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Co-Curricular and Extracurricular Programs: Enhancing Student Life and the Value Proposition

True or false: The viability of today's Catholic school relies on its ability to offer high quality academic programs in an environment that is clearly and identifiably Catholic. While this statement may have been largely true in the past, there are increasing demands on Catholic schools to include student programs that enhance further the value proposition for both students and their families. What is the value proposition as related to the marketing of Catholic schools? Simply put, the value proposition is like a promise made that the benefits (value) of the goods or services (academic, faith, and student programs) provided in exchange for the tuition paid are desirably different or better than other school options.

When constructing a value proposition, Catholic school leaders must be aware of the research with regard to parental choice of Catholic schools. *CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN A DECLINING CHURCH*¹ clearly indicated that parents choose to send their children to Catholic schools for the following reasons:

- A perception of academic quality;
- A perception of better structure, safety, and discipline;
- Religious values integrated with the curriculum.

Since 1976, this research has been replicated with similar results, yet the most recent research and experiences of CSM consultants in the field indicate that there is a fourth factor that relates specifically to the value of a Catholic education. This "value-added" is often justified via the availability of adequate and appropriate co-curricular and extracurricular activities combined with opportunities for leadership. Therefore, ensuring strong student programs is a key component to the construction of a sound value proposition.

¹ Andrew M. Greeley, William C. McCready and Kathleen McCourt, *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1976).

The Right Mix

A rule of thumb when welcoming a prospective student to campus is never to ask, "What sports do you play?" Rather, the preferred question would be, "What activities do you enjoy?" When determining the right mix of co-curricular and extracurricular activities for a school, it is important that there be a variety of options in order to meet the preferences of an increasingly diverse student body. This requires a balance among activities to include appeal that is academic, faith-based, athletic, and of high interest to students. Co-curricular programs encompass physical education and health classes as well as elective offerings as appropriate in academic disciplines, religious studies, technology, and the fine and performing arts. Extracurricular programs include not only competitive athletics but also music, drama, clubs, and various service opportunities.

Co-Curricular Programs

In the Catholic elementary school, great attention is paid to the education of the whole child: academically, religiously, spiritually, socially, and physically. Daily religious instruction combined with classes in physical education and the arts are hallmarks of the well-rounded curriculum offered in a Catholic grade school. In recent years, public schools have seen their arts programs diminished, if not cut entirely. Promotion of these "extra" or "special" classes still offered in Catholic schools will reinforce the value proposition. Today, parental and student demand has also grown for inclusion of enrichment or remediation programs within the standard curriculum that address the needs of students on both ends of the spectrum. Bringing guest speakers to the classroom or arranging for student field trips are additional ways to promote the value of an education that extends beyond the traditional four walls of the classroom.

For middle and high school programs, students and their families are increasingly interested in real-life experiences through elective programs. There is a premium placed on providing programming via co-curricular and extracurricular programs that provide students with opportunities for self-discovery and understanding of individual talents

and passions. Arts programs should include chorale and band components along with fine and digital art experiences. Branching out into new areas could include the exploration of rotating elective programs with offerings such as: stock market simulation games, technology design and innovation, programming and logic, applied environmental engineering, architectural design, video production and design, biotechnology, and game design.

At the high school level, administrators must grapple with offering elective programs reflective of diverse student interests along with ever-expanding technological applications and fields of study. Larger high schools may be able to provide a range of academically-related elective course offerings particularly via Advanced Placement classes in programming, social sciences, and the arts; Religious Studies offerings that promote further concepts of social justice and peer ministry; and, various science/health-related classes. For smaller high schools, offering a selection of electives in alternating years can provide access to some of the most desired classes as determined via student/teacher surveys.

Clubs and Extracurricular Activities

Catholic elementary schools often conclude that students are already involved in so many activities outside of school that anything beyond a sports program isn't necessary, at least until middle school. On the contrary, age-appropriate clubs and activities are important at all levels. Academic or other contests and competitions should be annual events, either school-based (e.g., school yearbook cover design) or as part of broader groups (e.g., Scripps Spelling Bee).

At both the elementary and high school levels, student dramatic performances have the potential to become much loved and valued traditions of a school community. The Fall Play or Spring Musical provides a venue for those students whose interests include theater, music, or dance, and the added benefit of experience in set creation and design for those with artistic aspirations. Furthermore, these events build community and have great "friend-raising" potential. School talent shows are

another excellent opportunity for the sharing of the unique gifts or interests of students. For some students, this may be the way in which they find a sense of place and belonging in a school community.

Who knows best what kinds of clubs are desired? As the voice of the student body, Student Council can be charged with surveying and assessing student preferences for various clubs or after-school activities. Working with their activity moderator, this group can thoughtfully analyze survey results and prepare a proposal outlining needs and budget for administrator review.

Service Projects and Community Service Learning Programs

Regular engagement in service is a normative expectation for Catholic school communities. Acts of kindness and charity abound, recognizing the call to serve those less fortunate. While many Catholic schools excel in ensuring that students regularly participate in service activities, they often overlook the opportunity presented to market this cherished aspect of a faith-based community. School websites, newsletters, brochures, and press releases can be enhanced through the presentation of annually collected data regarding service activity. How many families were provided with a meal at Thanksgiving? How many angels provided a gift to a child at Christmas? How many hours were given in pursuit of service activities? Testimonials from those benefiting from the Catholic school's call to serve can enhance further these types of presentations.

Those schools with well-developed service programs have incorporated a Community Service Learning component into the school curriculum. In this manner, service activities are tied to curriculum content and learning objectives at all grade levels. Students not only perform service, but they also may learn about such concepts as why their service is needed and what impact their service can yield (e.g., watershed clean up), factors that have contributed to various social situations (e.g., poverty), or the ways in which social service organizations provide outreach (e.g., St. Jude

Children's Research Hospital). Critical to a Community Service Learning program is that opportunity be given to students to reflect on their service and communicate back via writing or other media as to their experience. These programs also hold great potential to build important local or broader community partnerships and relationships.

Physical Education and Athletic Programs

Our society today is more concerned with fitness than any generation alive can remember. "Active-wear" and "fitness gear" can be purchased at many major retailers, as well as high-end, designer boutiques. Fitness is a big-seller as well as a growing market. Have you ever seen a "50% off the store" sale at Nike? With this emphasis on health and fitness, the question then becomes, "How do these attitudes impact a Catholic school's physical education and athletic programs?"

For programs of physical education, parents want to know that classes follow a curriculum designed to provide structured activity along with learning including:

- Emphasis on physical activity that also promotes concepts related to life-long fitness;
- Learning of both the skills and rules associated with various sports;
- Introduction of a range of physical activities in order to provide "something for everyone";
- Reinforcement that physical activity is an essential component of ongoing health and well-being.

The importance of fitness and athletics in today's society has also given rise to numerous resources to enrich a school's physical education program. For example, with the Charity Miles app, students with a smart device can contribute to select charities by simply walking, running, or biking. Wii games provide interactive means for learning a variety of sports. ESPN's "30 for 30" and "Nine for IX" documentary series have a number of real-life stories of male and female athletes that reflect Gospel-based values. Any of these resources could easily be integrated into the PE curriculum at a variety of levels.



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For competitive athletic programs, emphasizing student safety has become more important than ever before. Concussion awareness and management is a major topic with baseline testing required of student athletes in various states. Working with female athletes at a young age to prevent ACL or other knee injuries is also a growing trend. Parents want information on these kinds of topics, and they want assurance that their student athletes are being coached or treated by individuals with sound background and training. School newsletters can be used to direct families to resources within the community and elsewhere to become better informed with regard to safety and their student athletes. A school showing of the documentary Head Games: The Global Concussion Crisis could provide an avenue through which a school not only educates its community but also promotes its professional stance and understanding of this critical issue related to student safety. (See headgamesthefilm.com for information on free group showings.) Again, through appropriate promotion and communication strategies, these are opportunities through which a school can emphasize further the value proposition.

Finally, many Catholic high schools have athletic traditions so strong that they can give rise to perceptions that overpower a school's academic image and Catholic identity. Keeping a firm balance between the spirit of athletic competition and the mission of Catholic education requires a deliberate approach in the management of the athletic program. The recently released film When the Game Stands Tall provides a contemporary media conversation starter of how mission and message can be at the heart of athletics through the portrayal of a winning Catholic high school football team with a coach who focused on the building of community and brotherhood over individual or team success. For further information on this topic, please see the *Catholic School Management Letter*, May 2008, "Athletic Program Administration: Gospel-Based and Effective."

Ensuring a Focus on Co-Curricular and Extracurricular Programs

The importance of both co-curricular and extracurricular programs to the value proposition cannot be denied, yet many schools have yet to put in place mechanisms that ensure appropriate attention and oversight. Administratively, responsibility for the oversight of student programs should be appropriately assigned and included as part of the annual performance appraisal process. Annual parent satisfaction surveys should include questions that address co-curricular and extracurricular programs, including electives, physical education, clubs, service, and athletics. Overall vision and direction is also needed so that program structures and offerings continue to reflect the Catholic mission of the school as well as the needs and preferences of students and families. For this reason, incorporation of student programs as a distinct goal area, or as part of overall academic programming, within the school's strategic plan is strongly advised.

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