



ACADEMY HIGH
CHAMPAIGN URBANA

ACADEMY HIGH STRATEGIC PLAN, 2020-2025

“The mission of Academy High, an independent college-preparatory secondary school, is to inspire students to discover and pursue their passions; to become exceptionally well-educated, academically and personally; and to lead lives of excellence, purpose, and joy.”

INTRODUCTION

Since opening its doors to its first class of students in 2017, Academy High has offered an innovative approach to secondary education in Champaign-Urbana. In a few short years, the enrollment has grown to over sixty students, drawn from a number of local schools and communities, taught by a team of dedicated and talented educators. The faculty and Board of Directors are committed to the idea that by nurturing our students to develop adventurous minds, bold spirits, and compassionate hearts, they can change the world.

The Academy High community prizes its small classes, flexible curriculum, high academic standards, and commitment to college preparation. The Academy High experience encourages students to be proactive and engaged, and to apply the knowledge and critical skills they learn in school to action in the world beyond. The small size of Academy High fosters a close-knit, supportive, and caring community.

The coming academic year marks an important and exciting period for Academy High, as it welcomes its new Head of School, John Carpenter, undergoes accreditation, commences a varsity athletics program, and graduates its first class of seniors. As the school continues to grow, to consider a future, permanent site, and to develop its curricular and extracurricular offerings, it is an excellent time to develop its first strategic plan.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Academy High initiated its strategic planning process in summer 2020 with the establishment of a Strategic Planning Task Force, appointed by outgoing Board of Directors President Lisa Libman, and comprised of Academy High faculty and administrators, parents of current students, and Board members. The Task Force viewed its role in the process as a gatherer and synthesizer of feedback from stakeholders about the strengths of Academy High and the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. The strategic planning process included a series of five town hall meetings for the Academy High community. The first two “Inside the Classroom: Academic Program” and “Outside the Classroom: Student Experience” were open to students, parents, and faculty, and they were followed by meetings for each of the three stakeholder groups. All stakeholders were also invited to participate in a survey and had the opportunity to write letters to the task force.

From these discussions, a set of common themes emerged about next steps for Academy High. The Strategic Planning Task Force identified five strategic commitments and a series of actionable steps to advance these commitments in the years ahead. These commitments underscore the school’s innovative approach to education and enable Academy High to build on its successes and establish itself within the Champaign-Urbana community.

STRATEGIC COMMITMENTS AND ACTIONABLE STEPS

Strategic Commitment #1—Define and articulate a philosophy and identity for Academy High.

As a relatively new school, it is incumbent upon Academy High to highlight the “Academy High Difference,” and the ways in which its innovative and student-centered approach to education prepares students to succeed and thrive in college and beyond.

To accomplish this goal, the school will:

- 1) Develop a common understanding of what 21st century college prep means for academic preparation and for the social skills students will need to be successful young adults after secondary school.
- 2) Prioritize the recruitment and retention of an excellent and diverse student body via curricular innovations, a robust set of offerings outside the classroom, and commitment to Indexed Tuition and scholarships.
- 3) Establish a common philosophy about assessment, testing, and mastery-based learning and communicate that in a consistent way to parents and students.
- 4) Create and sustain a college counseling program and provide ample opportunity for students to explore college options via 1:1 consultations, visits from admissions officers, and trips to nearby campuses.
- 5) Integrate coursework, co-curricular and extracurricular experiences, and community engagement to build the skills and capacities students need.

Strategic Commitment #2—Further develop the academic program with the “Five Cs + One” as the guiding force.

Academy High is built on a foundation known as “The Five Cs + One,” that highlights the essential skills that are essential to succeed and thrive in college and beyond: Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication, Character, and Cosmopolitanism (cross-cultural competency). These skills transcend traditional academic subjects and are incorporated throughout the curriculum.

To advance this commitment, Academy High will:

- 1) Undertake holistic curriculum planning, including a four-year curriculum outline and a focus on collaborative, interdisciplinary teaching.
- 2) Develop a plan for modules (i.e., short courses that accompany the core curriculum), including the identification of best practices around the appropriate number of offerings, connections with core courses, and reflection on student transcripts.
- 3) Enhance professional development opportunities for faculty, including an annual faculty retreat to focus on the manifestation of the Five Cs + One in the curriculum.
- 4) Define the goals, organizational structure, and timing within the academic program of internship experiences for students and consider appointing a faculty or staff coordinator for experiential learning.

5) Grow the curriculum to allow for differentiation in instruction, mixed-grade learning opportunities, technological innovation, and expanded options for students.

Strategic Commitment #3—Develop a suite of co-curricular and extracurricular activities that align with Academy High’s mission.

The Academy High community views the student experience outside the classroom as an integral component of the program. As the school grows, there will be further opportunities to build the co-curricular and extracurricular offerings to students, and, indeed, the development of these offerings is a factor in attracting students to the school.

In order to grow outside-the-classroom activities in a thoughtful and mission-focused way, Academy High will:

- 1) Delineate categories of extracurricular activities (e.g., informal interest groups, formal clubs, school-sponsored sports, other competitive teams, performing arts groups), create a protocol for the creation of new groups, and establish expectations about the appropriate level of supervision and guidance for these entities.
- 2) Identify which possible student experience initiatives can (and should) be organized by Academy High on its own, which might be best achieved via partnerships with other schools or community organizations, and which should not be priorities for Academy High at this time.
- 3) Create venues for leadership development and student participation in governance (i.e., a student council).
- 4) Highlight student wellness through the development of mental health programming, attentiveness to the physical education needs of students, and a focus on life skills (e.g., presentational skills, financial literacy, self-advocacy, and skills for democratic participation).
- 5) Create traditions (e.g., signature experiences by grade level, social events) that build community.

Strategic Commitment #4—Prioritize community engagement, in Champaign-Urbana and beyond.

Academy High knows that valuable education takes place via connections with the community. The school is enriched by such connections, and students have the opportunity to gain the skills and experience necessary to become engaged members of society and people of character.

To underscore the importance of community engagement, Academy High will:

- 1) Integrate service throughout the curriculum.
- 2) Embrace the flexibility of the curriculum to address real-world issues, particularly social justice and anti-discrimination locally and globally.
- 3) Incorporate various types of experiential learning in the Academy High program, including internships, field trips, service learning, and domestic and international travel opportunities.
- 4) Partner with community organizations and other local schools to collaborate on projects and develop a pipeline for prospective students.

5) Build a school culture that values difference and supports initiatives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Strategic Commitment #5—Grow responsibly and build a sustainable future for Academy High.

Academy High has succeeded as a start-up school and, through the contributions of faculty, students, parents, and members of the Board of Directors, has established itself as an innovative and valuable educational alternative. To achieve financial sustainability and to fully meet its promise, Academy High is poised for significant growth. As the school evolves to its next phase and welcomes additional students and faculty, it will be necessary to build infrastructure to support these steps. This growth will support the mission of Academy High, building on early successes and not losing sight of what has made the school special.

As next steps, Academy High commits to:

- 1) Identify and manage relocation to a permanent site to meet current and future needs.
- 2) Engage with peer schools as useful models and mentors.
- 3) Develop an enrollment management plan, including strategies for admissions and financial aid.
- 4) Create a fundraising and stewardship program, including foundation and corporate relations.
- 5) Develop a social media-focused marketing strategy to share student accomplishments and highlight unique features of the school.

CONCLUSION

The completion of Academy High's first strategic planning process marks a beginning, not an end. The plan is intended as a living document to guide the Academy High community over the next five years as the school grows and evolves to meet its promise as an innovative and inclusive independent school redefining college preparatory secondary education for the 21st century.

ACADEMY HIGH STRATEGIC PLANNING TASK FORCE

TRACY SULKIN, chair, Board of Directors Vice President

JOHN CARPENTER, Head of School

JORDAN CONERTY, Faculty Representative

MARGARETH ETIENNE, Past Member of Board of Directors

JONATHAN FREUND, Board of Directors Treasurer and Parent Representative

SARAH LAUFENBERG, Board of Directors President and Parent