

## **Building Community to Build a Building**

Van Lunen Final Paper

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When I set out to be a Van Lunen fellow I knew that I needed both the networking and the learning that would result from the experience. The perfect timing of the program was a sign to me that God would bless the experience. So when it came time after the summer session to make a project proposal I was confronted with a reality that my original project, to grow as a new leader, was not what was most important to the school right now. That phrase had hit me hard. It had become clear that the most important item for the school right now was to design the spaces for our new building. So I proposed and was allowed to make that change to my program. It turns out that in doing just that, in focusing on the new spaces, I had to grow in all the other ways as well. The main discovery for me as a school leader during this Van Lunen year is that community building is the most important foundation when you are building a physical building. I have spent this year building a building by empowering teachers, staff, board, parents, and students to define the spaces that will support learning, by helping craft a communication plan to make every member of the community feel valued and involved, and by implementing an educational vision that will make these new spaces sing glory to God. While the work is ongoing, it is progressing in a blessed and beautiful way that Van Lunen prepared and supported me through.

The first step of building community to build a building was getting input from the entire community on what we needed. This work gathering the data was mostly accomplished just before my week at Van Lunen. We had several focus groups that were made up of many different areas of the constituency. The lead architect and I were in all these meetings and the two of us through conversation began to see themes rising out of all the different meetings. As we brainstormed the list of themes we knew we needed to focus them down or we would be designing a building for no one. We took two hours with the faculty and presented the themes. We then ran a workshop with the faculty and staff where we kept boiling down the themes to four final design objectives for the new building. Our four themes were: agile innovation, community building, beautiful mess, and visible mission.

These focused our work, especially when decisions got tough. In late September we stopped the design process to take a quick look at how we were doing on budget. It turned out that the schematic design process had us several million dollars over budget. We went back to the drawing board and made several cuts. Many of these cuts we could weigh against our design objectives. An example of a cut that was influenced by the design objectives was our outdoor amphitheater. We made the decision to keep paying for designing this element of visible mission, but moving it to an alternate part of the project where we could build when funded.

This element of community building has continued through the year. At each end stage of design we have checked in with every focus group that was impacted by changes. I have made regular presentations to the board and to the faculty at every stage of the design. Each time we took careful note of the input, and asked people to make decisions with the budget parameters about the spaces that were being designed. In the late fall there was a concern that the exterior of the building would not be a beautiful and timeless as some would like so we added an exteriors focus group, simply to focus on the look of the new building. This too increased engagement and created a whole new subcommittee of relationships, with new members of the community engaged.

The second aspect of the work this year has been creating a communication plan that made sure that not just those who were on focus groups, but everyone in the community felt engaged in the project. This plan that we created had two main elements. First, we knew we had to keep engaging donors to fund the project. Second, we thought we had to keep the whole community informed about what was happening so they would be excited. It turned out that these two goals were actually the same, and that by keeping everyone informed our donors were also deeply engaged.

Our plan was to hold two events in September for donors to reveal the schematic design. This involved coordinating the architects and the development people and making sure that we had a presentation that was both informational and emotive. In parallel with this we were approaching a foundation about a lead matching gift to inspire the year end giving. At each of the events we held we had a broad cross section of people from the community. The focus of these events was relaying the history of the project, which this new building, being built on land donated almost two decades ago was the realization of a community dream. Then revealing how the building reflected the focus groups and the dreams of the community. We also spent time reflecting on the design themes and how they were coming out in our new spaces. The nights struck a chord with the people who were there, and were exciting and emotional culmination of years of work for the community.

These design theme reflections had come out of my work writing about them for the monthly newsletters and the faculty clarifying them at our summer workshop. The dovetailing of this work was a welcome efficiency, but turned out to also be a very effective strategy. It made sure that we were communicating clearly in many different ways the direction of the design and we could be assured that people who may be disagreed with the direction had time to speak into their concerns. After the success of communicating these themes at our donor events we started to include the design theme articles into the packet for donors. It should not have surprised us, but the feedback on including those theme articles in the packets was that it helped clarify and create buy in for the people who had a chance to sit with the articles and read them. It allowed them to see and join in with the vision.

In November we announced a \$1.5 million match from the foundation we had been working with for the year end campaign. The networking and education at Van Lunen was vital to making this match happen. The community matched it all by January 3. This was an unheard of year end for our school community and was a direct blessing from God. It also was an indicator that we were communicating our plans and ideas clearly and effectively. We increased our number of donors significantly, as over \$1 million was new money to the campaign and in cash, not pledges. We were encouraged not just by the money, but also that people were excited about our direction.

This spring I have begun a series of video vignettes ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-X1CPPon\\_U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-X1CPPon_U)) from the construction site. Again, this communication has been valuable on all fronts, which was an unexpected benefit. The videos were created simply as an update tool for the whole community. They are on YouTube and posted to our Facebook account. They are meant to seem a little homemade and not super professional, although we do engage with a drone video company to splice together the video so that we get great footage from above the site. We released the first one a few weeks ago and one of the major donors to the campaign came up to me and without prompting told me the video was great and had ideas about what else he would like to see in the videos. Another donor who we were working with on a major gift saw the video from a hospital bed and later that week made a major commitment to the campaign. We are learning that you do not have to have a lot of messages, but you do have to have a lot of ways of getting those few messages out to your community.

Finally, this year I have begun to implement the educational vision that we created when designing the building. Through the whole process of design it became clear that moving to the new building meant taking steps towards our vision of our best selves that the old building could not support. This is not an indictment of the past, but rather an affirmation that the context of our culture has changed and our understanding of the world of education and faith formation has evolved as well. The new building will allow us to respond to this changing environment in ways the old building never would. So how do we begin the process of becoming our best vision of ourselves? The answer to that began a year and half ago, but the hard work of implementing that was the other major focus of my work this year.

In January of 2016, before I joined the Van Lunen cohort, South Christian hosted a combined board meeting of the five schools in our affiliation of Christian schools on the south side of Grand Rapids. It was the first time all five boards had showed up to a meeting together in our history and I introduced to them the Teaching for Transformation (TfT) program from the Prairie Center for Christian Education. This is a teacher and school renewal program rooted in the last twenty years of research on education and faith formation. My hope was to build excitement for the program not only in the faculty and board at South Christian, but also in the four middle schools from which our students in large part originate. The common language rooted in the Biblical narrative and expressed in students by formative learning experiences would serve to unite our students and prepare the teaching staff to take greatest advantage of the new facility.

This year the work on this began in earnest. In June the boards of each of the schools passed a motion to deeply explore the TfT program. During the summer it became clear that the Prairie Center and the schools were not ready to commit to full implementation. In our conversation we designed on a ten module introduction to TfT for our schools. These hour long professional development times were intended to be led by staff at each Michigan school and coached by the leaders at the Prairie Centre. We decided together for this to be the focus of our professional development time during the school year. I served as the coordinator for the five schools and helped design the learning targets of the modules. At South Christian I asked for volunteers from the faculty to lead the modules, and came up with a solid core team of volunteers. I thought this distributed model of leadership would inspire confidence that this program was something being done by teachers to support a renewal of Christian education. Interestingly, while some of the modules were well received this way others received a lot of criticism from the faculty about the presenter. I did end up leading one of them myself, partly because I thought the plan would receive criticism and did not want that placed on a teacher. Overall our progress through the modules has been well received.

We had planned a Prairie Centre school designer to come out in November of 2016. However Doug, the designer, got brain cancer and could not make the trip. This was a blow to him personally (and myself as Doug and I have been professional friends for years), but also to our plan. Instead of Doug coming out to design a learning plan for us I wrote a draft plan for implementing TfT in our schools myself. I shared this plan with the administrators and they tweaked it and approved for me to present it to the Prairie Centre. They also responded and approved the plan. This new plan had the administrators meeting with the Prairie Center in Sioux Center to tour two schools who were a year and a half into the program. This tour idea turned out to be a pivotal decision in the process.

We left for Sioux Center at 5:00 in the morning the day everyone got back to spring break. We had decided to take school vans since flying is expensive and with little time gained from Grand Rapids to Sioux Center. The twelve hour drive proved to be smooth and worthwhile because it allowed each

school to also take a teacher representative with them on the trip at little additional cost. The trip was a wild success. The leaders from the Prairie Centre hit every learning target that we had designed into the event. The administrators who were on the fence were immediately impressed with what was happening in the schools there. The depth of student engagement in the Christian education n impressed everyone. The level of professional and spiritual conversation among the teachers was also very high. It was, for our program, a blessing that instead of being visited we were able to put together a visit, and include teachers. Since then all of the schools have approved being a part of the program and we are working hard on our implementation. I have been appointed by the group to be the point person for the program during the entire implementation.

Perhaps more important to the future of all the schools than simply the renewal of our teaching and our commitment to the best possible faith integration is that we are working together better than we have ever done in our history. This has specific implications for the high school and the new building. The stronger these elementary and middle schools are the stronger we will be as a high school. The more ready for the future students come to us the better we can do with them as they grow through high school. The new spaces will be best used by students who are prepared well to use them. The new design is also pushing the other schools to think differently about their spaces, and design them for greater learning possibilities. As they grow and add capacity they too might begin to think about how to use spaces to inspire rather than simply house students and teachers.

Rex Miller, in his book *Humanizing the Education Machine*, talks a little about a town in the rust belt of Indiana where a local corporate leader offered to pay for world class architects to design the schools. In summarizing why this leader, who was also named Miller, would do this he wrote this:

Miller knew that a real community is one in which the people build things together. That's why he believed and preached "stakeholder engagement." In other words, leaders must respect all the stakeholders -- those with valid interest or concern -- in any business venture, crisis, community or grand quest. Failing to do so is to be guilty of Gandhi's relational insight: "whatever you do for me but without me, you do against me."

I read this quote recently, as I prepare to go to an education innovation retreat led by Rex Miller. But the insight really struck a chord with me as I thought about my year focused on the new building, the most important thing for South Christian right now.

On May 18, 2017 a crowd exceeding 500 people stood together on the site of the new South Christian High School. Even though diggers were hard at work already in the background, a row of shovels stood posed in a pile of dirt. A choir had amassed next to a small stage. A combined choir from five schools with hundreds of kids from grades seven through twelve, prepared to sing praises to our faithful God. The crowd was filled with teachers, staff, donors, construction workers, designers, students, graduates, parents, board members, and neighbors. It was filled with our community. It was a great event. The fundraising is on target. The design is set. The workers are ready. The community is built, and that community is building the spaces that will serve South Christian for generations to come.