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# Empowering Youths and Combating Gang Activity Across Long Island Through MBA Capstone Consulting

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## **ABSTRACT**

The MBA program at Molloy College culminates with a capstone experience that provides prospective graduates with the opportunity to demonstrate learning through a project-based paradigm that aligns with the mission of the academic institution. Molloy College is an independent Catholic college rooted in the Dominican tradition and its mission includes the four pillars of study, spirituality, service, and community. This capstone course integrates these mission pillars by immersing the students in a real consulting problem that provides actionable solutions for a not-for-profit organization serving society.

This paper summarizes the work completed by an MBA capstone consulting project to help the Council For Unity (CFU) increase its market expansion efforts so that its programs can be integrated into more communities across Long Island. This group integrated the knowledge and skills gained throughout the academic program and designed a new organizational structure, a comprehensive market entry model, and a digital marketing strategy to facilitate the CFU's efforts at empowering youths and reducing gang activity across Long Island.

## **Keywords**

Education, management, marketing, consulting, not-for-profit, community youth programs

## **1 PEDAGOGICAL PHILOSOPHY**

The pedagogical philosophy of the Molloy College graduate business program emphasizes the importance of excelling in each student's discipline, while also maintaining the broader view that business decisions and actions should positively influence society. The MBA capstone program at Molloy College follows this philosophy by providing each student with the opportunity to integrate the skills and knowledge learned in the classroom with practical community-based consulting consistent with the mission of the academic institution. The Molloy College mission is "rooted in the Dominican tradition of study, spirituality, service and community" (Molloy College Mission Statement, n.d.). This MBA capstone course design was inspired by a college-wide theme of "Civic Engagement" during the 2012-2013 academic year, and encourages students to complete their transformative educational process by engaging with a local not-for-profit organization on a real project. This capstone experience provides the students with the opportunity to demonstrate the skills, knowledge, and disposition learned in the classroom through real consulting services that benefit the greater good of the local communities.

The 2017 MBA capstone class was divided into three consulting teams serving one client. This paper summarizes the combined work of these consulting teams. These consultants used the Bloomberg Philanthropies "Mayor's Challenge" application as a general guideline for the consulting process. These guidelines include the following phases: (1) establishing a solution-driven vision, (2) developing a turnkey implementation plan, (3) evaluating the impact of the proposed solution, and (4) determining if the solution can be replicated to other cities or organizations (Bloomberg Philanthropies Competition Overview, 2017).

## **2 THE CLIENT and CONSULTING PROBLEMS**

The client for these projects was the Council for Unity (CFU), a 501(c) 3 organization founded by Robert J. De Sena in 1975 at the John Dewey High School in Brooklyn, New York. The CFU aims to foster positive life skills in at-risk youths and the jail population, while branding itself as an alternative to gangs. The CFU enters school districts, jails, and prisons to recruit new participating members and uses a proprietary model that encourages members to confront the problems they face in their daily lives and to avoid making detrimental decisions. The CFU model focuses on developing interpersonal life skills, leadership skills, self-expression, mediation, conflict resolution, and advocacy.

The CFU model helps reduce and resolve personal conflicts, (gang) violence, bullying, and intolerance. Participants gain greater self-awareness, self-esteem, and social skills, as well as a greater appreciation for diversity and community. The CFU currently offers both in-school and after-school programs, correctional facility programs, public safety and law enforcement programs, community outreach programs, and smaller workshops for clients in community centers and schools. According to the CFU:

90% of participants graduate from high school; 88% of participants attend college; 70% of participating school principals reported a decrease in violent crime in their schools; and 100% of participants reported that the CFU had a positive impact on their lives (Council For Unity Programs, n.d.). The product is very successful and often referred to as a “best kept secret” in terms of empowering youths and combating gang activity.

The capstone process began with a meeting between the student consulting teams and the client. During this meeting, the client presented problems pertaining to its organizational structure, ability to attract funding sources, awareness and expansion efforts into the Long Island communities, and social media and digital marketing strategies. One team was dedicated to each of these problems. The following sections provide further details of these problems and the consulting solution recommendations provided by the capstone consulting teams.

### 3 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The CFU’s current structure does not reflect positions typically identified with similar non-profit organizations, including a chief operations officer, chief financial officer, and human resources and marketing professionals. These positions are crucial to the effective and efficient operations of non-profits such as the CFU. The lack of these positions has led to an inability to grow the organization to its full potential. The structure currently does not have sufficient human resources to expand the organization to better develop new clients and sustain the CFU with the necessary financial resources needed to ensure its sustainability. The current staff at the CFU are overwhelmed with work and take on multiple responsibilities to keep the mission alive. The consulting teams’ multi-faceted plan addressed this problem by creating a structure that provides resources, skills, and efficiencies to foster organizational growth and market expansion. The details of this recommendation are:

- **New Positions and Chart.** A new organizational chart has been developed that includes the following new positions: Chief Operating Officer (COO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Director of Strategic Partnerships & Program Development, Human Resources Manager, Financial Analyst, Information Technology Specialist, Administrative Assistant, and Transitional Advocate. These new positions will help the organization alleviate current employees’ responsibilities and enable the organization to grow and become financially stable.
- **Phased Approach.** Because this proposed optimal structure is an ambitious initial undertaking, it was proposed that a phased approach be implemented that may take up to two years to fully achieve. During this time period, it was recommended that on-board personnel be identified to serve in a temporary capacity in the most crucial roles of COO and CFO.
- **Internship Program.** It was further recommended that the CFU develop a robust internship program that can be used to further expand the reach of these positions. Internships were designed using Molloy College’s academic programs in Criminal Justice and Legal Studies, Philosophy, Communication, Business, Sociology, Social Work, and Psychology. These internships would enable on-board staff to focus on strategic concepts and development to further the mission of the CFU. Additionally, these interns can play a valuable role in executing CFU funding efforts.

### 4 ALTERNATIVE FUNDING SOURCES

Currently, the CFU is primarily dependent on government grants, educational partnerships, and a small amount of fundraising. These funding sources are unreliable and make strategic planning efforts difficult. This problem also relates to the organizational structure issues as the lack of consistent funding has made it difficult to properly staff with enough sufficiently qualified employees. The consulting team’s plan addressed this problem by designing fundraising alternatives to generate the financial resources to support its operations and organizational growth. The details of this recommendation are:

- **Corporate Sponsorship Program.** Sponsorship opportunities will be offered to both large and small corporations that are interested in fulfilling a social responsibility for a reasonable cost. Development of a mutually beneficial relationship between the CFU chapters and companies in the surrounding areas will channel the CFU’s vision of unity. This sponsorship program would enable corporate donors to “adopt” a chapter of their choosing and afford it naming rights for one year. In addition, this sponsorship would provide a scholarship to a student in that chapter based on criteria set forth by the donor.
- **Hall of Fame.** A CFU “Hall of Fame” should be established for distinguished CFU alumni. The CFU has a deep base of distinguished alumni that can serve as role models for its members. A commemorative journal will be published with sponsorship primarily provided through Hall of Fame inductees.
- **Annual Reunion.** A proposed Annual Reunion will bring CFU alumni together and provide a great experience/reward for recently graduated members to network with previously graduated members.
- **Book Promotion.** Promote the book, *Chrysallia: The Princess of Possibility* by Robert J. De Sena (2007). The main character in this novel deals with a universe obsessed with greed, power, intolerance, and violence. The theme described formed the basis of the CFU’s model of fighting those societal flaws. The goal of promoting this book is to attract funding and advertise the CFU’s curriculum.
- **Senior Service Learning Project.** The CFU can expand its funding by allowing all Nassau and Suffolk County middle schools and high schools to fundraise on behalf of the CFU as part of a senior class community service learning project.
- **Community Events.** Multiple community events were designed that would also attract exposure and funding to the CFU, as well as form positive community relations. These events included a Chinese Auction, Golf Outing, and Casino Night.

The combined fundraising expected profits are approximately \$70,000-\$300,000 per year, while the additional salaries for the new reorganizational structure is approximately \$300,000. Depending on the success of the fundraising opportunities, there is the potential to cover all of the new required employee salaries.

## 5 LONG ISLAND MARKET EXPANSION

Although the CFU has had success operating within the five boroughs of New York City (Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island), there is an increasing desire to expand CFU's presence on Long Island. Nassau and Suffolk County of Long Island have experienced a frightening increase in crime and violence associated with the most dangerous transnational Salvadoran gang in the United States: MS-13. This gang has developed a strong presence in many Long Island communities, including Brentwood, Central Islip, Wyandanch, Huntington Station, Hempstead, Freeport, and Roosevelt. Although being termed a "best kept secret" is a compliment to the organization and its products, these communities need the successful programs that the CFU offers. As a result, the CFU would like strategies to better market and expand its awareness and presence on Long Island.

The consulting team's plan addressed this problem by creating a comprehensive Long Island expansion strategic model that would both increase CFU's presence in its existing communities and penetrate new ones that are most afflicted with gang activity. This model should be pilot tested in the communities of Westbury and Brentwood and, if successful, the model can be expanded to other ones across Long Island. These communities were selected because the CFU currently has an in-school program in Westbury, and Brentwood is experiencing one of the most dangerous effects due to MS-13 activity.

With the opportunity to promote a better marketing strategy, provide overall program awareness, and assist recruitment efforts, the proposed Long Island market expansion plan includes the following components:

- **In-School Programs.** The initial phase of this strategy is to directly reach children by partnering with schools in new communities to implement CFU's curriculum. The in-school programs affect individuals and the community using a curriculum exhibiting a strong focus on academics, community service projects, and building social skills. A new market entry plan was created that would put the CFU program into the Brentwood school system. Brentwood suffers from increased MS-13 gang activity, has four middle schools and one high school, and presents a large market for CFU's curriculum to both create awareness and further the mission of the organization. With an approximate Brentwood High School class size of 1,125 students and its current 74% graduation rate, adding the CFU program could potentially allow an estimated 263 additional students to graduate.
- **After-School Programs.** The next phase of this plan was to develop after-school programs in Westbury and Brentwood using a strategy of targeting libraries and community centers. The after-school programs will be supported by partnering with local entities such as the Brentwood Public Library, Westbury Memorial Public Library, and Westbury Community Center. In 2015, the Westbury and Brentwood Libraries had nearly 1.3 million combined visits and held over 600 events for children and 484 for young adults; these libraries are a hub of activity for potential CFU members. The team also coordinated with the Westbury Community Center and designed monthly CFU programs including movie, paint, poetry, and yoga nights.
- **National/Corporate Partners.** Corporate sponsors such as Northwell Health were identified to aid in future awareness and funding efforts for the CFU. Partnerships were designed that would be eligible to begin in 2019.
- **Marketing Internship.** Consistent with the organizational restructuring recommendations, a strategy was developed to create a marketing department for CFU staffed with unpaid interns that will continue to further the mission of CFU on Long Island and elsewhere.
- **Resources.** Recruit volunteers with the use of the "Points of Light" volunteer network. This network utilizes a website where volunteers can sign up to participate in CFU programs and events. This option will provide additional resources to facilitate the after-school activities and other recommended events/programs.

While the anticipated results will not happen overnight, these after-school programs can pave the way for a sustained presence in both Westbury and Brentwood, with a framework provided for growth in other locations across Nassau and Suffolk County.

## 6 SOCIAL MEDIA and DIGITAL MARKETING

The final problem area that CFU presented was with its inability to effectively leverage the powers of social and digital media to spread awareness, track program alumni, and attract funding sources. Due to staffing and funding shortages, the CFU does not currently maintain an active social media presence, which has reduced its ability to connect to prospective members and program partners. The consulting team addressed this problem through strategies aimed at increasing the CFU's social media presence and introducing a digital marketing campaign. The details of these recommendations are:

- **Social Media Presence.** A robust social media presence - featuring photos, searchable hashtags, and videos - would help newcomers to CFU learn about the organization, encourage current members to contribute content of their own, and provide

a place for members to interact with one another across the country. The consultants recommended that all participants (students, inductees, and staff) thoroughly document events, share personal stories, and livestream small seminars using CFU's Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts. It is important that CFU populate all of their social media profiles with content so they can help potential clients and other interested parties understand CFU's mission, expertise, services provided, and accomplishments.

- **Social Media Awareness.** A social media awareness campaign would help solicit donations from those interested in social causes. The consulting team recommended that the CFU use video advertisements in conjunction with Facebook's sophisticated advertising tools to spread awareness and solicit donations. With Facebook advertising, CFU can micro-target an audience for the advertisement based on a user's past behaviors, internet browsing habits, page "likes", and self-identified traits. The team produced and provided the client with a 90-second video advertisement for use in this campaign. Using this Facebook awareness campaign, it was estimated that the CFU can reach between 1,300 and 4,500 people per day when targeting Facebook users who earn between \$50,000 and \$150,000 per year, have previously expressed interests in children's causes, and have previously donated to charity. Assuming an average reach of 2,900 people per day and using conservative and optimistic projections, this awareness campaign could generate a profit of \$4,367-\$59,873 per year.
- **Tracking Alumni.** The tracking of all new students, members, inductees, and alumni can be accomplished by collecting email addresses and adding them to a simple Mailchimp database. Mailchimp is a powerful tool that would allow the CFU to import mailing lists for use with all alumni communications.
- **Social Media Content Marketing Campaign.** A social media content marketing campaign would help promote the CFU to potential clients (e.g., school districts, correctional facilities). The team recommended that CFU use Facebook's Lead Generation advertisement builder in conjunction with Mailchimp to attract potential new clients with the offer of a free eBook that offers relevant and valuable content to one or more of the many potential categories of client CFU services. This eBook would be approximately 20-30 pages in length and feature relevant industry insights gleaned from CFU's years of expertise. Example topics include: "Top ten questions school administrators have about dealing with at-risk teens answered"; "Top ten ways to increase self-esteem in teenagers"; and "An administrator's guide to building self-esteem in the jail population". Through Facebook, lead generation advertisements can be deployed targeting people who work in administrative services, community and social services, educational and library services, assistant superintendents, and vice principals. These advertisements are estimated to reach between 190 and 900 people per day. Using conservative and optimistic projections, the lead generation marketing campaign could generate a profit of \$2.9-\$14.4 million per year.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS and DISCUSSION

This paper had two primary objectives: (1) introduce the reader to the CFU organization and its important role in improving the lives of at-risk youth, and (2) demonstrate how the Molloy College MBA program provides its graduate students with a comprehensive capstone experience while improving the community.

The CFU is at a point in its history where it needs to infuse new ideas and operating practices so that it can expand its programs into more schools, communities, law enforcement agencies, and correctional institutions across Long Island. The recommendations that were presented in this paper were part of a multi-team MBA capstone consulting effort and created a new organizational structure, alternative funding sources, Long Island market expansion program, and social media and digital marketing campaign. These students applied the skills, knowledge, and disposition learned in the classroom and participated in a truly transformative learning experience that lived the mission of Molloy College and will allow the CFU to improve the lives of at-risk youth throughout the communities of Long Island.

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Additional references will be supplied upon request.