Cardinal Outreach Team: A Media Campaign

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Every Ball State student is familiar with the term “the Ball State Bubble.” This phrase refers to the disconnection between campus and the city of Muncie. But a closer look at Muncie reveals a city plagued by unemployment, blight and poverty – a city in need of the service students can, if they’re willing, provide. Christian students such as myself should especially care about others in need; doing so is an express command of the Bible. In response to the Ball State bubble and the misalignment of Christian students having no Christ-centered outlet to serve the poor, I helped found Cardinal Outreach Team, a student organization that provides avenues for students to serve those in need in Muncie. C.O.T. is so far a small organization, so as a journalism graphics major, I created a media campaign to boost awareness of our group on campus. This consisted of researching Muncie, creating a multimedia website, managing social media and planning and directing our campus-wide spring events.
Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank Diana, Patrick and every single member of Cardinal Outreach Team. Each of you is an answered prayer. You guys give out of your time and your own pockets because you love Jesus and want others to know Him, never asking for a reward or recognition. It’s truly inspiring to work with such selfless, dedicated people. You’ve all changed me for the better.
Introduction

*The Ball State bubble.* Every student has heard the term. Ball State students tend to stick to McKinley Avenue and the Village with no reason or desire to venture off campus. Students sarcastically talk about “Funcie” and the blight and lack of entertainment of the community outside Ball State. I’ve heard it over and over: “Muncie sucks.”

The disconnection is clear. Ball State is isolated from the rest of Muncie, building multi-million dollar campus buildings while 4,000 Muncie homes are abandoned and crumbling (Ryan). After decades of diminishing manufacturing jobs, the city’s unemployment rate hovers around 10%, and the poverty rate of the county is the second highest in Indiana (STATS Indiana).

Muncie is ailing; there’s no doubt about that.

I came to Ball State having grown up in a well-off Christian home. I strive to follow Jesus Christ in all I do. I’ve been involved in Ball State Cru for the last four years, leading and attending Bible studies and singing in the worship band. I knew the Bible told me to serve others, but I thought my Christian life could just stay in my small circle of friends and fellow students. I saw no reason to care about life outside campus. I was doing my thing and planned to leave Muncie after graduation without looking back.

But one thing I finally realized I could not do was authentically follow Christ and ignore those in need in my college community beyond campus.

Cardinal Outreach Team

In fall 2010, my good friend Diana Neff became a Christian. After we attended a Cru conference over winter break that year, she expressed a desire to show love to the Muncie
community. We were both sick of hearing students complain about Muncie, and we felt that we were missing something in our refusal to get involved beyond Ball State. After seeing the results of an outreach in Indianapolis at that winter conference, Diana and I realized the need for practical, Gospel-centered love in Muncie. She especially felt convicted to see the same proactive change happen here.

Cardinal Outreach Team was Diana’s idea: a group of students who take the Bible literally when it says to serve those in need, who care about Muncie beyond Ball State, who want to make a positive difference in this city. We both felt a driving purpose behind her idea, something that said, “This is right. This is something that needs to happen.” We found more students who felt the same disconnection, the same desire to do something. And that spring of 2011, we organized a campus-wide food drive and day of outreach where we delivered boxes of food to 25 Muncie families in need. We were able to share the Gospel and pray with these people, and we walked away changed.

Through the outreach, I realized that Muncie was much bigger than Ball State. My eyes were opened to the plight of the American poor – something that’s especially easy to ignore as a college student. I also learned that Jesus told His followers to serve the poor because it not only shows love to them; it brings those who serve purpose and joy. I wanted to do more.

Since then, Cardinal Outreach Team (C.O.T.) has become an official Ball State student organization. I’ve been serving as vice president since last spring. We are an independent Christian group, as we want to see students from all Christian campus ministries unite in answering the Bible’s call to active love. We exist to connect Christian students with opportunities to serve others in Muncie in Jesus’ name.
We’re small – last fall, we were averaging only about seven people regularly attending meetings and events. But I’m passionate about what C.O.T. stands for, and I wanted to use the opportunity of my honors thesis to solidify, advertise and expand our presence as a student organization. I knew that however small we were, we could make a difference. But I wanted to see more students taking the opportunity to obey the Bible and be changed by Christian service. I knew we could make a bigger impact in Muncie with more members.

I’m a journalism graphics major. I create visual media, and I tell stories. I knew my training could benefit our group, especially in a social media-connected world. We needed to get the word out to the Christian student body because if we held up our part of the job, we trusted that God would bring in more students ready to serve. We especially wanted to see more people involved with our second food drive and day of outreach in April.

That’s what my honors thesis has been about: using my skills in journalism and graphic design to help Christian students engage with C.O.T. through a media campaign. I’ve been able to use my training in print and web design, social media, Web programming and ministry leadership. And I’ve grown greatly as a person in my understanding of love, compassion, faith and moral duty.

**What I did**

My goals for this project included creating a multimedia website, managing social media campaigns, assisting with event planning and overall, increasing awareness of Cardinal Outreach Team on Ball State’s campus. A big challenge for me was doing this work with not only our organization and my design training in mind, but also focusing on honoring God through the process.

**Website conceptualization:** www.cardinaloutreachtteam.com
My first task was brainstorming, conceptualizing, sketching and planning for these goals, particularly the website. The skills I’ve learned in my major of journalism graphics greatly impacted the site’s art direction. I had an idea of what I wanted it to look like: clean, user-friendly and sleek. I knew I wanted the thin, contemporary font for the header and the color scheme of dark red, black and white. I wanted a breathable design with ample white space because I knew my target audience of Ball State students is bombarded with media every day. This site needed to be easy to navigate, simple to connect to with social media, free of clutter and appealing to the eye.

My major greatly emphasizes the use of multimedia to inform and engage the reader. In class, I learned that the human brain learns better when stories are presented visually; both the logical “word” side and creative “art” side of the brain are exercised. Journalism has become a cross-platform entity, utilizing video, photography, interactivity and the Internet to immerse the reader in a story. I wanted to apply this concept to the C.O.T. website to make it modern and memorable, so I knew that I would include several multimedia elements in the form of videos, photo slideshows and interactive graphics.

In addition to conceptualizing the look of the site, I also had to plan the content. Because I’ve personally seen beautiful changes in both our members and the people we’ve encountered through our service, I wanted to create a blog to record and share the stories of C.O.T. A blog would also give members and the overall organization a real-time voice, bringing it to life for students. I planned the blog to be a dynamic element on the home page so that viewers could immediately see how C.O.T. is currently serving and how lives are being impacted.

I also knew I wanted to create a “home base” for our organization – somewhere anyone could go to find out when the next meeting is, what projects we’re currently working on and how
he or she can get involved. This led to the development of the Calendar, About Us and Get Involved pages. My hope was that these pages would provide a quick and easy way to contact and learn about the organization.

The final element of the content development was to give insight into why C.O.T. exists and does what it does. I felt that demonstrating the real need in Muncie was highly important to our cause. I wanted to include elements that could teach students in an interactive way, so that led to creating the Muncie video and graphic. I also developed the idea for the Inspiration page to ground our cause in biblical doctrine.

During this process of conceptualizing, I also had to research which hosting and content management systems I wanted to build the site on. I had briefly used Weebly before and loved its clear and simple system. Weebly also made embedding multimedia extremely easy. So, I bought the domain name, www.cardinaloutreachteam.com, and synced it to a free Weebly account. The only cost to maintain the website year after year will be a $10 or so domain renewal fee. That’s important because we focus on giving away as much money as possible and can’t afford an expensive site.

Building and research

Once I established the content management system and domain, I was able to start designing. I got to practice my HTML skills by changing small details of the provided template, such as link color, widgets and the Star Press RSS feed. I also drove around Muncie to take the black-and-white banner photos and shoot content for the Muncie video. Weebly made it a simple process to include connective elements such as the Twitter badge, and I personally coded the social media links to sync our online presence.
This static content was easy; it just required time and patience. Moving on to the research-based pieces was more challenging but also more rewarding. The Inspiration page was especially enlightening and required me to examine my own motives for joining C.O.T. I searched the Bible for God’s commands on loving and serving others in need, as well as drew from sermons I’ve heard and books I’ve read. I was startled by the research I did for the Muncie information graphic and video, which mostly came from the Star Press and city data and Census websites. These sources are documented on the website itself.

Building the site was a gradual process that evolved as we organized our events. Once I got enough content to establish a foundation, we launched the website through Facebook and Twitter promotions and saw traffic reach more than 110 views on the first official day. After that, I continued to add to the site as we progressed through the semester.

Promotions and event planning

Along with the development of the website and accompanying media elements, I spent hours planning, organizing and delegating for our spring events. I assisted with planning monthly visits to Elmcroft Nursing Home, where we played bingo and spent time with the residents. To boost awareness of our day of outreach in April, I also came up with the idea for Light the Night, a candlelit prayer and worship service around the Ball State bell tower. I wanted to kick off our food drive by looking to God in prayer and hosting a short, open event for all students to learn about the outreach. We advertised at Cru and online through the website and social media. We had an estimated 70 people come to the event on March 20, and I was blessed to lead the crowd in three worship songs after a time of prayer and reflection.

The next stage of planning was for the outreach itself, which was set for April 21. Between Light the Night and the outreach, we held a campus-wide food drive at different
Christian student organizations to collect items to give away. I made multiple announcements at Cru, and we also collected from Navigators, the Ball State Unity Service and the Revolution church. I oversaw the development of a day of outreach logo and Facebook event. In addition, we posted constantly about the event on Facebook and Twitter to remind people to donate.

The final steps of planning for the outreach consisted of contacting local churches for addresses of families in need, procuring boxes and organizing the specifics of the event. The night before the outreach, we held a spaghetti dinner and prep time at the home of our president, where we sorted the donations into boxes and printed surveys and maps.

**Results**

Since the beginning of the semester, membership in C.O.T. has more than doubled. Last fall, we only had about seven people consistently involved. As early as January, we saw increased attendance, and since the outreach, we’ve had about 15 people consistently attending meetings.

The Light the Night event drew about 70 people and a box of donations to start the food drive.

We made multiple announcements at two different Christian student organizations and manned a food drive for three weeks. We also gained awareness, donations and new members at the Ball State Unity Service, a meeting of all Christian student organizations in early April.

The day of outreach proved to be a success. About 27 volunteers delivered boxes of food to 30 families, 26 in government housing facilities and 4 specifically recommended from churches. We had some amazing conversations with people who had been through some dark places. After delivering the box, we got the chance to walk through a survey and pray with the
recipients. We even had one man, an ex-addict and ex-convict, pray to become a Christian during our visit.

We now have a centralized, multimedia website to share the experiences and stories of how God is working through C.O.T.

I can happily say I believe my honors thesis has been a success, though I believe the blessings we’ve experienced in C.O.T. certainly aren’t all a result of my work but are mostly from God.

What I Learned

I’ve learned a great deal through completing this project, both professionally and personally.

Professionally

Regarding my major, I’ve learned how to successfully plan, build and manage a CMS-hosted website. I had to identify and respond to my target audience, as well as conceptualize and create a multimedia Web experience. I’ve gained understanding in promotions through social media, blogging, event planning and leadership. I’ve acquired more practice in video editing, designing information graphics, photography and web programming. Altogether, I probably spent around 28-30 hours creating the website and all its content, not including event planning, meetings and execution. This project was a joy to complete for the chance to improve in all these areas. I loved being able to use my major for something I’m passionate about. It helped me see I made the right choice for a program of study.

Faith and biblical service

I also learned much about my own faith, volunteering and helping those in need. When I started this project, I thought we needed to specifically address need in Muncie because of the
city’s plight. I held the mindset that Muncie was worse off than most places, and Christian students needed to help the city’s poor simply because they were in such bad shape. It was a subtly prideful view – an exercise of the “privileged” (including myself) reaching out to the needy because we’re good Christians, and that’s what good Christians do.

But looking back on this project, I’ve learned that serving the poor goes much deeper than that. It’s not about Christians checking something off their spiritual to-do list to keep from feeling too guilty. It’s not about Christians feeling good for doing something the Bible says. It’s not even about Muncie itself because poverty exists everywhere. No, Christians should serve the poor first and foremost as an expression of love for Jesus Christ and His Word.

As 1 John 3:16-18 says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth,” (Holy Bible: New Living Translation). If the motivation of our service stops at just helping someone out or feeling good about ourselves, we’re missing part of the Gospel: Jesus served us, we actively serve His people out of love for Him.

There are more than 300 Bible verses about helping the poor (Microfinance: Faith Based Solutions). If one truly reads the Bible and takes its teachings at face value, it is impossible to ignore the clear command to serve those in need. Jesus Himself spent nearly all His time with those at the bottom of the social ladder. We at C.O.T. believe He wouldn’t have spent so much time and so many words on the subject if it weren’t important to Him.

As a student myself, I’ve also learned that college Christians largely ignore the importance of this subject. While managing the food drive, I encountered great frustration in the
lack of response from Christian students. The first two weeks of the drive, we received two donations: a can of Spaghettios and a box of Ramen noodles and granola bars. It didn’t seem that the students were uncaring or even uninterested – the main reason for the minimal response seemed to simply be forgetting to donate.

I can understand why. Our lives in college are mostly about ourselves: getting through our classes, having fun with our friends, attending our Bible studies and organization meetings. We simply don’t prioritize helping others in need, and we justify it by saying we don’t have the time or money right now.

But through studying the Bible during this project, I’ve realized that our excuses never exempt us from Jesus’ command. As the verse in 1 John asks, if we ignore the plight of the poor, can God’s love truly be in us? Can we truly be Christians? Nowhere does the Bible say, “If you are in college, then don’t worry about serving the poor until you have a decent job and income for yourself.” If we’re Christians, we are called to actively serve with both our money and our time as an expression of worship and love to Christ, no matter how young or how busy we are.

In addition to learning about Christian service for college students, I’ve also gained new insight on our culture’s view of the poor. In America, we tend to look down on the poor as lazy, incompetent or stupid. We live in an “American dream” meritocracy that says, “If you work hard, you can climb your way to the top.” The overall cultural mindset toward the poor seems to be, “It’s your problem – you haven’t worked hard enough.”

Richard Stearns, CEO of World Vision, addresses this view in his 2009 book, The Hole In Our Gospel: “It is not our fault that people are poor, but it is our responsibility to do something about it. God says that we are guilty if we allow people to remain deprived when we have the means to help them. It is our moral duty to help our neighbors in need. We cannot look
at their situation and simply say, ‘Not my problem.’ Neither can we sit smugly in our comfortable bubbles and claim no responsibility for the disadvantaged in our world. God did not leave us that option,” (Stearn).

Working on this project and being involved in C.O.T. has led me to this truth. And when I see how people are truly struggling and the difference even a small amount of money or love can make, I feel true compassion and only desire to do more.

My research on Muncie and the outreach in particular opened my eyes to the plight of the poor in Midwest America. I previously thought families in United States never went too hungry or without basic necessities; this is, after all, the most developed country in the world. I had personally never encountered prolonged hunger or wondered how the bills would get paid. When I ran into statistics such as “More than 50% of Muncie students are on free and reduced lunch” (STATS Indiana) and “Muncie has the second-lowest average income in the nation for a city its size,” (CNN Money) and when I met Muncie families in need during the outreach, I learned that poverty is real in America. It’s often pushed away, shoved into the cracks, kept out of sight. It has faces: kids whose only meal comes from school lunch, exhausted single mothers, overworked and underpaid fathers, sick grandparents. It’s real. And if we continue to ignore it in our own country, we certainly will ignore it in countries with even more desperate situations - even when we clearly have the means and responsibility to help.

This is a social injustice for me, and though I’m sure I will continue to hear that the poor are lazy or stupid, I’ll be fighting to help whom I can. I don’t care how they got poor or why they remain poor – I’m not just helping for their sake. I’m helping because I love Jesus, who deems all humanity valuable and worthy of love.

Conclusion
My hope is that my project will be only a starting point for the future of C.O.T. Our organization has already elected new leadership for the fall, and another journalism graphics major will take over what I’ve started with the website. I love that our organization can use media to help more students worship Christ through service. I’m excited to see the new stories of lives being touched through C.O.T. and the Gospel shining into some dark places in our community of Muncie. I’m confident that our remaining members will work hard to keep expanding the organization and its circle of influence, as well as continue to learn about biblical service and true Christian compassion.

Being involved with C.O.T. and completing this project have certainly changed me. Wherever I go from here, I will remember that poverty is real and has a human face. I will work to serve out of love for Christ, not to make myself feel good or as only a moral duty. I will continue to serve those in need in practical, loving ways. And I will pray that other Ball State students can learn to share this love as I have through C.O.T.
Works Cited


