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Musical Mentors and the Plight of Autonomy



INSTITUTE FOR
MUSIC LEADERSHIP



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Musical Mentors and the Plight of Autonomy

Founded in 2008, Musical Mentors Collaborative is a nonprofit organization that offers free and individualized music instruction to underserved public school students in New York City. The program operates by linking student-run university organizations with neighboring elementary schools. Musical Mentors provides pedagogical training to volunteer student teachers and pairs them with elementary school students for the school year. This study examines the decision by the organization's executive board to expand from three to six university chapters over a two-year period. The opportunity would grow the program but would also present questions of university support, student leader recruitment, and community buy-in. The case concludes by asking the reader to create an expansion plan that details the actions needed to establish a new university chapter of Musical Mentors and to examine the implications of its commitment to instructor autonomy.



This case study was prepared by Caroline Sonett. *The Eastman Case Studies* are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or sources of primary data nor are they to serve as illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership or decision making.

Musical Mentors Collaborative

The New York City-based Musical Mentors Collaborative began in 2008 as a small, student-run organization through Columbia University. Students at Columbia noticed that among public elementary school students who played instrumental music, there was a lack of private music lessons available to them in their communities; even public schools with strong music education programs did not have the necessary resources to provide students with private instruction on their instruments. At the same time, there existed an immense, untapped resource among musically talented and highly trained Columbia students, who were well equipped to provide instruction and mentorship to elementary school students. Unlike larger music education programs geared toward group lessons and participation, Musical Mentors has committed to specializing in private lessons for the youth. The opportunity for individualized instruction

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on an instrument gives schoolchildren the encouragement and confidence that can generate a love of music from an early age. President and co-founder of Musical Mentors Zack Susel captured the ultimate objective of the program: “Playing music is one of life’s greatest joys, one we hope to share with as many children as possible.”

Musical Mentors recruits college students with extensive musical background and training and pairs them with elementary students who would otherwise not have access to private lessons. Instructors meet weekly with students to teach instrumental techniques as well as basic music theory. In the early years of the program, student teachers were

recruited through Columbia’s music department and student-run wind ensemble. As the organization has grown and expanded recruitment measures, teachers are now drawn from all departments of Columbia College, the undergraduate college of the university.

Musical Mentors relies not only on the individual talents of recruited instructors but also on the various instruments they play. At the beginning of each semester, the enlisted student teachers hold an “instrument fair.” Students and their families from the partnering public school are invited to hear and explore the instruments they might like to learn and are then matched with an instructor for the year. This model allows students to choose their preferred instrument. Student leaders of the Columbia chapter communicate with a parent-teacher coordinator at the host school to collect new student applications, determine the availability of the school building for lessons, and coordinate lesson times that work for student families and the instructors.

As Musical Mentors has expanded its operations to chapters at three universities, the organization’s basic configuration has remained the same. Local student leaders at each university branch maintain a roster of instructors and connect with a local elementary school to organize and deliver lessons throughout the school year. The second university chapter was opened at the London School of Economics in 2010, when a Musical Mentors instructor studied there. Recognizing the need for a larger organizational structure and centralized leadership in response to the program growth, Musical Mentors Collaborative incorporated as a nonprofit in 2011. The organization established a board of directors, which provides strategic planning and support to the separate university branches. The newest chapter was launched at New York University in 2013, shortly after the creation of the board of directors.

Musical Mentors in Action

The three chapters of Musical Mentors are run by university students who coordinate program financing, scheduling, and legal matters independently of the host university. There is also no legal association with the respective universities. Chapters hold yearly elections for leadership positions, drawing from their roster of student instructors. Chapter presidents of Musical Mentors recruit new instructors through student activities fairs held at the beginning of each academic year, and student-led music performance groups also yield a number of volunteers. Chapters further seek recruitment assistance from university music departments, which distribute announcements in classes and through electronic departmental communication. The structure of Musical Mentors is designed to be flexible depending on the music resources available at each university, allowing for the needs of the host school to organize chapter recruitment and to develop meeting times.

Private instruction is at the core of Musical Mentors. One-on-one lessons give young students a head start in music, and end-of-semester recitals provide an opportunity for them to display individual progress. Recitals often feature student-teacher duets, in which the instructor remains on stage with the student for additional support. The collaborative process builds longterm trust, and many student-teacher pairings work together for at least two years. Occasionally, private sessions are supplemented by small group lessons, but the focus remains on individual instruction.

In one-on-one lessons, students are able to express themselves freely. The familiar learning environment of the school and the informality of the private lesson setting allow students to interact collaboratively and spontaneously with instructors. The instructors meanwhile gain teaching experience and develop interpersonal and leadership skills. Faculty from

music departments further provide student chapters with instructional materials, basic pedagogical training, and professional development workshops. The substantial autonomy of instructors is a cornerstone of Musical Mentors. Instructors ultimately decide the precise content and length of their lessons, although most lessons feature a combination of instrumental technique, development of music theory and aural skills, and personal mentoring. The freedom given to instructors allows them to tailor lessons to students of diverse ages and learning styles, a further benefit of private lessons.

Musical Mentors stresses parental involvement in the weekly lessons. The program requires that each meeting be observed by a family member of the student. The leadership of Musical Mentors strongly believes that family support is essential to a student's musical success at the elementary level. Family involvement during lessons also solves an important legal issue: without family observation in the lesson, college instructors would have to go through the long and expensive process of registering with the state to work individually with students. By requiring family member attendance, Musical Mentors saves substantial funds and avoids a legal hurdle, while allowing students to study with talented instructors who would be unwilling or financially unable to complete state registration.

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Before teachers are matched with their elementary school students, Musical Mentors consults with university faculty to provide training and materials to the chapters at each institution. Instructors enter the program with some form of advanced musical training and may teach a variety of instruments for the chapter. The educational materials supplied by Musical Mentors, therefore, focus on general teaching techniques, behavior management, and best practices in music education pedagogy for elementary school. Student instructors are also given access to a range of online materials including instrumental method books and documents, which offer effective techniques for boosting student engagement and commitment. Chapters often request teaching workshops led by a music department faculty member. Additionally, student teachers in the program are offered continued support through monthly instructor meetings at the chapter level, which can serve as teaching labs.

The institutional chapters of Musical Mentors are guided by the parent organization's board of directors, which develops longterm plans and provides support to university chapters during transitions in student leadership. The board of directors -- comprising past chapter presidents, financial and legal advisors, and artistic consultants -- ultimately steers the direction of the organization. It meets two or three times per year and is responsible for arranging partnerships with public schools, handling chapter leadership changeover, creating organization-wide materials, fundraising, and offering counsel to the chapter leaders. The board also organizes citywide opportunities for Musical Mentors students, teachers, and families to convene outside of the private lesson environment. By establishing partnerships with high profile musical institutions (such as Distinguished Concerts International) that offer free tickets to educational nonprofits, the board

arranges concert opportunities to cultivate student interest and investment in music.

The board's largest responsibility is to establish and maintain professional relationships between university chapters and New York City public schools. When a university chapter is in its infancy or ready to expand to another teaching location, board members work to identify an appropriate school within the university community. They specifically target schools that satisfy three criteria: (1) the school must have a large percentage of students who qualify for a free or reduced lunch program; (2) it must be located within the immediate neighborhood of the university; and (3) it must offer some type of music program. Schools that already deliver basic music instruction but do not have a well developed instrumental program are ideal to host the private lessons. In this case, students have received some music education, but are not afforded high level, one-on-one instruction, a gap that Musical Mentors instructors could fill.

Also integral to the success of a new school partnership is a dedicated and organized coordinator. Once the principal of a school agrees to host the program, the coordinator is responsible for communicating with chapter leadership to organize lesson locations and times that accord with the schedules of the school, instructor, and student. The school coordinator is usually a full time school employee who supervises all after school programs, and they reserve school space for lessons each semester. Once a school and coordinator have volunteered to host the extracurricular lessons, Musical Mentors calls on pro bono legal services to set up any necessary contracts and waivers between the organization and the elementary school. Finding a partnering elementary school that is the right fit is a difficult process, but the mechanisms put in place by the executive board make it possible to help drive the Musical Mentors mission to bring individu-

alized music instruction to as many students as possible. Musical Mentors pairs with elementary schools that have a strong belief and investment in bringing the program to their students, and the success rate is very high for partnering schools.

Funding and Staffing

Because Musical Mentors relies heavily on a dedicated network of volunteers at many levels, it maintains a lean operational budget that requires effective allocation. The host universities of each chapter of Musical Mentors do not contribute “dues” to the parent company nor do they collect funds from Musical Mentors for hosting. The universities do offer space in kind for chapter meetings, professional development events, and end-of-year recitals. While Musical Mentors does not employ any paid part or full-time staff, each chapter raises some funds to cover annual recruitment of teachers, as well as nominal expenses such as printing posters to advertise recitals or buying refreshments for concert receptions. Chapters also raise money to offset instrument acquisition costs as needed. Chapter presidents collect donations from the annual student recital and concerts given by instructors in the program. Columbia University’s chapter, for example, enjoys a long-standing partnership with the Columbia University Wind Ensemble, which contributes proceeds of its annual Festival of Winds to Musical Mentors. This recurring, well-attended event has become a reliable source of income for the Columbia chapter.

With an emphasis on instrumental lessons, Musical Mentors is determined to keep barriers to obtaining instruments low for families, while also guarding against the rising costs for basic instruments. The organization’s instrumental procurement policy currently puts the cost of the instrument on the student families, who are asked for a one-time fee not to exceed \$150. This fee not only covers the

purchase of the instrument, but also includes an instruction book and any other required musical equipment such as metronomes or reeds. For many families however, the instrument fee is cost prohibitive. To aid students from low-income households, Musical Mentors has held drives to collect used instruments that can be loaned to students. Costs can also be defrayed considerably if the partnering elementary school is able to lend instruments to students at no charge. This scenario is often possible when the elementary school runs a band program with the students’ chosen instruments.

In nearly ten years of operation, over 300 Musical Mentors instructors have collectively volunteered over 6,000 hours in private music lessons. The three current student chapters continue to thrive, with new cohorts of instructors interested in chapter leadership positions and a steady supply of new and enthusiastic teachers. School coordinators, board members, and advisors also operate in a volunteer capacity to support the mission.

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A Plan for Expansion

The strong volunteer force of Musical Mentors facilitates the smooth operations of all chapters, including additional professional development for instructors and extracurricular opportunities for students. Its lack of any paid part-time or full-time staff does present a challenge, however, when confronted with the issue of program expansion. Networks of volunteers are capable of providing

targeted services such as teaching, recruiting, and coordinating scheduling logistics, but the addition of a chapter would necessarily involve a large outpouring of human resources. The London School of Economics chapter materialized only because a previous Columbia chapter president had studied at this institution, and the New York University program began when a Musical Mentors alumnus joined the board of directors and recruited an NYU student to help launch the new program. Their knowledge of the organizational structure and strong belief in the program were invaluable in establishing strong and lasting chapters. Executive board presidents Zack Susel and Jonathan Maimon also provided assistance to student leaders as they established these chapters. Opening up a new chapter at a university now requires the recruitment of a student leader willing to invest time to start a program, as well as buy in from the host music department and a partnering elementary school.

Fortunately, Musical Mentors has just received a two-year grant that will allow the organization to employ a part-time operations manager. During this time, the new hire will help Musical Mentors expand to three new college campuses, thereby doubling the number of active chapters. The organization aims to have these new chapters operational within two years and will use this expansion plan as a model for establishing future chapters. Considering the number of steps involved in the lengthy process of setting up a new chapter, meeting this goal will require efficiency from those involved. Before the operations manager begins this process, some important questions fundamental to the success of the program will have to be considered. First, the new chapter must identify a local elementary school that fits requirements set by Musical Mentors. Considering the organizational mission to provide instruction to students who would otherwise not have access to private lessons, low-income areas have become a focus for finding partner schools. Musical

Mentors seeks elementary schools that have 50% or more of its students who qualify for the National School Lunch Program. Prospective host schools must also have some sort of existing music programs, as Musical Mentors believes its individualized after-school lessons should act as a supplement to in-school group instruction. Further, the schools should have the infrastructure in place to make sure that there is space to host weekly lessons, as well as a coordinator who is already a school employee. To assist in college student recruitment and retention, selected partner schools should be within walking distance from the local university.

There are several additional factors that the new hire must consider while choosing a host university for a new chapter of Musical Mentors. For instance, there are characteristics that make good prospects for the program and successfully motivate individuals to invest time and expertise in order to create a new Musical Mentors branch. Not every college or university has the leadership and organizational structure necessary for an organization like Musical Mentors to thrive. Institutions without music departments, for example, may present issues with student leadership and instructor recruitment. On the other hand, the organization might encounter oversaturation in conservatories, with talented students already working as private lesson instructors, often in paid positions. To find lasting success, chapters of Musical Mentors must provide quality opportunities for their college instructors, as well as for the students they will serve.

Examining the mission statements of college music departments can reveal the potential alignment of the department's values with those of Musical Mentors. For example, the mission statement of Columbia University's Department of Music states: "as a liberal arts department, and not a conservatory, we aim to prepare our undergraduate majors, minors, and concentrators for careers in music and

the arts, but also to bring skills developed in the rigorous study of music to the pursuit of careers in academia, technology, public service, policy, business, medicine, the law, engineering, science, education, and many other fields. We believe that the study of music is crucial to the development of the critical intellectual and ethical skills that are the broader objectives of a liberal arts education and the basis for a successful career in any field.” The department places great value on the critical and ethical skills gained from engagement in the study of music, which it believes can contribute to broad academic and personal success. The mission resonates with that of Musical Mentors, which states that “in pairing college-age instructors with elementary school students, our program is unique in that we teach music, but also strive to create college-attending role models for our young elementary school students.” By teaching music, college instructors provide strong musical and academic mentorship to their students. Successful institutional pairings, then, can be college music departments that expressly aim to teach the multidisciplinary benefits of musical knowledge.

Finding supportive faculty sponsors in college music departments are essential, as they may eventually volunteer their time and expertise to provide professional development materials and workshops to student instructors. Universities with full-time, tenured music faculty are most likely to have the resources (if not always the time) to invest in a community service program like Musical Mentors. Faculty sponsors also can provide program continuity and may ease the burden of responsibility on the founding student leader of a chapter. In general, students pass more quickly through the halls of a university than faculty members, allowing for the latter to develop a long-term vision to advance a nascent program. Sponsors can further nominate potential chapter leaders, ideally ones who are not only qualified musicians but also responsible

individuals. Inviting faculty sponsors to recommend student leaders adds internal credibility to the chapter and allows high-achieving students the opportunity to develop close working relations with influential faculty members.

Standardization

By standardizing aspects of Musical Mentors, leaders of the organization could create a blueprint for efficient program roll-out in the future. Director of Outreach Isaac Assor believes that standardization is a matter of “figuring out which components are uniform across all of Musical Mentors and which are unique to each individual environment.” How can Musical Mentors keep lessons individualized and the program community-focused, while rapidly expanding the base of volunteer instructors within these brand new chapters?

Are these two goals in conflict with one another? Is program standardization a reasonable and achievable goal for the parent organization?

One of the current benefits to student-teachers of Musical Mentors is that the program offers great autonomy for the instructor, allowing volunteers the freedom to use whatever method books, pedagogical materials, and teaching strategies will be most effective for their students and for them. Musical Mentors provides a small online repository of materials for optional use, but this does not include music theory teaching materials or instrumental technique books across a range of instruments. New student leaders at the chapter level could decide to recommend these resources when training student instructors.

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If the parent organization purchased sets of method books each year, it could allow for an easier export of the Musical Mentors program to new schools. Moreover, standardized materials might increase the number of students served because it would lift some of the financial burden on families and could lower the lesson planning time of student instructors. Currently, however, Musical Mentors finds the proposal to order standard books for private lessons to be cost prohibitive in its current budget state.

The board of directors has agreed that both standardizing and providing instructional books for their students is crucial to growing the number of sites for the program. It has suggested three possible solutions for raising the necessary funding to cover the new and substantial expense. (1) Musical Mentors could seek to establish partnerships with music publishers of method books, who would donate these books for all students enrolled in the program. (2) It could focus on fundraising for the purchase of the books through an aggressive online strategy. The Musical Mentors website currently has the capacity to accept online donations, and other possible fundraising methods could include online funding platforms such as kickstarter.com and donorschoose.org. (3) Finally, the organization could create an online library of method books and teaching materials that are in the public domain. A digital pedagogy library, comprising free materials linked to reputable online sources, could be stored on the organization's website. While the last proposal seems to eliminate costs entirely and could provide immediate and perpetual access to materials for instructors in all chapters, finding free materials from the same provider (or a few providers) will likely prevent standardization across instruments. It is ultimately up to the individual instructors which teaching materials they choose, as they would not be mandated to adopt this curriculum. Chapter presidents have also acknowledged that

recruited instructors have expressed a desire to have a more well-defined curriculum for starters. Each of these options could serve as a point of entry for teachers, retaining autonomy to keep lessons completely individualized, but decreasing the time needed to prepare instructors to teach.

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Musical Mentors has hired a consultant, who will make a recommendation to the board about an expansion strategy, to be enacted by the operations manager. The board has asked the consultant to identify a university within the United States to host a local Musical Mentors chapter, with specific instructions for efficient roll-out at this particular institution, but also structured in a way that will allow the template to help launch new chapters. Putting yourself in the role of the consultant and using knowledge of the organization, identify a potential partnering university and write a pitch directed towards a music faculty member at the chosen institution. Address the following points in particular:

- How does the mission of Musical Mentors align with that of the college music department?
- Why will this new Musical Mentors chapter thrive in this institution and its surrounding community?
- What are the benefits to the university, the department, potential teachers, and students of Musical Mentors if the chapter is founded?

These questions should be addressed from both ideological and practical standpoints. Use this pitch as a starting point for the creation of an expansion template for this school. You may use the document in **Appendices 1** and **2** to guide the content and larger structure of your template and pitch. **Appendix 1** is a flowchart that characterizes the

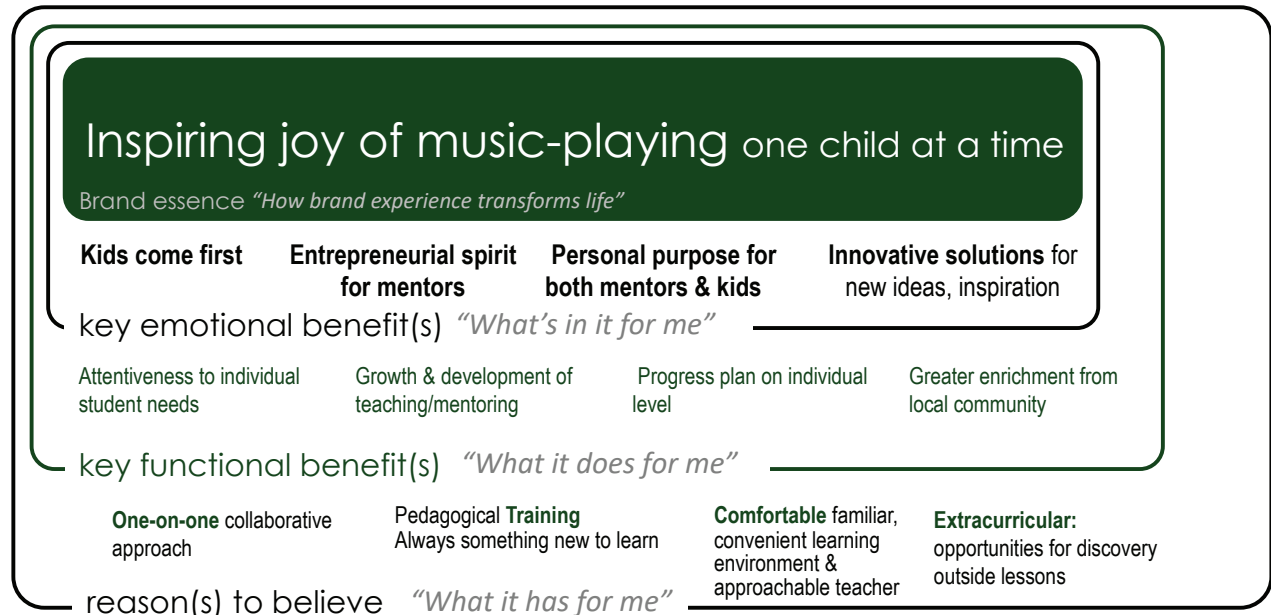
brand equity of Musical Mentors, and **Appendix 2** documents Musical Mentors' long-term goals. You will need to prioritize your intended actions to create a vibrant program while being mindful of the hours that volunteers can be expected to contribute. Of the goals listed in **Appendix 2**, which are the most important? Which can be delayed until the program has been running for two or three years?

As the expansion template is drawn up, suggest a potential solution to the question of standardized instruction books. The board has proposed three solutions, which can be used in combination. Explore these approaches more deeply, and recommend one or more strategies to the board.

- If you plan to work with music publishers, propose one with which to establish a partnership, based on its catalogue of teaching materials and past philanthropic experience.
- If you recommend an online fundraising campaign, specify whether this would be done through Musical Mentors' website, other online funding platforms, or a different method. To whom will the campaign be targeted? Who will participate in the campaign, and how will it be structured?
- If you opt for an online library of teaching materials, compile a list of potential materials that you would include within your library. How will you ensure that these materials are reputable and appropriate for young students? How will your library be organized, and what type of instrumental and theory pedagogy materials will you include?

APPENDIX 1

Musical Mentors Brand Equity



APPENDIX 2

Musical Mentors: Organizational Goals

QUALITY	CATEGORY	GOALS	ACTION
	Instructor training	• Improve quality of education for kids • Increase benefit to instructors	• Develop closer ties with university music depts. • Hold more frequent training workshops • Find new people to lead workshops (unaffiliated w/ universities) • Start pedagogy blog • Develop mentors' mentors scheme • Create an online 'library' with training resources • Consider online training opportunities • Video/record workshops for future use • Create an online instructor forum
	Extracurriculars	• Expand kids' exposure to music (music appreciation) • Grow MMC's presence outside of the schools/universities	• Organize more frequent outings • Diversify types of outings • Bring professional musicians to the schools • Reach out to high-profile musicians • Log/record past outings/activities, affiliated costs, tricks for running an outing more efficiently
	Instrument inventory	• Reduce cost to families • Broaden selection of instruments • Improve instrument quality	• Hold instrument drive • Better maintain school pianos
EXPANSION	Student recruitment	• Drive higher retention rate • Grow student base • Improve parent communication	• Distribute year-end survey for admin/parents • Hold instrument fairs • Present at parent nights • Publicize annual recital to non-MMC students/families • Use parent references/endorsements
	Instructor recruitment	• Drive higher retention rate • Grow instructor base	• Ensure activity fair presence • Get university music dept. email list at all schools • Tap into grad students • Expand media presence (school blogs/papers) • Implore instructors to refer friends • Annual post spring break feedback session to identify issues/opportunities for next year
	Growth/expansion	• Reach more kids • Tap into fallow instructor resources	• Create list of prospective universities • Limit growth to 2 chapters every 2 years • Create 'expansion guide' • Expand to post-college mentors (young professionals, MMC alumni) • Formalize indicators of need (e.g., 50%+ NSL eligible) • Expand to middle/high schools
	Fundraising	• Fuel expansion and improvement • Hire part/fulltime admin	• Identify donors • Identify grants • Identify needs for funding • Build 3- to 5-year budget • Organize more fundraising opportunities (e.g., instructor benefit concerts) • Develop fundraising pitch/presentation and materials

ORGANIZATION	Board of Directors	• Improve MMC leadership/ organization	• Clarify roles of board members • Hold more frequent meetings • Broaden advisory board (one music dept. rep from each university?) • Develop tangible, quantitative goals • Clarify board's relationship with student boards • Ensure compliance (within reason) with bylaws • Consider minimum board member annual commitment/participation
	Student board leadership development	• Aid new chapters in becoming self-sufficient • Establish better institutional memory • Ensure quality control across chapters • Encourage ownership / empowerment of student boards	• Facilitate more frequent communication between board and chapter boards • Facilitate more frequent communication among chapter boards • Write student board manual/best practices
	Administrative organization	• Ensure IRS compliance • Strengthen institutional memory • Get house in order in preparation for further expansion/ fundraising	• Formalize accounting/recordkeeping • Maintain ongoing data/metrics on organization



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