

GCA Development Project
Carlo Giannotta
Grace Christian Academy
Consultant: Zach Clark
MAROON PLATOON – Hoo AH !!

THE NEED

Grace Christian Academy is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the City of Chicago. The “Little Village Neighborhood” has a free or reduced lunch rate of 90%. The per capita household income is \$10,697 which is 200% lower than the Chicago norm of approximately \$30,000. These statistics make running a private school in this neighborhood a challenge and is the main reason that increasing donations is critical in both the short term but most importantly for the long term sustainability of the school.

At Grace Christian Academy parents pay on average \$1500 per student. Our COE (Cost to educate) is a reasonable \$4500. The cost to educate a student in the city of Chicago is \$14,525. We are working very hard to increase enrollment in order to increase income. However, even if we were at full capacity of approximately 175 students it would increase income but not enough to bridge the delta between the COE and the average paid by parents. We run lean when it comes to expenses, so the only way to have a balanced budget for the long term is to increase donations and grants.

GETTING STARTED

The mission of Grace Christian Academy is prepare students for success in High School, College, and Beyond. I will be honest that this mission statement was stolen and adapted from an all girl’s school in Africa. I find it interesting that although

we are not in Africa, we are ministering to a very under privileged population that needs a quality Christian education. Although I really liked the mission statement I am not sure that we as a school “owned it”. Doing this development project forced me to inwardly digest my mission statement and so much more.

Creating a development plan has been a much more intense process than I could have imagined. I had originally planned to create a development plan and work with my board of directors on expectations and structure. Once I realized the time that it would take to create a proper development message, I quickly turned my focus to the most important improvement needed for future success of Grace Christian Academy; the creation of a development plan. A plan with a purpose that will inspire those to give in a way that will allow the school to grow and will be sustainable for years to come.

TWO BIG TAKEAWAYS

During my initial discussion with Zach my consultant, there were a couple of key points that really hit home. First, “Don’t grow to death.” In most of the Chicago Lutheran Schools enrollment is decreasing so there is huge emphasis to increasing the amount of students in the school. So our emphasize has been “Putting butts in the seats” Also some of our current grantors want to see increased enrollment. I must admit that the increased enrollment has been a blessing, as filled classrooms are a positive step towards stability. But with increased students comes increased cost. The biggest cost, as you can well imagine, is staff. Staffing is about 80% of our total cost even though we pay them peanuts as compared to the local public schools. But if we want to grow much bigger more staff would be required with more cost. Seeing that students pay so little to attend

GCA it makes continued expansion/growth a challenge. With Zach's vast knowledge of Christian not-for-profits, he has advised to be careful not to "grow to death". As a result of this advice, we have decided to move back our time table for any growth that would require more staff. We are going to grow as big as we can be with the current staff, build a wait list, and grow when we have the funds to do so. This did not change our development message but it did change the funding part of the plan.

The second big "Golden Nugget" was "Donors will fund a plan not debt". This may seem an obvious idea, but for the longest time (At least for the 22 years) we have funded to avoid debt and not a plan. It has been a continual challenge of keeping "our heads above water". God has blessed us with the money when we needed it, but the gifts/donations were sporadic and unpredictable. That is why creating a long term development plan is so important to the future of Grace Christian Academy.

LET'S PLAN

After getting my two "nuggets" from Zach I was psyched to begin the development planning process. I figured that we would throw a couple of items together and then concentrate on the spreading of the plan to "the masses". However, it was far from that. He gave me a list of 15 to 20 questions that forced me into to some very in-depth thinking about who we are and how we are different. When you work at a place for 20 years you would think that you know your school identity, but his exercises forced me to take the time to really see what makes GCA unique and how we can show our donors the impact that we have on the lives of our students and how they can partner in our ministry. This process involved a lot of quiet contemplation and a lot of prayer.

So creating a proper development involves crafting a meaningful mission statement, a compelling vision statement, a profile of a graduate, core values, organizational history, organizational importance, goals for the future, and the finally dollars needed to accomplish the goals. The only piece that was in place was the mission statement, but I still needed to take the time to really “own it”. Zach gave me examples from other schools including one of my favorite schools “The Rock” school in Florida.

As the mission statement was already in place, my first step was to create a vision statement that describes the qualities that we want to see in our students. There were five: living biblically, acting responsibility, leading righteously, working cooperatively, and communicating effectively. All of these attributes are part of what I want my students to be and that will make them successful Christian leaders (See Mission statement).

The purpose of GCA is to help the students to be successful in the future. So it seemed appropriate that the profile of student is an acronym of the word success. It includes many of the attributes in the vision statement but includes additional items emphasizing hard work and service.

The section about the GCA history was pulled from a few other created docs but a slant about current successes were added. The core values were a combination of the mission statement , vision statement, and profile of a student which talks about what we value and want to instill in our students.

The most difficult section that took the longest to create was the “Why is this so important” section. This section is super important because this is the reason that a donor should give. I knew that GCA was a great school with great results but I never took the time to put into words what a difference it makes in the lives of its students.

The “What are we working towards” was another section that really took some deep thinking. This section was at the core of who we are and what we strive to accomplish. Our first goal is to grow successful Christian leaders that lead by example. Our second goal was to begin to create successful leaders that impact their families and future generations. The final goal was to create a leader that makes a kingdom impact by sharing the love of Jesus with others.

The final piece is to create a plan to fund the goals of the organization. I created three separate campaigns that would be implemented over the next ten years. The first is a short term stability campaign that includes monies for scholarships, the creation and funding of an endowment fund, and building improvements. The second campaign would emphasize program expansion. It would include: scholarships for high school, after school programming, summer school expansion, scholarships, and a possible expansion of our ministry to another campus at a vacated high school building. The final piece is the “BIG HAIRY GOD” campaign which would start in the fall of 2023.(Or sooner if a voucher system was put in place in Chicago.:-) This is our major building initiative which would involve the adding of a new gym, classrooms, Etc. It would require that we purchase six houses to our north so that we can move the playground and add needed parking. This campaign would only happen if/when the classrooms are full and if the first two campaigns were successful.

NEXT STEPS

This plan that has been created should be used to start the process of raising funds. This process will begin by adding a development director. They will review and access our current donor data base to evaluate levels of giving for campaign #1. The development director will work in cooperation with the principal to set up appointments for an "Ask". The development director will also start to explore other grants and donors that can become partners in our ministry as well.

CONCLUSION

At the start of the project, I felt that the biggest benefit would be to develop a plan that would bring in more cash to the organization. That will be the most helpful benefit to the organization moving forward. However, what I did not anticipate was the benefit the process would be to my growth as the leader of the school. This process has forced me to some deep thought and prayer about our mission and what makes us unique. It has reinvigorated me to make the school better in order to accomplish the goals set forth in the development plan.

I would like to thank all the folks at Van Lunen, Zach Clark, and CLEF for giving me this wonderful opportunity to create a tool that will help my organization and helping me to grow as a leader through information learned, plans created, and most importantly friendships made. God Bless you ALL !!!

