. The VEF grant provided for students and staff to attend the Evangelical Catholic Training Camp and allowed CCM to hire a graduate researcher (Danielle Vaclavik) to assess the Catholic Small Groups Initiative.

Information will be shared with Student Affairs through the Assessment Symposium in October 2016.

Implications for Other Departments

This project has clearly shown that students are naming a need for safe (non-judgmental) spaces, where peers are able to gather at a reserved time in neutral spaces, to make relationships with one another/find a sense of belonging, and explore/gain confidence in elements of their identities that they perceive as difficult to explore in other arenas. Implications for Student Affairs may be that small affinity groups in this model can be beneficial to students seeking to explore other elements of their identities. This may be: ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious identity, or involvement with a particular defined group. Due to the element of not feeling comfortable sharing amongst a wide group, these groups would probably be most effective with identities that students have potential to feel marginalized. In other words, a general group of “1st year students” may not be as beneficial as a specific group of “latino/a 1st year students” or “first generation first year students”. The implications of this project from an overarching Student Affairs framework may be that it is wise to place an increased emphasis on building peer affinity groups. There may be an implicit implication that traditional programming may not meet these particular needs as effectively as a small group model. This could have implications for how student leaders are trained and for what they are trained.