

2017 Van Lunen Project  
Retention and Recruitment in Action

Iowa Christian Academy  
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In 1999 a group of parents from an established covenant Christian school identified and acted upon a need for an evangelistic model of Christian Education. The Lord has blessed the efforts of these families and Iowa Christian Academy (ICA) has gradually increased enrollment from 39 in 1999 to an ongoing enrollment of approximately 240 students Kinder-prep thru twelfth. As a relatively young school, ICA has presented as the “little engine that could; can’t; might; stuck amidst an identity crisis of who they are as a school, who they wish they were as a school, and what they want to be as a school: an engine on track from a proud departure point without an arrival point.

Our school community struggles to fully embrace the “seeker” mentality: diversity is the greatest strength of a “seeker” mission but also a prevailing weakness if not fully embraced. Iowa Christian Academy has basked in ongoing thankfulness for the doors opening every year. ICA is well over-due to celebrate its existence and ask the question *what does the Lord have next?*. Fall 2016, there as an overwhelming conviction amongst the leadership team to move constituents from an apologetic thankfulness for existing, toward a purposeful thankfulness for what the Lord is preparing for the future. An educational institution is a tanker, not a speed boat: the leadership readily identified that any change would be a process that would take considerable education of all constituents.

***The academy’s vision is to equip students to impact their world for Christ by providing an innovative community school system throughout Central Iowa focused on introducing youth to a growing relationship with Jesus Christ in an environment of love and acceptance. It is a policy of the Iowa Christian Academy, Inc. that the school be “seeker focused” or evangelical in orientation, accepting the unchurched in fulfillment of the Great Commission, so long as the student and parents accept the academy’s standards and biblical curriculum and agree to abide by the academy’s standards.***

The Van Lunen project undertaken has been essential for Iowa Christian Academy to lay the foundations of an emotional, spiritual and intellectual commitment to the “seeker” based model. The “seeker” school is biblical: the concept is not new and certainly never intended to be controversial Paul said “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity” Col.4:5. This seeker school model is disappearing because of its difficulty, discomfort, lack of clarity and misunderstood purpose. Designed with an emphasis on recruitment and retention, the project focused on the imperative of identifying the intent of the organization’s mission statement and determining if that was still the desire of the Board of Directors. The Golden Circle was the first step taken with the Board of Directors to bring clarity to why this organization was in business.

Upon arriving in 2010, I had identified a visible disconnect between the ministry mission statement and the end product of the organization’s labor. As I embarked on different strategies to establish a clearer identity in relationship to the mission statement it was apparent that I was leading a philosophically covenant entrenched faculty: The unintended result was a disconnect in the overall mission of the school. Anything less than a full commitment by the Board of Directors, staff and families to the Mission Statement will facilitate ongoing mediocrity and the eventual spewing out of the Lord’s Blessings.

Precious; very valuable or important; too valuable to waste: ICA is a precious gift that cannot be taken for granted or viewed carelessly. There is an ongoing need for organizational communication regarding how precious the mission of ICA is and the rarity of being called into an organization that embraces the messiness of families in the shadow of the cross. As the Board of Directors became entrenched in brick and mortar, staff professional development addressed the spiritual issues that defined the clientele being served on a daily basis.

## Recruitment and Retention Foundations

- **Strategic and Purposeful** communication must be ongoing: the project sought to identify what makes ICA educationally unique and tell the story consistently, incessantly and proudly. The best way to enhance recruitment and retention is to develop a marketing plan with a purposeful routine that makes sense for the ICA Mission Statement, the community ICA serves, and is based on the resource and facility constraints of the mission. If ICA is only promoted during enrollment periods, the result will be an eventual slowdown in school growth and/or enrollment stability, leading to a vicious cycle that will negatively impact recruitment and retention. ICA must remember its history, mission and vision: Iowa Christian Academy was founded to be a “Great Commission School”. It is important to continue to reduce confusion and shift the focus toward identifying what ICA does well and assuring that those traits are nurtured first.

ICA needs to celebrate its size by continually recognizing students. Prosperity can result amidst an ongoing remembrance of the ongoing benefit of being a big fish in a small pond. Stories that communicate successes in the lives of teachers, parents and students create a vibrant atmosphere in our community. It is a priority to get stories on the website, on social media, in our newsletter and in everyday conversation. Strategic and purposeful communication should be utilized as a means of facilitating informed decisions that are proactive in supporting the mission statement. A barrier is the discomfort of saying “no” to many good things in an effort to pursue what is best for the ministry.

- **Cultural Relevance:** the Iowa Christian Academy faculty encourages a child's individuality and assist students toward achieving their God-given potential in their academic preparation. However, the mission of Iowa Christian Academy is not just about preparing students academically, it is about the perspective from which students are encouraged to view the life lessons they receive along the way. This generation of students may be the most rebellious there has ever been, with more opportunity and ease of access to live in sin than any other time. But the problem remains the same, sin; the solution is still the Word of God and the answer Jesus Christ crucified for sin. The needs of students in a faith-based educational system have not really changed, only the culture and society that influences them.

Teachers called to ICA seek to challenge students academically while understanding their role as a mentor and their responsibility to disciple students. As educators, we often forget that our own evangelical subculture is growing more distant from the increasingly secular culture surrounding us. It can be difficult to proclaim with clarity the gospel while remaining true to the commitment of pleasing God, not people (Gal. 1:10) In our zeal for student growth and a manifested Great Commission, great care must be taken to avoid creating a culture that is more likely to impress than to save the unbeliever. Employees of ICA are challenged daily, as a body serving families, to be a living curriculum, passionate regarding our calling to educate from a Christian perspective and attune to modelling Christ to students.

- **Biblically consistent:** The academic rigor of the ICA curriculum provides a distinctive faith-based approach to the learning environment. ICA curricular development is focused on implementing learning strategies that are Biblically based. Humanly devised

programs are not substituted for the principles established in the Word of God. Our faculty seek to bring clarity to the cultural murkiness our students are exposed to in the current society. In the ICA learning environment, Biblical Truth is pursued as the constant.

### **Changing a school culture**

To create a change in culture, it was necessary to begin addressing the systems that created that culture in the first place and have been shaping it every day since . Cultural change does not occur by buying new tools, sending people to training, or asking them to change. Promoting a culture which is committed to excellence in every aspect of Christian Education requires a multifaceted approach.

It is difficult to pursue something that has yet to be defined. The term excellence was readily added to goals and objectives but the meaning of the term continually escaped my grasp as a school leader. Excellence by worldly standards has a horizontal perspective. Social excellence, human excellence, personal excellence, technological excellence and utilitarian excellence are steeped in humanism. Excellence by the world's standards is perfecting performance on human ability and achievement: excellent if better than someone or something etc.

By contrast, biblical excellence has a vertical perspective; requiring goals and standards built toward conformity to God's purpose in character and conduct. Biblical excellence is not defined by what God is, but who He is (Cloud, Townsend, 1992). A culture clarifying a vision is not only an avenue for God to do something through ICA but is an avenue for God to do something in each of its constituents. The ICA vision statement is for His glory: He is the end of the line.

## **Checks and Balances**

Self-evaluation and examination were an important component of professional development throughout the 2016-2017 school year. “The key to real change lies not in implementing new process, but in getting people to hold one another accountable to the process” (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler, 2012, p.13) Until personal accountability is established, the role of an employee in the recruitment and retention of families will be ineffectual. The humanistic world we live in focuses on our individual needs producing a natural resistance to the concept that as employees we are privileged to have the opportunity to serve our families. A community of grace that is also a business embarks upon a difficult balancing act: too much grace and the business fails and the ministry is lost; too much business and grace is lost and the ministry fails. The purposeful examination of the “why” of employment was strategically pursued through self-examination as follows:

- Are any of us entitled to be here?
- Do I truly view employment at ICA as a privilege?
- Do I model the respect that I expect of our students?
- Is Matthew 18 a convenience or does it govern all aspects of my communication all the time?
- Am I serving? Do I lend a hand wherever, whenever it is needed?
- Do I serve ICA families and students with an attitude of humility and conviction that models an attitude of servitude from the Lord?
- Am I a positive asset to ICA marketing efforts? Do I strive to be accountable for the retention of each student/family I serve?
- Am I willing to tear down the walls of my box to go outside of my comfort level and serve those students/families who give me little in return?

Each day, ICA is either moving closer to, or farther away from the type of culture which reflects biblical truth thru modeling the character of Christ (Stanley, 1999). Cultures are always gaining momentum, they are spinning in a positive or negative direction. Each employee is called to spin positive to assure that we are positioned to allow the Lord to work thru us.

### **Comparison Leads to a Loss of Joy**

The statement above taken out of a humanist application, really exemplifies a distraction that often leads to frustration and disappointment for ICA. Discussions this year have been focused on the families that are committed to ICA and not allowing the disappointment of those leaving affect the celebration of what our students are accomplishing. Quite simply, ICA will misplace its joy if consumed by comparison and efforts to be like other Christian schools. Our joy and peace will be found in ongoing efforts to be the best of who we are, striving to always do a better job of forwarding the mission God called ICA to be: Comparison threatens to rob us of the joyful blessings we already possess.

***May we never let the things we can't have or don't  
Have, spoil our enjoyment of the things  
We do have and can have.***

-Richard L. Evans-

### **Here I am Lord, send me**

Every employee at Iowa Christian Academy is accountable for creating and enhancing relationships that insure the institution's future. "Accountability is a tool and a gift we give one another to try to realize the growth we could never know all by ourselves" (Ortberg,p.180). While events that happen are often beyond our control, how we react to the events is almost always within our control. There will always be areas where ICA lacks in the material world and always reasons for this ministry to be viewed as a glass half empty by earthly standards. Attitudes can change feelings and every one of us decides the attitude we take in every situation. Exhuming God's peace, love and joy to ICA constituents are an ongoing pursuit

that each employee is accountable for in faith-based education. The responsibilities assume at Iowa Christian Academy are not to be taken lightly nor are they unrelated to the heavenly impact each employee is empowered to make.

It would be nice to walk into a shiny modern school with all the amenities; but at the end of the day, their teacher, is the most important tool ICA students have. Although unworthy for His service, often found inadequate, stumbling over our sinful nature and blindly attempting to lead; there is no greater calling than to plant the seeds of salvation and godly living in the hearts and minds of ICA students.

***Today give all that you have, for what you keep inside you lose forever.***

-Owen Marecic-SF 49rs

### **There is no failure in godly service**

Unequivocally, there is a level of disappointment that efforts to secure additional property have fallen short. Compounded by legal battles, devastating health diagnosis, tragic losses amidst our school family, all involved knew it was going to be a difficult if not doubtful journey; but we are the hands and feet of the Lord. So...what does ICA do know? Samuel Rima, in the book "Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership" had this humbling statement regarding success, "the problem arises from the fact that success is not something one can have or possess: true success is a state of being not having" (p.19). The Lord is not going to walk through doors for this ministry. The leadership of ICA will continue to walk through open doors and explore all opportunities that are deemed as beneficial to this ministry. It is the responsibility of all who are called to serve at ICA to be ready at all times to be obedient to the Lord. We rarely have the foresight, and only in our arrogance, the ability to understand how the

Lord is working and what He has planned. As His followers, we are simply to be ready: ICA will remain ready.

Wise counsel recently pointed me toward a passage in II Chronicles. In chapter 20 it is recorded that Jehoshaphat and his army were facing overwhelming odds on the battlefield. Praying to his Maker, he states in verse 12, "For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on Thee". The next morning, the Lord handed Jehoshaphat and all Judah a great victory over Ammon, Moab and the inhabitants of Mount Seir because of their trust, faithfulness and obedience. Hope is often all there is to cling to.

### **Retention and Recruitment in Action**

Through the Van Lunen Project, ICA sought opportunities to rebuild, educate and maintain our connectivity within the school community and the West Des Moines Community through classroom and schoolwide events.

- Monthly Monday Potlucks were hosted by different segments of the school: these informal times of fellowship brought families of 4 year olds and 18 year olds together in an relaxed conversational setting. The Potlucks were also utilized for strategic informational gathering and distributing.
- Family Lunches were scheduled to encourage parents and grandparents to come have lunch with their student. These events provided much needed exposure to the friends and educators who are spoken of regularly at home. Uninformed social media chatter can be devastating in its basis in speculation: opening up our most vulnerable time of multiple moving parts was a positive factor.
- Family Game Nights; Family Movie Nights and Family Fun Nights were implemented.
- New student enrollment, retention and tuition revenue was compiled from 2010-2016. The 2017-2018 Retention rate is currently 85% which is within the 5 year average of 83%. The long-term goal is to track closer to 87% by May 2018.
- Expenditures on magazine, radio, and social media ads have been doubled this year. All mediums are being tracked to make an educated assessment of the impact on recruiting.
- A silver cord program was initiated this spring based upon servant leadership principles. "Developing Leaders Committed to Christ" will be reinforced by the opportunity for community outreach through a broadly defined service definition.
- Iowa Christian Academy will participate in our second 4th of July parade with flyers and enrollment coupons for our neighborhood families.
- The ICA family recruitment incentive has been increased to further encourage our greatest recruitment tool; current satisfied ICA families.

- A restructuring of administrative duties has placed the communication/community coordinator as the Director of Admissions. This move has been of tremendous benefit to the ministry as it places this strategic individual with an ongoing pulse rate of both current family and potential family likes and dislikes.
- A family host for international students is being implemented to assure connectivity between our families and our international students from all over the world. As the main educational provider for the Iowa Wild AAA Hockey team, ICA has 13 countries represented among the 28 International students on campus. Families are encouraged to embrace an exchange student for church and dinner on Sunday or a family activity at a time of their convenience.
- Student Hosts were identified, trained and provided incentives to assure that students visiting the classrooms receive a consistent message and are provided an informative experience regarding what attendance entails. The Students Hosts are also being empowered to provide feedback to the administration following a shadow.
- Tours of new students are up over 150% over this time last spring. The shadow opportunity for potential students has been increased from half-day to full-day which has bolstered the number of students visiting. The investment in a competitive environment compels a higher level of exposure and time with potential constituents.

The faith based community has both alienated the unbeliever and embraced the unbeliever in the name of Christ with a somewhat fragmented interpretation of biblical truth...the results are festering around us. Retention of current families has traditionally been much easier than recruiting new students. The reality is that in a fickle self-centered society, where the trend is the Christian component being less and less a priority, it is dangerous to separate the importance of addressing both retention and recruitment factors.

As a school founded to serve the community, our role is to love and respect all students that attend; while modeling Christ crucified purposefully and unashamedly: our efforts are done poorly at times; done well and are fruitful at other times. What the focus of faith-based education must be is consistent in its presentation of biblical truth no matter the audience.

In Ephesians 4:1 Paul urges Christian “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called”. That does not mean that we spend our lives trying to deserve our place in God’s favor. It means that we should recognize how much our place in God’s favor deserves from us. The focus is not on our worth but on the worth of God’s calling.

The planting of seeds in the lives of ICA students must never be compromised for any earthly agenda. In the court of public opinion in Des Moines, Iowa, Iowa Christian Academy is often torched for embracing a diverse social, financial, and spiritual clientele. ICA can never be so caught up in being all things to diverse clientele that we waiver from or sacrifice the consistent planting of seeds with love and respect for those needing Christ. ICA will not compromise the message to improve the venue but must be passionately presenting that message with confidence in the Lord's provisions for venues that serve our students at a high level. The earthly reality is the truth about ICA will rarely be out there; however, the presentation of truth at ICA must not waiver.

## References

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