George Jackson Academy: Building Brotherhood Beyond GJA

Capstone Project

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Dedication

We dedicate this capstone to our beloved friends, spouses, children, families, and colleagues who have supported us throughout this entire academic journey. This work could not have been done without your unwavering love and support. To all of you who provided words of encouragement throughout the years, it was greatly appreciated.

At this time, we would like to thank our capstone advisor, Dr. Daphne Penn, for your hard work and dedication to our team. Thank you, Dr. Campbell, for assisting our group, providing feedback, and constantly pushing us to be our best selves throughout the entire process. A special thank you to all the LLO professors for providing us with the knowledge that we needed to get to this point in our doctoral journey.

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Organizational Context

Established in 2003, George Jackson Academy (GJA) is an independent all-boys middle school in New York City serving predominantly students of color and first-generation families. Named after Motown Records CEO George Jackson, the school was founded by one of George's early educators and friends in order to provide a rigorous middle school education for underserved students in Manhattan. The founders intentionally established a middle school designed to support high-achieving boys of color and low-income students during their critical middle school years. GJA has a need-blind admissions policy, meaning that when considering admissions, financial standing is not a factor. Annual tuition is $25,000 and every student at GJA receives at least some financial aid (*Home*. GJA. (n.d.)). The school, which typically serves between 80-100 students per year, provides over two million dollars in financial aid each year (*Home*. GJA. (n.d.)). Each year, incoming students go through a process of interviews and assessments to ensure that they are the best fit for the school. The admissions staff and recruitment team, however, are supportive of each student and their family throughout the entire process and collaborate with families to ensure that every part of the student experience is accounted for. For example, the staff partners with each family to ensure that their child has a transportation buddy if they take public transport to school.

This example symbolizes the kindness, intentionality, and care that each member of the GJA community aims to embody in their daily actions and lies at the core of the school's community. The school prides itself on being one that not only fosters academic success and achievement but also cultivates high integrity, empathy, and leadership. Grounded in Lasallian tradition and an emphasis on holistic development, GJA nurtures its student's intellect and supports emotional growth. The Lasallian mission is grounded in numerous core principles that

are relevant to the George Jackson community (*Mission*. GJA. (n.d.)). Most notably, it emphasizes the commitment to social justice, respect, and dignity for all community members, a high-quality education that prepares students for college and life, and an inclusive community (*Mission*. GJA (n.d.)).

Middle school can be a turbulent time for all young people. GJA plays a critical role in building community and promoting meaningful relationships that extend beyond the classroom. At GJA, boys routinely speak of it as a "brotherhood" and laud it for its camaraderie and support. Regardless of financial means, students speak candidly about feeling valued, seen, and heard during their precious moments at school.

Through both academic and extracurricular opportunities, students forge bonds with their classmates that eventually guide and support them throughout their lives. As many of them matriculate to vastly different high school experiences, the GJA experience provides them with an important foundation that equips them for the academic rigor and social nuances that they're bound to face as they progress throughout high school and beyond. Students learn the importance of building and maintaining trust, empathy, and teamwork as they navigate the obstacles of adolescence. Its emphasis on character development shapes the way its students interact with other community members and the world outside of GJA. Through intentional character development, the school equips students with the interpersonal skills they need to thrive and lead wherever their lives take them. This critical support could not happen without an exceptionally gifted, mission-driven, and dedicated team of faculty and staff.

As it is constructed, GJA has 24 faculty and staff. All faculty and staff members wear multiple hats as they work to provide holistic support to their students and their families. Faculty, including senior administration, typically teach courses, advise students, counsel students as they

transition through middle school, support students who may have accommodations for learning disabilities, and run clubs and extracurricular activities. The adult community is undoubtedly dedicated to the school's mission and purpose, and its efforts have increasingly focused on broadening that community through more targeted alumni engagement.

Given the school's mission and the inherent emphasis on connections and belonging, the school leadership has expressed interest in opportunities to increase engagement among the alumni community through volunteer opportunities and the formation of a strong, formal alumni association. The purpose of this capstone is to aid GJA in its mission to improve the structure of the school's alumni association. The oldest GJA alumni are in their mid-30s, which means that the school community is beginning to have an alumni base that is more financially independent and solidified in their careers. Additionally, GJA alumni will have attended a wide range of high schools, colleges, and various graduate programs, meaning that current students will be able to reap the benefits of building a connection with a breadth of successful, independent young men. An alumni association will create a meaningful professional network for the GJA community, whose students often come from systematically disadvantaged backgrounds. A robust and self-sustaining alumni association will be pivotal to the longevity and sustainability of the institution.

In essence, this project is centered on the experiences of current and future GJA students. Our project hopes to inform and formalize the creation of a George Jackson Alumni Association, which will provide meaningful relationships and support for current and future students and their families. Ideally, however, our project's footprint will also enable alumni to connect and reconnect with one another, providing opportunities, insight, and community well beyond

graduation. This community and connection could similarly provide a meaningful impact on the future generational wealth and health of students, families, and the institution itself.

Organizational Stakeholders

There are five key stakeholders connected to this project. The Head of School (Ramon Javier), the Advancement Associate (Brandon Smith), the Teachers and Faculty of GJA, current students, and alumni. Every individual in this study plays a crucial role in providing their knowledge, perspective, and ideas with regard to the development of GJA's alumni association.

While all stakeholders are important, the Advancement Associate is the point person for all things alumni engagement. This position was created in hopes of getting alumni more involved, and creating the foundation for the school's future alumni association. The Head of School works in collaboration with the Advancement Associate to communicate the vision of the alumni association, as well as provides other important support, systems, and infrastructure that are needed to make this sector of the organization as successful as possible.

In efforts to support this study, the Advancement Associate was assigned the task of posting an alumni engagement survey to all of the school's social media platforms and contacting their most frequently engaged alumni. He was also tasked with providing details regarding any alumni engagement activities that were happening throughout the year (i.e., fundraisers, career day, happy hours, and homecoming celebrations).

Figure 1: Current GJA Faculty Organization Chart
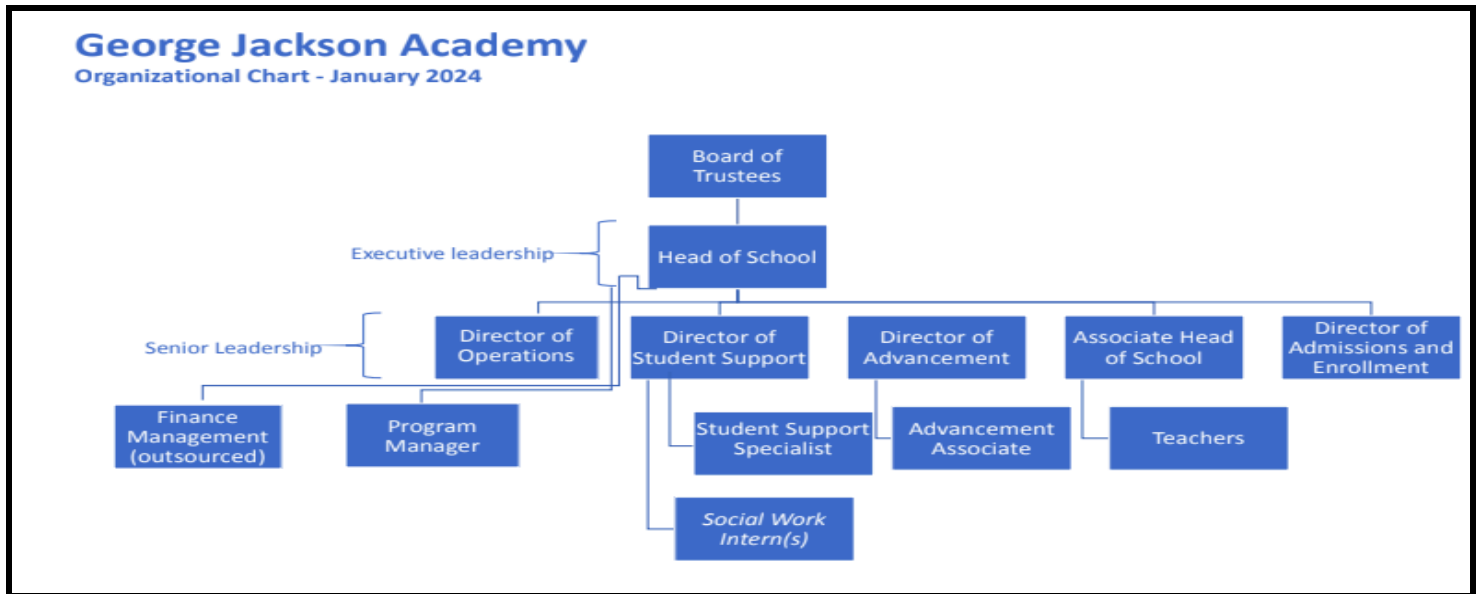
Problem of Practice

In our discussions with the Head of School, Ramon Javier, and their Advancement Associate, Brandon Smith, they expressed numerous aspirations and hopes for cultivating a strong alumni network to bolster the development, sustainability, and overall sense of community at GJA. Despite this compelling vision, GJA administrators have struggled to maintain momentum and consistent engagement with GJA alumni. Our objective is to pinpoint the obstacles hindering alumni engagement at GJA and devise research-based and context-specific strategies to foster lasting and genuine connections between GJA alumni and the broader GJA community.

GJA's advancement team has put forth significant effort to engage more than four hundred alumni, yielding moderate success. Administrators have organized a variety of alumni events, including reunions like barbecues and formal gatherings based on graduation years, as

well as alumni happy hours, college panels, and career days. However, alumni participation in these events has been inconsistent, with attendance fluctuating between twenty and forty alumni.

Despite reaching out to and connecting with several alumni, the advancement team has struggled to establish lasting alumni engagement and consistent systems and structures. Last year, they attempted to address this problem by conducting an alumni survey, but the response rate was less than ten percent. They rely heavily on a small group of dedicated alumni to assist with networking and organizing social events, yet they have been unable to maintain momentum or expand their bandwidth to do so. Nevertheless, current leadership recognizes the importance of addressing this issue as a critical next step for the institution.

Not addressing the alumni engagement challenge poses potentially significant consequences. GJA's existence is heavily dependent on donors and grants. Without a strong alumni network, GJA may struggle to expand its donor base which could lead to increased reliance on external grants and donors, making the school more financially vulnerable. In addition, a disengaged alumni network could mean missed opportunities to leverage alumni to support the school's mission and benefit current students, ultimately weakening the sense of community and connection that is so integral to the culture of GJA. Finally, an unengaged alumni network could make it challenging for GJA to track and measure its long-term impact on the lives of its graduates. This lack of data could potentially hinder the school's ability to refine its programs, demonstrate its effectiveness to potential funders, and make data-driven decisions for improvement.

The causes of the alumni engagement problem are not entirely clear, but based on discussions with GJA's advancement team, potential factors may include inadequate resources allocated to alumni engagement, ineffective communication strategies, lack of incentives for

alumni involvement, or a limited understanding of the alumni community's needs and preferences. Our goal is to conduct a robust study to identify the root causes of the alumni engagement issue and provide potential paths forward.

The Organizational System: GJA Alumni Association

Although George Jackson Academy has a small faculty, its Advancement Associate and additional teammates are dedicated to engagement and building relationships with its alumni community. Within this small circle of staff members, this sector's alumni engagement team is tasked with hosting events and creating beneficial relationships that will support the longevity of this department. Because of these relationships, alumni are more than ecstatic to return and help their alma mater. GJA currently monitors alumni engagement using tactics from the Council for Advancement and Support Education (CASE). These strategies include communication, experiential measures, volunteerism, and philanthropic work.

Figure 2: Categories of Alumni Engagement Defined by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education **(CASE***, 2018)*

Communication	"Interactive, meaningful and informative communication with alumni that supports the institution's mission, strategic goals and reputation." (CASE, 2018, p.6)
Experiential	"Meaningful experiences that inspire alumni, are valued by the institution, promote its mission, celebrate its achievements and strengthen its reputation." (CASE, 2018, p.6)
Volunteer	"Formally defined and rewarding volunteer roles that are endorsed and valued by the institution and support its mission and strategic goals." (CASE, 2018, p.6)
Philanthropic	"Diverse opportunities for alumni to make philanthropic investments that are meaningful to the donor and support the institution's mission and strategic goals." (CASE, 2018, p.6)

Every category mentioned demonstrates ways to not only build relationships but also encourage alumni participation. Every alumni has the opportunity to make an impact in each of these categories, and in return, they are able to stay connected to everything that is happening at their alma mater while also creating connections through networking. GJA has begun to make strides towards the efforts, but has not yet reached the goal that they would like to show that alumni are a crucial part of this organization's standing. The engagement of alumni for the 2023-2024 school year is represented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Snapshot of Alumni Engagement for GJA 2023-2024 School Year as Measured by the CASE Categories of Engagement

No. of Contactable Alumni	No. of Engaged Alumni	No. of Volunteers
353 out of 439	**105**	**15**
No. of Donors	Communication Engagement	Experiential Engagement
13	1. **Email** 2. **Instagram** 3. **Facebook** 4. **LinkedIn**	**3 Events** **46 Total Participants**

Currently, GJA alumni are involved through various communication channels, such as emails, social media, and LinkedIn. While the engagement of these platforms is limited to alumni responses, they are important in pushing out communication for all of GJA's updates and events. Most of the alumni interaction is passive through these specific communication channels simply because they are only clicking to open emails or liking the posts that are made. This is not a reflective representation of the entire alumni association, but this is a barrier that impacts alumni engagement. The other form of engagement is in the philanthropic category. Out of 439 alumni, 13 of them have given back financially this year. This is another opportunity for GJA to strengthen the donor population within the organization. This year the organization had three events that called for alumni participation, and only 46 alumni participated in these events. While this number is impacted by other outside factors—such as location, time, and limited opportunities—an alumni presence is needed to continue strengthening the reputation of the organization and brotherhood beyond graduation. This information, based upon the data provided, offers evidence that GJA is working with limited resources to keep its alumni association afloat.

Because GJA has a limited number of staff who work in conjunction with the Advancement Associate and limited financial donations from its alumni, it is extremely important to figure out a plan of action to get them involved with the organization. In order for GJA to meet their goal of creating a successful alumni association with ongoing/consistent engagement, they must provide a general understanding of their organization's priorities and goals to their alumni. Doing so ensures alumni can engage themselves accordingly. Because this is a middle school, engagement does not always have to be financial. Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) mention that alumni can influence current students by providing mentorship

opportunities, career development resources, and encouraging the matriculation of institution students. This is what GJA needs at this time.

Each category of engagement impacts alumni and students' experiences daily. However, it takes a significant number of alumni to make a powerful impact. Needless to say, there are challenges that reflect GJA's current alumni population. With intentional and strategic planning this alumni association is projected to grow not only through engagement but also through philanthropic donations.

Literature Review

       The primary focus of this literature review is centered around alumni engagement and student success at George Jackson Academy (GJA). This literature review seeks to define, build, and identify factors that impact alumni engagement, while also identifying the structures and supports needed to build effective alumni associations. Although there is minimal research on K–12 alumni engagement, our review attempts to utilize existing literature in higher education with potentially beneficial structures for GJA.

Defining and Conceptualizing Alumni Engagement

       K-12 independent schools have strived, and continue to strive, towards maximizing their ability to engage with their alumni in an effective and meaningful way (Grace, 2019). Effective and consistent alumni engagement, however, is an elusive goal that institutions constantly seek to improve upon because of the overwhelmingly positive benefits to their communities. Alumni engagement is unique in that all institutions want a high level of engagement yet there is not a single, universal definition for how to conceptualize or define alumni engagement in general. In 2018, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) established a task force to create a framework and benchmarks to measure alumni engagement. They defined alumni engagement as, "Activities that are valued by alumni, build enduring and mutually beneficial relationships, inspire loyalty and financial support, strengthen the institution's reputation, and involve alumni in meaningful activities to advance the institution's mission" (CASE, 2018, p. 5). This definition served as a useful benchmark for research across various domains and was framed around other specific components of alumni engagement. In attempting to ground the research into further categories, CASE's model and categories for alumni engagement helped to articulate the specific ways in which alumni can engage with their institution: volunteer,

philanthropic, communication, and experiential (CASE, 2018). This conceptualization helped ground our understanding and categorize the various types of alumni engagement.

All four types of engagement exist both to fulfill the desire by an alumnus to remain connected to their alma mater while simultaneously reinforcing its mission and values. Volunteerism and philanthropic support are both self-explanatory categories for alumni engagement but experiential and communication reflect two less obvious components of engagement. Experiential engagement refers to the experiences that contribute to the development and growth of the institution (CASE, 2018). These experiences are aimed at enhancing the positive association and connection between the alum and its alma mater. Communication engagement refers both to the communication between the institution and its alumni but also between alumni (CASE, 2018).

Fleming's (2019) work also critically informed our understanding of alumni engagement by discussing five themes that contributed to his definition of alumni engagement. These themes produced a working definition of alumni engagement grounded in the connection between personal values, institutional integrity, a sense of connection, commitment, and a sense of fulfillment and were broken down further into two separate categories (Fleming, 2019). The first category consists of personal values, institutional integrity, and a sense of connection to their alma mater, while the second category is related to the actionable relationship between the two (commitment and sense of fulfillment) (Fleming, 2019). Personal values, Fleming (2019) described, are what an alumnus perceives as important about their alma mater, whereas institutional integrity is connected to the understanding of what characteristics their alma mater has. A sense of connection, he further noted, highlights the feeling of connection or affection that

one has (Fleming, 2019). These three themes within the first category help to define the personal, internal relationship that an individual has or might have with their alma mater.

The other category, consisting of commitment and a sense of fulfillment, describes the external relationship between the individual and institution. Commitment refers to the resources that one is willing to "invest towards" institutions while the overall value of the worthiness of their investment is characterized as a sense of fulfillment (Fleming, 2019, p.112). Engagement, therefore, "is the coalescence of beliefs, thoughts, actions, and emotions about and towards their alma mater, and an individual's level of engagement is the degree to which they come together" (Fleming, 2019, p. 103). Although alumni engagement is a large and multifaceted concept, the combination of Fleming's five values and CASE's four categories of engagement provided a meaningful baseline understanding of how to measure and define alumni engagement. We therefore utilized both Fleming and CASE's definitions to develop our own working definition of alumni engagement **as a multifaceted, mutually beneficial relationship between graduates and their alma mater that represents a combination of personal values and actionable relationships that result in the ongoing support of the institution's mission and its community.**

Creating Meaningful Engagement

Shen and Sha (2020) argued that the style and structure of communication were the most impactful on engagement levels. More specifically, a multifaceted approach that included direct conversations and hands-on experiences fostered the deepest connections and long-term engagement. Shen and Sha (2020) highlighted the necessity of evaluating alumni engagement using more than just quantitative data to get a more thorough understanding of what engagement

means. More specifically, they noted the importance of "conversational voice" in communicating effective and meaningful alumni engagement (Shen and Sha, 2020, p. 1). Similarly, Singer and Hughey (2002) discussed the pivotal role that alumni associations play in providing opportunities and access for individuals to engage with their alma mater and its current constituents. They, in agreement with Shen and Sha (2020) highlighted the critical role of alumni in curating and building the experience for current students.

Singer and Huey (2002) specifically stressed the critical role that alumni associations play in fostering connections between students and graduates. Alumni associations are central conduits for facilitating ongoing engagement and relationship building between constituent groups. Targeted communication and programming help build community and reinforce the connection between individuals and the institution. Both Singer and Huey (2002) and Shen and Sha (2020) emphasize that the strongest connections and results between alma maters and individuals occur when communication is individualized and intentional.

In addition to structured communication, Gannod et. al. (2010) highlighted the beneficial role that an interactive project between alumni and current students can have in fostering increased alumni engagement. In this project, undergraduates enrolled in a capstone seminar where they worked directly with alumni in a field of their interest (Gannod, et al., 2010). Alumni were introduced and provided overviews of their own career paths and roles, ultimately serving as mentors and sponsors to help facilitate a real-world experience for undergraduates to participate in (Gannod, et al., 2010). This course was organized by the university in conjunction with their alumni association, which, as noted by Singer and Huey (2002), plays a critical role in curating experiences for individuals to connect with alumni. Alumni participation gave them a tangible way to give back to their alma mater while also providing them with two of Fleming's

critical themes: a sense of fulfillment and commitment (Fleming, 2019). Additionally, Gannod's et al., (2010) study provided alumni with unique opportunities to create potentially meaningful relationships with current students. Alumni were positioned to recruit students for employment after having engaged with their work throughout the semester, effectively providing them with the opportunity to interview students for several months and to hire or support them in their early careers. This study also illustrated the benefits of a hands-on learning experience in creating meaningful alumni engagement that is mutually beneficial for all parties involved.

Research, most notably Singer and Huey (2002) and Shen and Sha (2020), demonstrated the importance of establishing a personal connection to their alma mater and engaging individuals through the prioritization of individual, personalized engagement. Alumni associations should, therefore, be utilized as catalysts for effective communication and engagement between alumni and their institutions. This comprehensive and personal approach proved to generate the strongest connections between individuals and their institutions, ultimately highlighting the critical role that belonging plays in alumni engagement.

The Role of Belonging

Belonging is critical to overall student success and happiness. Research has supported this idea for over fifty years, dating back to Maslow's (1962) hierarchy of needs and enhanced by Strayhorn's (2019) research on the impact of belonging on college student's success and well-being. Maslow's (1962) hierarchy articulated the need for psychological and physical safety and that an ability to succeed or thrive is only possible when there are feelings of safety and is maximized when there are feelings of belongingness. Belonging or belongingness, though it has many definitions, was defined aptly by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) (as cited in

Strayhorn, 2019, p. 2), as , "referring to a feeling of connectedness, that one is important or matters to others". Hagerty et. al. (2002) also noted that the absence of belonging has been linked directly to feelings such as "isolation, rejection, loneliness, or "marginality" (as cited by Strayhorn, 2019, p. 2) and has led to decreased academic success (Walton and Cohen, 2007). In fact, Jacoby and Garland (2005) noted that college students who did not feel a sense of belonging felt that their entire college experience was transactional and merely a stopping point along the way to a final destination. Therefore, not only is a strong feeling of belonging and community central to the overall student experience at any educational level, but it is directly correlated with increased alumni engagement (Hummel, 2001).

The educational experience at George Jackson Academy extends beyond strictly academic success. Although GJA students, families, and employees have high expectations for academic success, GJA plays a critical role in developing young scholars and helping to build an innate sense of self-worth that is grounded in and supported by their loving community. Their mission explicitly states the importance of building young men of high character and creating a strong sense of belonging in order to ensure that each student feels seen, heard, and cared for. Not only does this mission attract certain families and students, but it is also proven to demonstrate a higher likelihood of future alumni engagement.

Research by Gardner and Pierce (2022) delved into the psychological relationship between alumni and their alma mater and utilized the phrase "values congruence" (p.2) to demonstrate the increased likelihood of alumni commitment and engagement. They described value congruence as the importance of aligning institutional values with individual alumni. Their research found a correlation between value congruence and "normative organizational commitment", demonstrating value alignment as a strong predictor of alumni engagement

(Gardner and Pierce, 2022, p. 2). Although values congruence and belonging are not identical, individuals who are aligned in their beliefs with an institution have a potentially higher likelihood of feeling a more meaningful connection to the mission and goals of the institution and its other constituents. Similarly, Edmiston (2022) explored the role of a positive sense of community on future engagement, demonstrating that students who feel a positive sense of community are unsurprisingly more likely to be engaged alumni. The research particularly highlighted the importance of belonging and community during educational transitions. Although Edmiston's research was done for older students and GJA does not have a high school, the importance of a strong sense of brotherhood and purpose is critical to providing the foundation for GJA students to be successful as they transition to other school settings.

Due to its mission and demographic base, GJA is positioned to be able to create meaningful, sustained relationships and connections with its alumni population. Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) studied the impact of belonging on alumni engagement and found a direct correlation between feeling a sense of belonging and increased alumni engagement. Their research highlighted that belonging acted as an impetus for alumni engagement that included but wasn't limited to volunteering, participation in events, and financial contributions (Drezner and Pizmony-Levy, 2021). Additionally, Drezner's (2009) earlier work highlighted the strong connections and engagement between African American millennials who attended historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs); specifically noting the robust track record of engagement and philanthropy. Although George Jackson Academy is distinctly not a school based on racial affinity, the research illustrated the positive correlations between mission, affinity, and a general sense of belonging. Drezner's (2009) research demonstrated that schools

with a specific mission and demographic have an innately higher likelihood of generating engagement and feelings of belonging between their students and their alma mater.

This research, in conjunction with Gardner and Pierce's (2022) research around value congruence, exemplifies the significant role that mission-centric schools play in making students feel a strong sense of belonging and ultimately providing GJA with a strong opportunity to build alumni engagement. Since GJA is both a values-based institution and serves a target demographic (low-income, male students), it is uniquely positioned to be successful in generating alumni engagement and in providing its students with a strong sense of belonging and institutional commitment.

Other Factors Impacting Alumni Engagement

Research has demonstrated conflicting predictive data around other demographics and their correlation to alumni engagement. In addition to belonging, student experience was the most other consistent factor that was connected to higher alumni engagement. Barber (2012) highlighted the importance of the student experience for alumni engagement. His research examined the effect of "important student life functions," such as "extracurricular involvement, student leadership, recognition, and living on campus" as it connected to alumni engagement (Barber, 2012, pp. 24-25). According to Barber (2012), students who participated in these student activities had a higher likelihood of being engaged as alumni. Similarly, Astin's (1999) work demonstrated that increased student engagement at their university was highly correlated with the strongest increases in personal growth, learning, and development. He argues, therefore, that all educational policies should directly relate to increasing student engagement (Astin, 1999). Although George Jackson Academy is not a boarding school, by investing in and

supporting programs and policies that positively contribute to the overall student experience, it is therefore helping to eventually facilitate higher rates of alumni engagement.

This emphasis on student life and the student experience is particularly important when factoring in the socio-economic background of the vast majority of GJA's constituents. Laguilles (2013) investigated the relationship between socioeconomic status and alumni engagement, ultimately devising numerous key findings. Although students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, he noted, were significantly less likely to make large financial contributions to their alma mater, this demographic showed no differences compared to their higher-income counterparts in other methods of alumni engagement (Laguilles, 2013). Most notably, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds demonstrated a desire and similar levels of engagement as their wealthier peers to participate in volunteering, attending events, and recruiting future students (Laguilles, 2013). Meer and Rosen (2012) contributed to these findings by highlighting that students who received student loans demonstrated a lower likelihood of financially contributing to their alma mater; similarly illustrating that the higher the amount of student loans, the smaller the contribution. Laguilles (2013) emphasized numerous factors that contributed to the data on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Most notably, lower-income students tended to have less discretionary income due to additional responsibilities such as paying off loans, which directly connects to Meer and Rosen's (2012) findings, and often shoulder more responsibility to financially support other family members (Laguilles, 2013). At GJA, 100% of students receive some amount of tuition assistance for the $25,000 annual tuition, with the average family paying $200 per month (*Home*. GJA. (n.d.)). As a result, recent GJA graduates would be fantastic candidates for volunteer and other experiential engagement opportunities.

To complicate this research, however, Weerts and Ronca (2007) found mixed correlative data when examining overall alumni engagement with students who received scholarships or grants. There is the potential that students feel more compelled to financially contribute if they received a scholarship or grant rather than student loans. Lastly, Laguilles (2013) argued that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tended to demonstrate lower feelings of belonging or connection to their institution and often had less knowledge of the specifics of its financial needs.

Similarly, Bekkers and Weipking (2007), as well as Weerts and Ronca (2009), discussed the importance of transparency and awareness of need as critical indicators of alumni engagement. Their research noted that the vast majority of donations occur when solicited and that overall philanthropic engagement increased when alumni were specifically aware of the need and destination of their financial contribution (Bekkers and Weipking, 2007). The authors stressed three theories that helped explain alumni engagement: social exchange theory, expectancy theory, and the investment model (Weerts and Ronca, 2007), which served as the basis of our conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

Social exchange theory, expectancy theory, and investment theory reveal the motivations, costs, and benefits that shape alumni involvement, with the ultimate goal of offering actionable solutions to foster long-term alumni engagement. While each theory offers valuable insights on its own, this project leverages all three theories using an integrated approach to better understand and improve GJA's alumni engagement strategy.

Expectancy theory posits that individuals will be motivated to engage in specific behaviors if they believe those behaviors will lead to desired outcomes (Vroom, 1964).

According to expectancy theory, an individual's motivation to engage in a particular behavior is influenced by three factors: their perception that increased effort will lead to better performance (expectancy), the belief that engaging in a certain behavior will lead to a desired result (instrumentality), and the value one places on the outcome (valence) (Van Eerde and Thierry, 1996). Applying this theory to their problem of practice, GJA's alumni will be more likely to engage with their alma mater when they believe (a) their involvement will contribute to the institution's success or the success of its students (expectancy), (b) that this success will lead to outcomes they desire (instrumentality), and (c) that these outcomes are personally important to them (valence) (Vroom,1964).

Social exchange theory explains that individuals decide to maintain relationships and engage with communities when they perceive that the benefits they are getting from social exchange are valuable (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Weerts, Cabrera, and Sanford, 2010). The perception of the value benefits (both tangible and intangible) is critical and suggests that institutions like GJA must explicitly communicate those benefits in order to create a more compelling value proposition for staying connected to the institution. GJA alumni may choose to stay engaged with GJA or withdraw their participation if the perceived cost of engagement outweighs the perceived immediate and long-term benefits. By clearly articulating the benefits of alumni engagement, such as networking opportunities, professional development, and personal fulfillment, GJA can foster stronger motivation for its alumni to remain connected to the institution post-graduation.

Investment theory builds on the principles of social exchange theory, purporting that an individual's commitment to investing their time, energy, and resources into a relationship is connected to their understanding of the costs and benefits of doing so (Weerts and Ronca, 2007).

When individuals perceive that the benefits of maintaining a relationship outweigh the costs, they are more likely to continue investing in it. For GJA, this means that in order to foster long-term alumni investment in the institution, they must not only communicate the benefits of staying involved but also work to reduce the costs and barriers to participation. Mitigating the costs/barriers to engagement to make the alternative (disengaging) less appealing can strengthen alumni's long-term commitment to the institution.
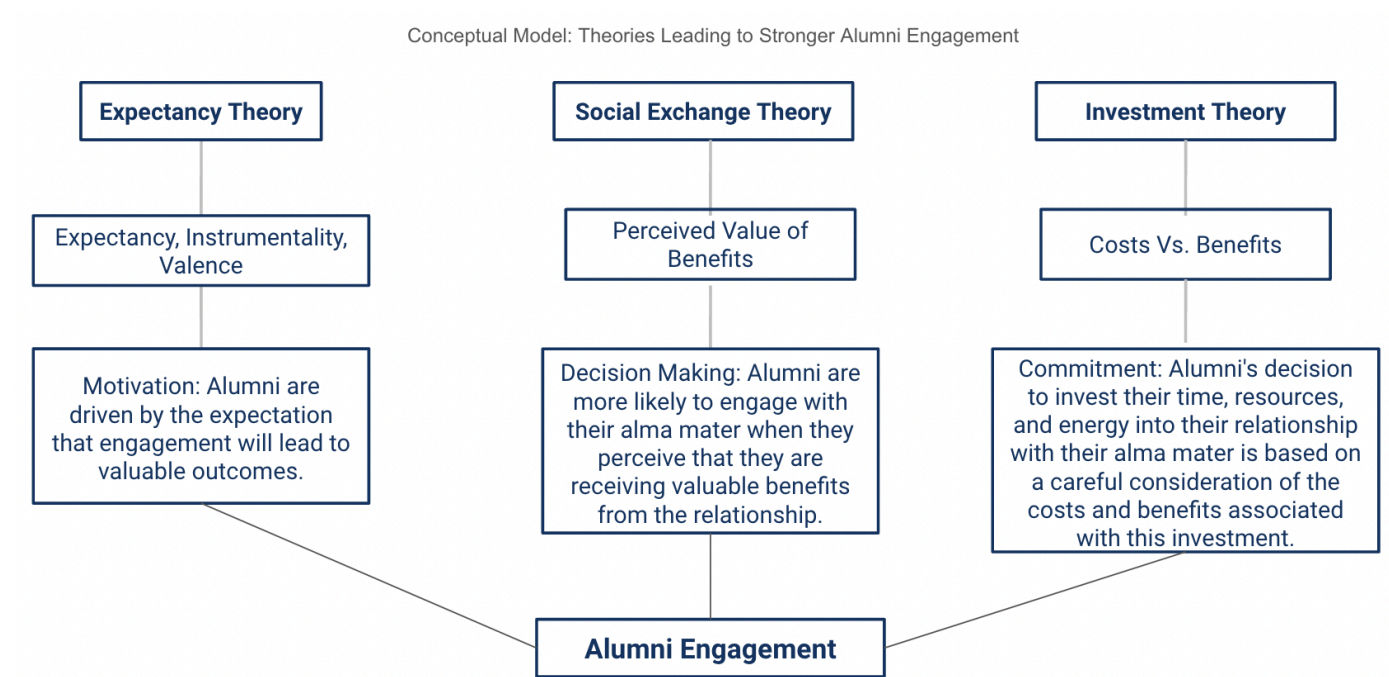
Understanding the dynamics of GJA's alumni engagement through these interconnected frameworks can uncover the factors influencing alumni's connections with the institution. These frameworks will help chart the direction of our research related to these three areas of inquiry:

1. Exploring the benefits alumni derive from their relationship with GJA.

2. Understanding what outcomes alumni value and expect from their involvement with GJA

3. Exploring the factors that may compete for alumni's resources and attention, and how GJA can establish itself as a worthwhile investment for alumni's ongoing engagement in spite of potential barriers/costs

Conceptual Model

The following conceptual model illustrates how these theories interconnect and can contribute to stronger alumni engagement at GJA:

Figure 4: Conceptual Model: Theories Leading to Stronger Alumni Engagement

Conceptual Model: Theories Leading to Stronger Alumni Engagement

Expectancy Theory	Social Exchange Theory	Investment Theory
Expectancy, Instrumentality, Valence	Perceived Value of Benefits	Costs Vs. Benefits
Motivation: Alumni are driven by the expectation that engagement will lead to valuable outcomes.	Decision Making: Alumni are more likely to engage with their alma mater when they perceive that they are receiving valuable benefits from the relationship.	Commitment: Alumni's decision to invest their time, resources, and energy into their relationship with their alma mater is based on a careful consideration of the costs and benefits associated with this investment.

Alumni Engagement

Data Collection, Analysis, and Results

The following section explains our project design, data collection, and analysis process before delving into our findings. This capstone project explores the current standing of GJA's alumni association. In efforts to get a better understanding of the organization, the study looks into the barriers that have impeded GJA from having a successful alumni association, while also discovering components that would better enhance the alumni association. In order to get a detailed understanding of the problem, we utilized our conceptual framework to compose the following questions:

> ***Research Question 1:*** How do the diverse stakeholders within the George Jackson Academy community envision the potential value and purpose of an alumni network?
>
> ***Research Question 2:*** What perceived specific social, institutional, or systemic barriers have hindered the effective organization of George Jackson Academy's alumni?
>
> ***Research Question 3:*** What additional strategies would enhance the growth and development of George Jackson Academy students beyond graduation?

The first question seeks to understand the perspectives of current employees and former alumni views on the importance of having an alumni association at GJA. The second question builds on those perspectives by examining the barriers that have impacted alumni engagement since several groups graduated from the academy. The final question serves as a guidance structure to help develop a successful alumni association that adheres to the school's missions and values through the voices of former alumni.

Project Design

The purpose of this study was to assess the current state of alumni engagement, and determine factors that could strengthen GJA's efforts. We will use the results of this study for improvement purposes to help GJA better engage and build its alumni association. This study used a multi-methods approach that relied heavily on interviews, surveys, and focus groups. First, we leveraged a survey for GJA alumni to reach a broader audience to gain initial insights on alumni perspectives and to gauge an interest in participating in one-on-one interviews. We then contacted GJA alumni who expressed interest in individual discussions and conducted interviews with them. In addition to GJA alumni, we also conducted focus group discussions with current GJA staff and seventh and eighth grade GJA students. The goal of these conversations was to capture the unique perspectives of these stakeholders on the potential benefits of an alumni network and identify barriers hindering engagement (RQ1 & RQ2). We also asked stakeholders to share potential strategies for post-graduation student growth and development (RQ3). By blending individual experiences with broader trends, we were able to gain a nuanced understanding of alumni engagement at GJA, guiding the development of targeted strategies for a more impactful alumni network. Based on an analysis of the data collected, our team provided recommendations for GJA to implement in the form of a multi-year plan.

Participant Recruitment & Sample

The analysis for this study is based on three distinct stakeholder groups. The first group includes GJA alumni ($N = 14$). The participants in this group were all adult males in college or beginning their careers. They ranged from ages 23 to 25. We recruited this sample through a survey that was distributed to the current alumni database. To recruit alumni we designed and

distributed a flyer through the school's social media platforms (Appendix A: *Alumni Recruitment Flyer & Survey*). The survey had a completion rate of 4%, from which we scheduled semi-structured interviews with three GJA alumni. Our sample also includes current GJA students in the seventh and eighth grades ($N = 20$). Their ages ranged from 12 to 14. We recruited students using a flyer that included information about the study and a list of FAQs to introduce language around alumni associations (see Appendix B: *Student Flyer & FAQ).* As an incentive, we provided students with pizza for their participation in the study. The third group was current GJA faculty and staff members ($N = 14$). This group included men and women between the ages of 30 and 45. We recruited faculty via email and through support from the school leadership to participate.

Data Collection

We collected survey, interview, and focus group data between March and April of 2024. Before collecting data our team developed a survey (Appendix D), interview (Appendix C), and focus group protocols (Appendix E) for each stakeholder group, ensuring each protocol was tailored to their unique perspectives. This approach allowed us the opportunity to develop findings and recommendations that integrated multiple perspectives. Data for the project was stored in locked Google Drive folders that were only accessible by the research team.

Alumni

To explore alumni perspectives, we first sent out a Google form survey to the 335 contactable alumni that the school had contact information for. The survey assessed perceived knowledge of current alumni engagement practices and a willingness to participate in further individual interviews. From the 14 survey respondents, we were only able to interview three alumni—highlighting the low engagement. The alumni-facing interviews were done via Zoom.

Respondents were in the fields of medicine, education, and mass communications. The semi-structured interview protocol focused on exploring alumni perspectives on realistic needs, challenges, and desires to engage with the community. These interviews helped inform our recommendations.

Faculty and Staff

Our research team also conducted focus groups with GJA faculty and staff using semi-structured focus groups. Focus groups included teachers, guidance counselors, and other support staff and were conducted in-person during their free periods. The three focus groups included four, five, and five participants, respectively. The focus groups provided us with knowledge of how they currently engage with alumni, and how they envision their interaction with the alumni association could look like.

GJA Students

We conducted two student-centered student focus groups in person. The first focus group consisted of nine students including two eighth graders and seven seventh graders. Our second group consisted of eleven students, including four eighth graders and seven seventh graders. In order to obtain consent from families, we needed to offer these focus groups during lunch and recess to ensure students wouldn't miss academic classes, thus leading to larger groups of students. The focus group protocol explored students' perspectives related to how they wanted to engage and what they envisioned their alumni association to be moving forward.

Figure 5: Data Collection Plan

Project Question	Data Needed	Data Collection Method
How do the diverse stakeholders within the GJA community envision the potential value and purpose of an alumni network?	Perceptions of the potential value and purpose of an alumni network Hopes and aspirations for the network's impact Understanding of existing networks' strengths and weaknesses	**Semi-structured interviews** with current employees, alumni from different graduation years, and current students **Focus groups** with smaller, targeted groups based on stakeholder category (alumni, staff, students) **A survey** was administered to evaluate the perceived value and purpose of alumni engagement
What perceived specific social, institutional, or systemic barriers have hindered the effective organization of GJA's alumni?	Specific barriers encountered in engaging with the alumni network Reasons for alumni disengagement or lack of participation Perceptions of existing communication channels and their effectiveness Perception of any institutional or systemic supports or barriers impacting alumni engagement	**Individual interviews** and **focus groups** allow for a detailed exploration of personal experiences and specific barriers faced **Survey** to gather quantitative data on perceived barriers and areas needing improvement
What additional strategies would enhance the growth and development of GJA students beyond graduation?	Preferred methods for continued support and engagement with the Academy after graduation Ideas for alumni involvement in student development and career guidance Suggestions for resources or programs beneficial for ongoing growth	**Interviews** with current students and recent alumni to capture their immediate needs and aspirations for post-graduation support **Focus groups** to identify strategies from current students and faculty/staff that might work **Survey** targeting alumni to gather wider data on preferred engagement methods and desired support areas, informing program development

Data Analysis

Survey Analysis

We began our survey analysis by utilizing Excel to explore general trends within the data. Initially, we imported the raw survey responses into Excel, ensuring each variable from the survey was represented as a distinct column, which facilitated straightforward manipulation and analysis. Given the small sample size, we focused primarily on analyzing descriptive statistics to get a clear sense of the central tendencies and variability within our dataset.

Recognizing the limitations of numerical analysis due to the small sample size, we subsequently shifted towards a qualitative analysis of the survey responses. Specifically, we used a thematic approach to identify key themes and trends across participants (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This method enabled us to make informed conclusions about alumni perspectives and desires. We then identified recurring themes across different questions and developed a coding scheme to organize responses. Five key themes emerged from our analysis:

1. Desire for connection with GJA and fellow alumni

2. Opportunities for career networking and exploration

3. Willingness to "pay it forward" through mentorship and volunteering

4. Obstacles to engagement

5. Need for consistent, streamlined communication of alumni happenings

These codes were then applied to survey responses to provide us with specific data about each code. We also analyzed open-ended responses to enhance our findings to gain additional ideas and explore trends from the emerging themes. After synthesizing their responses, the insights we gleaned from the data eventually contributed to our recommendations to improve overall alumni engagement.

Interview and Focus Group Analysis

After each interview and focus group, our research team gathered together to conduct a memoing process that helped us identify key themes and produce a preliminary set of findings. This process also enabled us to identify emergent themes that were common across the groups. We used inductive thematic analysis to develop an initial set of codes from our data memos. Themes included brotherhood and community, alumni engagement, mentorship and support, transition challenges, academic preparation, networking, resources, and information insight (Braun and Clarke, 2012). To analyze the data more deeply, we then transcribed audio recordings of the interviews and focus group data into written transcripts using Otter. AI—a digital platform that uses artificial intelligence to transcribe audio files. Transcripts were carefully reviewed and corrected to ensure accuracy. This process helped us to pull out other noticings we missed while collecting data and allowed us to ask more specific follow up questions during the interviews.

For our next round of analysis, we used an abductive coding technique by building on our inductive insights through more deductive coding techniques (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Specifically, we manually coded interview transcripts using a color coding system in a shared document, focusing on four key emergent themes: 1) alumni engagement and communication, 2) mentorship and academic support, 3) brotherhood and community, and 4) helped identify barriers. We further applied a deductive method to connect these themes to our conceptual framework and relevant literature. Doing so helped us to develop an analytic story, which is the basis of our findings and recommendations. Our recommendations include a multi-year strategic plan and implementation strategies that can be used at the organization's discretion based upon their needs and capacity.

Findings

In survey responses, interviews, and focus groups, GJA alumni, current GJA students, and GJA faculty offered insights on their experiences being a part of the GJA community, the barriers that have impacted alumni engagement, and their hopes for a formal alumni association in the future. In this section, we have categorized our findings based on our three theories of focus: expectancy theory, social exchange theory, and investment theory. By analyzing the data through these theoretical lenses, our goal is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the motivations, costs, and benefits that shape alumni involvement and provide actionable recommendations to enhance long-term alumni engagement at GJA.

Finding 1: Desire to Meet Current Student Needs and Drive Future Impact (Expectancy)

"...I didn't feel that community aspect I felt in GJA" (Leo).

Expectancy theory posits that individuals are motivated to engage in certain behaviors when they expect their actions to lead to the outcomes they value (Weerts and Ronca, 2007). Through interviews, focus groups, and survey data, GJA stakeholders articulated a strong desire for a formalized alumni association that is grounded in two critical priorities: (1) meeting the acute needs of current students and (2) driving long-term impact. By establishing a clear connection between alumni engagement and these desired outcomes, GJA can leverage the principles of expectancy theory to motivate its alumni community to remain involved after graduation.

Current Needs of GJA Students

Alumni and current students' motivation to engage with an alumni network is driven by the expectation that this network could address the immediate and future needs of GJA students. GJA alumni and current students shared a critical need in focus groups, interviews, and through the alumni survey: the need to support students in their transition from GJA to high school and

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beyond. Alumni specifically mentioned the challenges of adapting to increased academic rigor, adjusting to different social dynamics and institutional values, and developing the general skills of being a more independent student and professional after graduating from GJA.

> For instance, Leo, a GJA alumnus shared:

> It is a struggle transitioning from [a] grade school, like GJA, to other schools that might not have the same values that GJA held, but understanding that if we do feel like we are struggling in high school, or in college, GJA is always there for us, whether it be through the alumni network, or if you're struggling with a science class.

Leo's sentiments highlight the need for ongoing support to help students manage the academic and social transitions that come with acclimating to different institutions. For Leo, having a support system like the alumni network could provide a sense of emotional, social, and academic support for students post-GJA. Leo also noted:

> GJA was very on top of their students. It's a close-knit community. The teachers really cared for you. But, I remember going to college and just feeling kind of disconnected from the college because I didn't feel that community aspect I felt in GJA.

Leo's experience underscores the emotional and psychological impact of moving from a supportive environment like GJA to a more impersonal institution. Transitioning from a community-care-oriented space like GJA to a more individualistic institution can be jarring and emotionally challenging. Leo's insights speak to the need to support GJA students with transitioning into less community-oriented environments.

> Another GJA alumnus, Noel, provided additional insight on the challenge of the different social dynamics GJA graduates encounter:

> Transitioning from an all-boys school to a co-ed school. It's nerve-wracking, to say the least. You see GJA, it's a tiny school, all boys, all boys look like you, are similar to you. And then you're jumping on the complete opposite on the matter of a summer break.

Noel's reflection highlights the abrupt and significant change in the social environment that students from GJA face when transitioning to high school and future spaces. At GJA, students

are part of a small, tight-knit community where everyone shares common characteristics such as being male and largely identifying as students of color. This mostly homogeneous environment fosters a strong sense of belonging and understanding because students feel seen, understood, and supported by their peers and teachers. However, when these students transition to high school, many encounter environments that are much larger and either more diverse in terms of gender and/or are more homogenous in ways they are not accustomed to (i.e. predominantly white spaces). The familiarity and comfort of GJA's setting are replaced by the complexities of navigating social interactions with peers from different backgrounds and perspectives. This transition, as Noel describes, is "nerve-wracking" because it demands a rapid adjustment to new social dynamics and expectations. The supportive, inclusive culture of GJA contrasts sharply with the potentially less personal and more competitive atmosphere of larger, co-educational high schools, which students are thrown into, as Noel said, "in the matter of a summer break."

Current GJA students echoed Leo and Noel's sentiments about wanting more support and anticipating what the shift from GJA to high school and beyond could feel like. One 8th-grade GJA student, Adrian, talked about dealing with shifts in racial demographics:

> From my experiences in my class, 8th grade specifically, a lot of alums go to PWI's (predominantly white institutions). So they might want to know numerous things about how to deal with the fact that you might be the only people of color.

Adrian's observation speaks to a concern for many students of color: the transition from an identity-affirming space to one where they may be in the racial minority.

Preparing for academic shifts was another concern mentioned by current GJA students like Kyle, a GJA seventh grader. Kyle expressed his curiosity about the academic demands of high school: "[I would] probably ask, like, more to do on the academic side. I would say, how much more or less homework do we get? Yeah, and also how to survive high school." Current

GJA students like Kyle are eager for advice on managing the academic workload of high school. Understanding what to expect in terms of homework and academic expectations can help students like Kyle feel more prepared for the transition to more academically rigorous settings.

Alex, another GJA 8th grader, was more curious about the social challenges of transitioning to a new school environment: "For me, I'd probably say being social, you know, getting to interact with new people and how to interact with them." Alex's sentiments indicate a concern about social integration and forming new friendships and social connections, a particularly daunting task especially when moving from a small close-knit community like GJA to larger settings.

Driving Long-Term Impact

Cultivating an alumni network that drives long-term impact is a key desire expressed across GJA stakeholders. Helping students transition successfully from GJA into high school, college, and their careers is part of the vision for long-term impact. GJA stakeholders see mentorship as an important tool for supporting current GJA students with these critical transitions. In his interview, GJA alumna Leo shared:

> So right now we have a bunch of alumni that are now in their 30s. And probably in different stages of life, whether it be career or schooling, I think just offering their knowledge of what they went through post-GJA, and then offering that to current students, I think that would be something that would be very beneficial because sometimes, we hear about high school, we hear about college, but we don't know about it, when we are in middle school, and just offering our knowledge to these current students about what lies ahead.

Alumni, like Leo, see the invaluable benefit of offering wisdom to current students to help them anticipate challenges as they mature in their education and their careers and how to address them. This aligns with the shared long-term impact goal of the alumni association that

emerged as a theme across stakeholders. Noel, another GJA alum spoke of his "dream" for a more formalized alumni program:

> Some sort of mentoring program, especially for all ages. So for GJA kids transitioning into high school, like what alumni have gone to that high school, what can do they do for that kid? High School alum heading into college, like, what alum have gone to that college? What can they do? And then ultimately, like careers? So the student has taken this major, what the work is like in that field? And how can they, you know, use their connections to sort of get them in the door? I think if we can create that sort of pipeline, I think that is like, the GJA success story of sort of getting kids from GJA into a career law connection based, because that's what a lot of these other schools are doing. You know, it's all about who you know, and I think if we can sort of create that for GJA, that'd be awesome.

Here, Noel articulates what he refers to as a "pipeline" that could ultimately create a chain of success for all GJA students, current and former. He speaks to the power of social networks to create opportunities for GJA students at every stage of their educational and professional journeys. Noel's dream of a "pipeline" for GJA students embodies the ethos of "paying it forward" where each generation of GJA alumni contributes to the success of the next. This aligns with the shared vision amongst GJA stakeholders to cultivate an alumni association that creates a sustainable cycle of support and impact.

Alumni, like Leo and Noel, expect that their involvement as alumni can be particularly impactful by easing the transition challenges faced by current students as they move on to future academic institutions and careers. The expectation of a positive impact on students' academic, social, and career transitions can fuel their desire to remain engaged with GJA. By providing opportunities for alumni to contribute their knowledge, experiences, and expertise to support current students, GJA can create a mechanism for alumni to see the direct impact of their involvement on the meaningful outcomes they care about the most. This in turn could reinforce their motivation to continue to engage.

Table 1

Theory	Relevant Themes	Prevalence	Illustrative Quotes
Expectancy: individuals are motivated to behave in a certain way if they expect their actions to lead to desired outcomes (Weerts, et. al, 2007).	General alumni mentorship and guidance–Across all stakeholder groups, there was a strong belief that alumni mentorship and guidance would lead to positive outcomes for current students (personal, academic, and professional growth for students)	3/3 alumni (interviews) 13/14 alumni (survey responses) 14/18 students (focus groups) 7/9 staff (focus groups)	"I would like to give that opportunity to anyone who's interested if they want to mentor. For those students who are interested, I could support that project. I think there's a lot of alumni of GJA who are into things that I think many of the current students would be interested in. And it's just giving them the opportunity to be aware of the possible career opportunities that you could pursue when you get older." –GJA Alumnus
	Alumni supporting students' transitions–All stakeholder groups recognized the potential impact of alumni support on students' transitions from GJA to high school and beyond.	2/3 alumni (interviews) 13/14 alumni (survey responses) 11/18 students (focus groups) 7/9 staff (focus groups)	"From my experiences in my class, 8th grade specifically, a lot of alums go to PWI's (predominantly white institutions). So they might want to know numerous things about how to deal with the fact that you might be the only people of color." –GJA Student

Finding 2: Benefits and Communication of those Benefits (Social Exchange Theory)

"It didn't feel like I was just going to school. It was like I'm building a community" (Jacob).

Benefits

Social exchange theory posits that individuals are drawn to relationships or communities where they receive benefits, suggesting that the perceived value of these benefits motivates individuals to maintain and deepen their ties with the community (Weerts and Ronca, 2007). Across interviews and focus groups (the alumni survey did not ask about benefits from GJA experience), GJA interviewees articulated a variety of benefits derived from their experiences at

GJA. The most salient benefit shared amongst stakeholders was the palpable sense of community they felt during their time at the institution.

Jacob, a former student and member of GJA's founding cohort, provided a poignant illustration of this sense of family that he experienced as a student at GJA and that is inherent to GJA's culture:

> The teachers there, you know, they're amazing. They're like family. My brother and I were sick. And we had to be admitted to the hospital during our fifth grade year. And I remember that the teachers were looking out for us, they were sending us care cards. The students even made a video about like, we missed you guys. You know, it was definitely that family, you know, love that we experienced in that school. So it was a great experience.

For Jacob, GJA was more than just a school focused on academic preparation and discipline; it was a family that rallied behind him and his brother when they needed support the most. Jacob's recollection of the support he and his brother received during a difficult time aligns with the essence of social exchange theory, with individuals exchanging emotional support and care within the community in exchange for a sense of belonging.

Current GJA students also reinforced the sense of community they experience at GJA, specifically a sense of "brotherhood." In one student focus group, the following statements were shared:

- "GJA is definitely built on brotherhood. And it's really easy to make friends no matter the degree."

- "We have a great bond and brotherhood. We don't have locks on our lockers since we trust each other so much."

- "We're all like, together, we're all friends. We were all like in a brotherhood."

- "I like the brotherhood aspect and the way that if we're missing anything, or if we're not really caught up, our GJA brothers can help us catch up."

Students' expression of camaraderie and friendship emphasizes the social benefits derived from being a part of the GJA community. "Brotherhood" was named several times, signifying a deep bond between peers and a sense of true belonging.

Current GJA staff's sentiments align with the sense of community and brotherhood benefits that former GJA and current GJA students articulated. One staff member shared, "Every single person here is so connected to the day-to-day of a student's experience," indicating a strong sense of involvement and support within the GJA community. In discussing GJA alumni, the same staff member also shared, "I think like, they (alumni) know, we're obsessed with them. And like, we are always so excited to see them. And we celebrate them constantly." This enthusiasm for alumni reflects the reciprocal nature of relationships within the GJA community, with staff's excitement about alumni and their accomplishments contributing to a greater sense of connection to GJA among alumni.

Communication of Benefits

According to social exchange theory, clearly communicating benefits can motivate alumni to stay connected because it can influence their perceptions of ongoing engagement as mutually beneficial (Weerts and Ronca, 2007). While interview, focus group, and survey questions did not directly assess stakeholders' perceptions of how effectively GJA communicates the benefits of engaging with GJA for the long-term, the statements stakeholders shared suggest that there is room for improvement in GJA effectively and explicitly communicating and promoting these benefits. GJA staff, in particular, articulated the benefits of alumni engagement, of which GJA alumni were seemingly unaware and one GJA staff member provided insight into the current state of communication efforts:

> "I feel like there's a lot of informal alumni stuff that we don't even know about. I feel like Michelle and Melissa (pseudonyms) are always emailing alum about this scholarship

opportunity that they saw or like, oh, this like, event at some museum or whatever. Like, I feel like they have a lot of contact. Yeah. And kids and families are eager. I think people just don't know how to plug in. I think if it was more formalized people would be into it."

According to this staff member, the benefit of ongoing engagement and participation in alumni activities or events is not communicated very well. Benefits such as scholarship opportunities are not communicated effectively, leaving alumni mostly unaware of them.

Another GJA staff member articulated a missed opportunity to communicate the benefits of alumni and their families supporting the long-term sustainability of GJA through recruitment/referrals of potential students:

I think that one of the things that you could get out of a strong alumni is families networking to get more referrals for new students. Which is one of the challenges here is getting enough people interested and applying. Because it is such a unique school. The more you could keep alumni families engaged, you can keep the school in the front of their minds, and the more likely they are to refer the school to their friends.

This staff member's perspective suggests that explicitly communicating the potential impact of supporting GJA's sustainability by helping to recruit future students could motivate more alumni to stay connected.

While what GJA students shared in focus groups did not directly address the potential missed opportunity to communicate the long-term benefits of continuous engagement with alumni, they did provide some student perspective on what those long-term benefits could be. One student articulated this viewpoint, expressing:

Alumni could ask what they like and don't like and students could ask a lot of nice stuff, like, advice for classes or the high school process with alumni as I've gone through, and it would be beneficial for 8th graders, because we're graduating next.

This student's perspective suggests that students see value in being able to get advice from alumni about the high school process and beyond which could be framed as a long-term benefit for staying engaged with GJA. By framing alumni engagement as a means of accessing valuable

guidance and support, GJA can encourage alumni to remain engaged and active participants in supporting the next generation of students.

Another student offered a similar perspective when asked how he would like to remain connected to GJA post-graduation:

> I want to, like, get to know everybody that came into the school after I left, because I want to see how they think, what their GPA is, and I want to see how they're adjusting and give them advice.

This student expresses a desire to return as an alum to meet younger students, suggesting that he sees connecting with younger generations as a long-term benefit of continuous engagement with GJA. GJA can leverage these motivations for ongoing engagement and ensure that the benefits are explicitly communicated in their alumni programming.

No GJA alumni explicitly mentioned any clear benefits or value propositions communicated by GJA for their ongoing engagement with the institution. While alumni expressed some ideas of their own about potential benefits, such as mentoring and career pipelines, their responses did not indicate that GJA has directly communicated to them the specific ways they can contribute and what they stand to gain from staying involved long-term. There is an opportunity for the school to be more proactive and intentional in communicating the benefits of long-term alumni engagement to increase its value proposition. For example, GJA could highlight how long-term involvement directly supports current students, strengthens the GJA community and institutional brand, and provides value to alumni themselves through networking and personal fulfillment. Disseminating a clear message about the mutual benefits of alumni staying engaged could motivate more of them to find ways to connect and contribute.

Table 2

Theory	Relevant Themes	Prevalence	Illustrative Quotes

Social Exchange Theory: Individuals decide to maintain relationships and engage with communities when they perceive that the benefits they are getting from the social exchange are valuable (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Weerts, Cabrera, & Sanford, 2010).	Sense of community and belonging at GJA	3/3 alumni (interviews) 0/14 alumni (survey responses) 9/18 students (focus groups) 6/9 staff (focus groups)	"It didn't feel like I was just going to school. It was like I'm building a community." –GJA Alumnus "We're all like, together, we're all friends. We were all like in a brotherhood." –GJA Student "Kids are by and large interested and there is a collegiality among the kids. There's like a sense of brotherhood, and they'll have each other's back." –GJA Staff
	Desire to give back and support current students	3/3 alumni (interviews) 10/14 alumni (survey responses) 6/18 students (focus groups) 5/9 staff (focus groups)	"I would love to come back and see how the students that were in my shoes are doing. I want to give them some of my ninth-grade wisdom if you want to call it that, but yeah, just to kind of help them out with stuff, or if they're needing a question answered about a class or tips on how to get their grades up." –GJA Student "I think we try to engage them to help our eighth graders make a good transition into high school." –GJA Staff
	Lack of clear communication about the benefits of alumni engagement	0/3 alumni (interviews–no direct questions related to this theme) 0/14 alumni (survey responses–no direct questions related to this theme) 0/18 students (focus groups–no direct questions related to this theme)	"I feel like there's a lot of informal alumni stuff that we don't even know about. I feel like Michelle and Melissa (pseudonyms) are like always emailing alum about this scholarship opportunity that they saw or like, oh, this like, event at some museum or whatever. Like, I feel like they have a lot of contact. Yeah. And kids and families are eager. I think people just don't know how to plug in. I think if it was more formalized people would be into it." –GJA Staff "It would be really fantastic if it's like, hey, we know you're gonna have community service opportunities. Like, when you're

Finding 3: Weighing the Costs and Benefits of Alumni Engagement (Investment Theory)

"I try to go back at least once a year. It'd be nice to do it more, but just life is busy" (Noel).

Building on the discussion of potential benefits, investment theory proposes that individuals weigh the costs and benefits of a given relationship before deciding to invest their time, resources, and energy (Weerts and Ronca, 2007). For GJA alumni, the decision to remain engaged with the institution for the long term hinges on a clear understanding of these costs and benefits.

Costs

Despite the numerous benefits of staying engaged with GJA, several perceived costs and barriers deter alumni from maintaining long-term involvement. These challenges were articulated by stakeholders and highlighted the need for GJA to mitigate these obstacles to engagement and ensure that the benefits of engaging outweigh the perceived costs.

Physical Constraints

Leo, a GJA alumnus, expressed the significant time constraints that come with increasing responsibilities as he gets older. He expressed:

> "Yeah. I mean, the school I used to go a lot more frequently. Like, before I started getting busy, I would show up to the building a lot more. But I'm busier, I just couldn't really go back that much. Because I'm tired. I can't talk to these kids. I'm just trying to go home and do my thing, or work on whatever assignments I have. But yeah, like, it just gets harder the older you get. So I think just things that take less time would be something that alums like me would appreciate. Right? Like, ways to virtually do something, ways to

just, you know, just throw some money at something, which I've tried to do sometimes. And, yeah, just things that don't kill my calendar."

Leo's comments reveal a key barrier: the increasing demands on alumni's time and energy. To address this concern, GJA might consider offering more flexible, time-efficient ways for alumni to remain involved, such as virtual events.

Noel, another alumnus, highlighted geographic distance as a challenge: "But for me, in particular, I think it was just the distance and where I went for college and where I was living, post-college and where I'm living now, it's just the distance that kind of separated us." Noel's experience underscores the difficulty of staying engaged with the institution with alumni moving away for college or work. To mitigate this barrier, GJA could provide additional virtual engagement opportunities that are compelling and aligned to alumni's interests/motivations for staying connected (i.e. mentorship) and potentially create regional alumni networks to help alumni maintain connections regardless of location.

Staff Retention

Staff retention also emerged as a critical factor impacting alumni's connections to GJA. GJA, like most schools, faces challenges with staff retention and turnover. As a result, alumni and staff noted that students feel less of a connection to the people at the school, which might contribute to a decreased desire to return to school to visit and remain engaged as an alum. One staff member in their focus group noted:

> "I think one of the challenges is around teacher retention. We had a big exodus a few years back. And so a lot of kids, they come back, and they don't know a lot of people here. And I mean, you kind of expect it, like, no one's gonna stay somewhere forever. But I think if there was a way to attract teachers to stay longer than I think it would, I think it would be a little more enticing for somebody to come back."

Echoing the above sentiment, Jacob, a GJA alumnus, added,

> "But when I went there, there were all the teachers that I was familiar with, and the head of school that I was familiar with. And then after they all left, it was kind of like a new school almost. And so it's like, how do we stay connected? Or how does that draw us back into, like, you know, wanting to stay connected, when it's all new people."

The lack of familiar faces due to staff turnover can make returning to GJA feel less appealing for alumni. Fostering long-term relationships with staff and creating opportunities for alumni to engage with both new and familiar faces through events and communications help mitigate this challenge.

Staff Bandwidth and Lack of Formalized Systems

Another significant barrier is limited staff bandwidth and the lack of formalized processes to effectively manage alumni relations. Staff noted that while there are informal and ad hoc efforts to connect with alumni, such as impromptu visits, email outreach, and occasional events, there is a need for a more structured and systematic approach to support consistent and meaningful alumni involvement. One staff member had this to share as it relates to staff bandwidth:

> "I want to add on to the point of what's the benefit? I think preserving bandwidth is a huge, important piece of all of the work that we do. You know, yes, we are so obsessed with our alums. And it's amazing that they want to reach out, but Michelle (pseudonym) has a million things on her plate. And Isla (pseudonym) has many things on her plate. And so we get an email where it's like, okay, stop whatever you are supposed to be doing. And now it's like, this is another fire to put out or another thing to deal with, that's not really in your wheelhouse or not, you know, shouldn't be kind of you shouldn't be the first line of defense for if you need to be tapped into it later on. Yes, but I think in terms of preserving bandwidth, in order to continue to grow into, you know, kind of solidify our programming that's really important in my mind."

Another staff member had this to share as it relates to the need to formalize alumni relations:

> "But I think that as they transition to like college, or even graduate school, like, their time is not as ...they never have as much time as they would like to come back. But I think that

we probably don't engage or have more opportunities for the distance, right? Like, if you're like, in the area, if you can swing by cool, like, but there's just so many, I think informal opportunities where it's very person dependent, and not institutionally, these are the buckets that you can participate in. It's very custom. That's, I guess, the best way to describe it."

While GJA staff feel deeply invested in the success of their alumni and experience personal fulfillment in maintaining connections with them (a key benefit), the time, resources, and energy to support alumni sometimes supersede those benefits. This strain on staff resources underscores the need for a more systematized approach to alumni relations to support effectively managing and responding to alumni needs without overwhelming existing staff.

Overall, to overcome these barriers and tip the cost-benefit scale in favor of engagement, investment theory suggests that GJA must be proactive and strategic. This means developing targeted initiatives to mitigate logistical challenges, such as offering virtual engagement opportunities or regional alumni chapters. It also means investing in staff capacity and continuity to ensure that alumni have consistent points of connection and support after graduation.

Benefits

In light of the various costs and barriers to long-term engagement with GJA, it is imperative that the institution better leverage the benefits that stakeholders already recognize and clearly articulate the value of continued engagement beyond the initial experience and matriculation at the school. These benefits, rooted in the strong sense of community and lasting relationships formed at GJA, can serve as powerful motivators for alumni to remain connected and involved.

One staff member shared a compelling story about an alumnus named Michael (pseudonym), who returned to GJA on his birthday despite having faced significant challenges during his time at the school:

There was one student from last year who came back who I was like, "I can't believe he came back and he came back on his birthday." And that was something where he didn't fit the usual profile of the students that I've seen come back. And I was like, so impressed. You know, he had a little bit more of a challenging time, I think, especially in the time that I knew him here.

This anecdote highlights the profound impact GJA has on its students, suggesting that even those who face difficulties feel a deep connection to the school. This enduring bond underscores the importance of promoting and communicating the long-term benefits of staying engaged with GJA, such as the support and recognition that alumni can continue to receive.

Alumni themselves have expressed the value of the lifelong connections they formed at GJA. One alumnus remarked, "The people I do keep in touch with, I consider them my brothers because I still talk with them. Like, a lot." Another echoed this sentiment, stating:

So it's a great experience. It's a lifelong brotherhood. I think we all still care about each other even though we might not be the closest friends, we are still connected. And I think that's a lifelong pact that we made with each other.

These quotes illustrate the deep and lasting relationships that GJA fosters, which can serve as a significant incentive for continued engagement. By leveraging these intrinsic benefits and emphasizing the long-term nature of these connections, GJA can more effectively encourage alumni to remain active members of the community.

Table 3

Theory	Relevant Themes	Prevalence	Illustrative Quotes
Investment Theory: Individuals weigh the costs and benefits of a given relationship before deciding to invest their time, resources, and energy (Weerts & Ronca, 2007)	Time constraints as a barrier to engagement	2/3 alumni (interviews) 10/14 alumni (survey responses) 3/9 staff (focus groups)	"Yeah. I mean, the school I used to go a lot more frequently. Like, before I started getting busy, I should show up to the building a lot more. But I'm busier, I just couldn't really go back that much. Because I'm tired. I can't talk to these kids. I'm just trying to go home and do my thing, or work on whatever assignments I have." –GJA Alumnus

Geographic distance as a barrier to engagement	2/3 alumni (interviews) 8/14 alumni (survey responses) 4/9 staff (focus groups)	"I think I wasn't able to attend any alumni stuff just because of school and my location and so, whenever they did have an event, it always coincided with school. I was also transitioning from different locations because I lived in Connecticut, post-graduation from college." –GJA Alumnus
Lack of familiar faces/staff turnover as a barrier to engagement	1/3 alumni (interviews) 3/9 staff (focus groups)	"I think one of the challenges is around teacher retention, we had a big exodus a few years back. And so a lot of kids, they come back, and they don't know a lot of people here. And I mean, you kind of expect it, like, no one's gonna stay somewhere forever. But I think if there was a way to attract teachers to stay longer then I think it would, I think it would be a little more enticing for somebody to come back." –GJA Staff Member
Lack of staff bandwidth	8/9 staff (focus groups)	"I think preserving bandwidth is a huge, important piece of all of the work that we do. You know, yes, we are so obsessed with our alums. And it's amazing that they want to reach out, but Michelle has a million things on her plate. And Isla has many things on her plate. And so we get an email where it's like, okay, stop whatever you are supposed to be doing. And now it's like, this is another fire to put out or another thing to deal with, that's not really in your wheelhouse or not, you know, shouldn't be kind of you shouldn't be the first line of defense for if you need to be tapped into it later on."
Lack of formalized processes and systems for alumni engagement	5/9 staff (focus groups)	"I feel like there's a lot of informal alumni stuff like, like that we don't even know about…I think people just don't know how to plug it in. I think if it was more formalized people would be into it." –GJA Staff Member
Desire for virtual/social media opportunities to remain connected	3/3 alumni (interviews)	"Well, I want to consider the best ones. You can use like apps like WhatsApp, and discord maybe.

	8/18 students (focus groups)	Yeah, messenger. Just to kind of keep in contact with them, see how they're doing. Ask them questions about stuff you need help with or how their life is going." –GJA Student
Desire for mentorship and guidance from alumni	3/3 alumni (interviews)	"It's like a way to connect with other people to like help you gain more opportunities and things like that. It
	11/18 students (focus groups)	would be good to have access to someone in a field that I really like. I can just contact and be like, can you like help me with this or something?" –GJA Student

Recommendations

We provided our team at George Jackson Academy with six recommendations related to the growth and improvement of their alumni engagement to help with the eventual alumni association. Although some recommendations require additional financial contributions, others include internal shifts , adjusting priorities, and more intentional programming to help instill an alumni mindset for current students while simultaneously responding to the findings in our research.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: It is recommended that GJA design a mentorship program that will involve both current and former alumni. We recommend the program be named after its founder and be entitled George's Successors. The purpose of naming the mentorship program George's Successors is to signify each young male who graduates from GJA as a success story and to build on each other's success. Ultimately, George's Successors would allow for mentorship, academic/social-emotional support, and consistent alumni engagement opportunities.

Our data pointed to the strong desire among all constituent groups (including faculty, current students, and alumni) in the GJA community to establish a formalized mentorship program that facilitates continuous engagement and support for current and future students. The

proposed recommendation would create a mentorship program called "George's Successors" that directly creates a structured mentorship program over a three-year rollout period that aligns with the values and aspirations expressed by the stakeholders.

The name George's Successors holds significant symbolic meaning as it not only recognizes each graduate of GJA as a success story but also explicitly names the legacy and values instilled and formalized by the institution's namesake. The name, therefore, honors the legacy of the school's history while also being a catchy, memorable name to inspire and empower students and alumni to remain engaged with the community. The primary purpose of the program is to provide a structured platform for alumni to share their knowledge, experiences, and support with current and future students. This will undoubtedly build a stronger sense of intergenerational community and connections, as well as help to create a professional network for students who may not otherwise have access to the same type of professional and collegial network.

As highlighted in the findings, GJA alumni have a strong desire to "pay it forward" and support future generations of GJA students. In particular, alumni expressed an interest in supporting students in areas such as career exploration, navigating social dynamics, and adjusting to new academic environments like co-ed or predominantly white institutions. The mentorship program will create a regular way for alumni to stay connected with the institution and contribute to its mission. This aligns with the desire for transparent and consistent communication channels, provides opportunities for social and meaningful engagement, and will help to create an "alumni mindset" for current and future students while enrolled at GJA.

Overall, the George's Successors program has incredible potential to be an important cog in building a sustainable and impactful alumni network that supports current and future students

academically, socially, and emotionally. The program will leverage the commitment and

expertise of alumni while simultaneously fostering and building a sense of community and

tradition, which was explicitly stated as a goal by the GJA stakeholders in our findings.

3-Year Implementation Proposal

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
1. Establish a group of volunteer alumni as leader(s) of the mentorship program. In year one, the current Alumni Associate would lead the program	1. Execute the kick-off event of George's Successors	1. Refine program based on feedback and first-year experience
2. Develop mission, goals, and structure	2. Match alumni mentors with student mentees	2. Establish corporate and/or community partnerships for mentors, resources, events, etc.
3. Establish criteria and guidelines for mentor selection	3. Hold monthly group mentoring sessions	3. Develop an online platform for official mentor/mentee communication
4. Create an outreach plan to recruit mentors	4. Facilitate individual mentor/mentee meetings	4. Explore additional mentoring components (internships, job shadowing, etc)
5. Develop general training materials for mentors with strategies	5. Survey participants & gather feedback	5. Hold annual alumni reunion celebrating George's Successors
6. Plan kick-off events	6. Recognize and appreciate mentors through events and/or awards	6. Transition program leadership to alumni coordinators
7. Promote and recruit	7. Expand promotion to increase participation and network of mentors	

Recommendation 2: Develop an 8th-grade course that could help prepare GJA students for the transition to high school and life thereafter by connecting them directly with alumni mentors and exposing them to the diverse paths alumni have taken beyond GJA.

In conjunction with our data findings and the most relevant research from the field, one recommendation is to develop an 8th-grade course that directly connects students with alumni and exposes them to the diverse paths alumni have taken beyond GJA. Together with "George's Successors," this course would help provide a structured opportunity for students to connect with alumni who have navigated similar transitions and can offer valuable insights and guidance. The incorporation of alumni into the curriculum would facilitate desired student engagement, alumni, and larger institutional advancement goals.

This recommendation would benefit current students by highlighting a diverse range of career paths that alumni have followed; serving both as inspiration and motivation for students to see what'] is possible as a member of the GJA community. Additionally, it would align with the importance of helping to create an alumni mindset for current students, which research has demonstrated is significantly beneficial for future engagement. By providing direct exposure to alumni and their experiences, current and future students can envision themselves as future alumni, fostering a sense of responsibility and commitment to giving back to the GJA community.

The course would facilitate engagement between students and alumni as they navigate new cultural environments, social challenges, and academic expectations. Through Zoom, interactive workshops, and role-playing scenarios students would be better equipped with solutions to navigate different potentially challenging situations that they'll inevitably navigate at their next institution. Overall, the recommendation helps to facilitate intergenerational connections, create and preserve traditions, and prepare students for the challenges of the

drastically new high school environment that they're eventually stepping into, while also having the mutually beneficial effect of increasing alumni engagement for the institution.

3-Year Implementation Proposal

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
1. Form a curriculum development committee with teachers, administrators, and counselors 2. Outline course objectives, structure, and major components 3. Develop curriculum modules, scheduling structure (how often it meets, etc), and lesson plans 4. Recruit and train alumni volunteers to participate	1. Pilot the 8th-grade transition course 2. Facilitate online/in-person alumni interactions and mentoring activities 3. Incorporate student feedback to refine curriculum and activities 4. Expand alumni recruitment efforts for more diversity in roles, career paths, backgrounds, etc 5. Develop strategies to continue alumni-student relationships after 8th grade	1. Fully implement transition course for 8th-grade students 2. Explore integrating the course with George's Successors 3. Develop complementary resources like an alumni career exploration database 4. Establish milestones and metrics to evaluate program effectiveness 5. Plan annual alumni career fair/networking events tied to the course 6. Adapt curriculum based

	6. Promote course successes to build excitement for the following year	on feedback for continuous improvement

Recommendation 3: To support student's post-GJA success and strengthen ties between the institution and its alumni, GJA should employ a dedicated transition counselor tasked with staying engaged with graduates and their families through activities like campus visits, academic and social counseling, and providing continued guidance as they navigate their educational journeys.

One of the key findings in our research highlighted the need for alumni to give back and stay connected to GJA, particularly through mentorship, programming, and networking opportunities. A recommendation would be to employ a dedicated transition counselor at GJA to support students' immediate post-GJA success and to continue to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with alumni. The counselor's role would be to help facilitate and maintain these connections so that they remain connected to the school and feel its ongoing support as they transition to new educational environments.

Our findings additionally demonstrated that current students would continue to greatly benefit from receiving mentorship and support as they transition to high school. A transition counselor would play a critical role in this process, providing a known individual to help each student's academic and social transition to their next institution where they might not feel as known, seen, or valued. More specifically, the counselor could support their academic needs, communicate with the student's current advisor, and be a voice to help navigate the challenges of being in a new social environment. The counselor would simultaneously serve as a consistent point of contact for both current students and alumni, helping to ensure continuity and create a sense of belonging and familiarity for students even as they transition out of GJA.

This recommendation would also meet the expressed need for more consistent, transparent, and regular communication. The counselor can be an established and reliable resource for sharing information, facilitating campus visits, providing ongoing support for graduates and their families, and also helping promote alumni events during their continued communication with students and families. Additionally, the counselor could help coordinate virtual check-ins and other more regular touchpoints to support students in their first few years away from the institution.

Furthermore, the counselor would be able to assist in maintaining up-to-date records and contact information for each student, contributing to the need for an updated database of contact information. The dedicated transition counselor aligns with multiple needs, more specifically not only being able to provide critical support for GJA graduates at their new institution but also helping to maintain connections with students and spreading valuable information about alumni activities at GJA.

3-Year Implementation Proposal

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3

1. Clearly define the roles, responsibilities, and goals for the transition counselor position
2. Secure funding and get approval to create this role
3. Develop a detailed job description and identify the required qualifications
4. Form a hiring committee
5. Conduct a thorough search and interview process
6. Establish an office/resources for the role on campus
7. Build awareness about this new resource among
	1. Implement foundational programs such as:
	  a. Individual exit meetings with 8th graders and families
	  b. Semesterly check-ins/office hours for current high school students
	  c. Campus visit days for alumni to connect with current GJA students
	  d. Workshops on HS transition, study skills, wellness, etc
	2. Develop and launch guidebook/online resources for post-GJA success
		1. Expand counseling offerings based on feedback (tutoring, career exploration, etc)
		2. Create student groups to provide HS students access to other HS students to collaborate in areas of need/support
		3. Develop partnerships with educational consultants, tutors, therapists, etc
		4. Integrate with alumni programs like George's Successors and Speaker Series
		5. Establish metrics and analyze data to evaluate program effectiveness

current students and families	3. Coordinate with college counseling staff at HS to align efforts 4. Survey students/families to assess needs and gather feedback 5. Promote the counselor's services through communications and events	6. Adjust programming and messaging based on ongoing feedback

Recommendation 4: To continue to provide structured opportunities for alumni engagement, we recommend the establishment of an ambassador program. This would enable leadership to build a dedicated base of engaged alumni that would eventually grow into the official George Jackson Alumni Association.

This recommendation would be a critical stepping stone toward creating the first official George Jackson Alumni Association. The ambassador program is aligned with the finding that indicates a widespread desire to build a sustainable alumni association with age and professional diversity. The ambassador program would provide a structured framework to help cultivate a core group of engaged alumni who can eventually form a more comprehensive alumni association. Not only would this provide a more formal way for engaged alumni to contribute their time, energy, and resources in a meaningful way, but it would also align with the overwhelmingly strong desire to stay connected and give back to GJA.

This recommendation would address the perceived lack of clear, organized alumni engagement and would create more structured and (hopefully) recurring alumni events. The

ambassador program would create a meaningful bridge between current students, recent

graduates, and older alumni to tap their expertise and networks at GJA. The ambassador program

and GJA leadership could then begin to implement events, programs, and communication

strategies on a smaller scale to eventually build-out. The gradual approach of the ambassador

program fosters organic growth of leadership within the community and would help to build a

groundswell for enthusiasm and connection between the engaged alumni and their peers. Overall,

this recommendation aligns with numerous of our findings and lays the foundation for a

sustainable, long-term community.

Recommendation 5: It is highly recommended that GJA build a communications team that can meet the needs of all key stakeholders. The team should consist of a director of communications, alumni, and students. Within the students' aspect, there should be a representative for each grade level. It would be recommended that the communications team create and maintain an online alumni directory allowing former students to search for and contact one another based on information such as their current location, career, and areas of expertise.

Based on the research findings, establishing a dedicated communications team that works

in conjunction with the alumni and advancement office is a highly relevant recommendation. The

findings reinforced the need for more transparent, consistent, and regular communication

channels to keep the entire GJA community informed and engaged. The proposed structure of

the communications team fully addresses this need while also engaging representatives from

various constituent groups such as alumni and current students.

The director of communications' would be critical in leading and coordinating the team's

efforts. They would be responsible for developing and implementing a cohesive communication

strategy that ensures timely and relevant information reaches all stakeholders through the

appropriate channels in a routine, reliable way. Additionally, the director of communications

would meet regularly with the current director of advancement and the alumni coordinator to

ensure that their strategies are interconnected and aligned to maximize the growth and sustainability of the school in all three areas.

This recommendation specifically includes alumni and current student representatives on the communications team to align with the other findings, which highlighted the desire for alumni to remain engaged and contribute to the school's growth and evolution. Through their inclusion on the team, alumni can help craft the messaging to ensure their voices and perspectives are heard and represented while also helping to directly spread messaging and information about events and happenings at the school to their immediate networks. Similarly, the inclusion of current students helps to address the need and desire for additional mentorship and connection to alumni while also providing an important perspective and ensuring that the current initiatives resonate with and support the real needs of the current student body.

Additionally, a primary responsibility of the communications team would be to create, organize, and maintain an up-to-date online directory to provide access for current students, alumni, and families. The directory would enable members of the community to proactively network with one another, responding directly to a consistent finding from all constituent groups that highlighted the need for a consistent channel of communication.

This recommendation further aligns with the findings that highlighted the need to create and preserve traditions to help foster a stronger sense of community at GJA. The communications team would create intergenerational relationships among students and alumni while also serving its intended purpose by effectively communicating about upcoming events, celebrations, and opportunities for engagement. By establishing clear and reliable channels, consistent communication can help overcome the identified barrier of a lack of a centralized database or information hub. Alumni and their families can ensure that all stakeholders have

access to up-to-date and relevant information about initiatives, successes, and engagement

opportunities.

3-Year Implementation Proposal

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
1. Establish the need and secure funding and resources for a communications team 2. Create and hire a Director of Communications position 3. Conduct an audit of current communications strategies and form a steering committee with staff, alumni, and students 4. Develop a communication plan and recruit and select student reps 5. Research and evaluate different alumni directory platforms/vendors	1. Build out a full communications team 2. Designate roles like content creator, social media manager, alumni liaison 3. Implement new communications initiatives based on the plan 4. Provide training to student reps based on their roles 5. Facilitate consistent meetings with a full communications team 6. Gather feedback to evaluate the effectiveness	1. Review and update plan based on feedback 2. Explore new technologies and strategies to improve outreach 3. Develop a branding team to unify messaging 4. Create reporting metrics to measure engagement 5. Plan and execute large-scale anniversary/ homecoming communications campaign 6. Reassess student roles and adjust accordingly 7. Promote the enhanced alumni directory

6. Define the scope, features, and requirements for the directory (search filters, profile fields, etc) 7. Develop a data collection plan to gather updated alumni information 8. Build awareness and promote the upcoming directory to increase participation 9. Select the directory platform and implement 10. Obtain consent to input current alumni information already acquired into the new platform	7. Launch the core alumni directory platform with basic search and profile capabilities 8. Conduct an alumni outreach campaign to populate a directory 9. Designate alumni ambassadors to drive awareness and registrations 10. Integrate the directory with GJA's website, alumni newsletter, and social media 11. Survey users to gather feedback on missing features and potential improvements 12. Expand directory functionality based on feedback	8. Develop a long-term data maintenance plan to keep alumni data updated 9. Establish an advisory group to guide future directory enhancements 10. Integrate directory with "George's Successors" mentorship program 11. Analyze engagement metrics and adjust strategy to maximize participation

Recommendation 6: To foster connections among alumni and provide networking opportunities, we recommend the creation and maintenance of an online alumni database.

An alumni database would serve as an important foundation for facilitating connections by providing a centralized resource for alumni to find and connect with one another based on shared interests, career paths, geographic location, and/or other relevant demographic data. This tool would be helpful for the institution, current students, and recent graduates to be matched and connected to other alumni. Our research emphasized the desire of current students to be mentored by alumni to better equip them for their higher education experience. The database would enable this mentorship to go beyond their current GJA experience. In particular, it would empower alumni to connect with fellow alums as they enter the workforce once they are several years removed from GJA regardless of their current location.

The findings demonstrated one major barrier to engagement: the need for a centralized place to find and provide information to connect with other alumni and see updated demographic information. The database would address this need while simultaneously helping to provide more consistent and transparent communication. The school could thus utilize this information to not only provide contact information but also structure it to help market and publicize information about upcoming events, roles within the association, and coordination of future school-related activities. This recommendation would maximize its success with the implementation of two previously mentioned recommendations including the creation and dissemination of an alumni newsletter by the communications team and the development of an alumni mindset.

Limitations and Future Research

While our study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing alumni engagement at GJA and offers actionable recommendations for enhancing long-term alumni engagement, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of our research and potential paths forward for future studies.

One limitation of our study is the relatively small sample size, particularly for alumni interviews. While the data we were able to gather from alumni participants was rich, a larger and more diverse sample of alumni could provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the factors shaping their engagement with GJA. This emphasized the need for a more formalized alumni association and consistent channels of communication. The lack of alumni responsiveness is indicative of the need for more consistent, regular communication. Alumni expressed a connection to their peers and the institution yet we had very low response numbers. A future study could consider factors such as graduation year, geographic location, and career path to help capture a more representative picture of the alumni community. Future studies could also include the perspectives of other key GJA constituents, such as parents, community partners, and donors to shed light on the broader ecosystem of GJA support and uncover new strategies for fostering alumni engagement.

Similarly, another potential avenue for research would be a longitudinal study to track alumni engagement over time to gauge long-term effectiveness. There would be numerous benefits to this type of study. Firstly, we could more acutely identify successful and unsuccessful strategies to engage alumni. This could help the leadership team to implement more efficient and effective strategies. Secondly, we could track and follow the paths of a few specific classes of students to stay connected and build effective engagement strategies with and for those cohorts.

The study would track and remain connected with these students over a longer period of time. Lastly, this type of study might influence those groups of students to remain connected and commit to helping with future engagement efforts at the school.

Additionally, our project hopes to have a long-lasting effect on numerous different groups of stakeholders. While there is not much research out there on building alumni associations for middle schools, our main aim is to address the lack of research on this topic and make a contribution to the field of education. Our study poses numerous opportunities for future research in terms of theory and development.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to discover ways to engage alumni at George Jackson Academy (GJA). From the outset, the school recognized gaps within its current alumni association. GJA believes that alumni engagement is crucial for maintaining the organization's longevity and is eager to make the necessary changes as soon as possible. GJA recognizes the importance of having an efficient database to actively monitor engagement. The organization has already made strides in restructuring the alumni engagement avenues by matching students with alumni for mentoring. While GJA had ideas on what they could do, they plan to rely heavily on our recommendations to better support their alumni association moving forward.

To support and monitor GJA's alumni engagement, the study utilized survey, interview, and focus group data as well as scholarly literature to inform its recommendations. The research questions explored three important perspectives on alumni engagement. The literature review

focuses on several factors that impact engagement, including hands-on experiences, a sense of belonging, and volunteerism.

The research utilized survey instruments to collect data from GJA's active alumni, current students, and staff. Data analysis yielded three key findings. First, the research revealed a strong desire among GJA stakeholders for a more formalized alumni association. Second, the sense of family, belonging, and brotherhood was identified as a benefit for GJA stakeholders. The study uncovered barriers that impeded alumni, student, and staff engagement, leading to missed opportunities for connection.

The recommendations provided are categorized as structural and strategic to support the study's key findings. Structurally, it is recommended that GJA hire a communications director and a transition counselor to strengthen alumni life post-GJA. The strategic recommendations include developing an 8th-grade transition course, launching an ambassador, creating a mentorship program after the school's namesake, and establishing an outward-facing alumni database.

Furthermore, the research found that individuals are motivated to engage when they expect their efforts will lead to desired outcomes. Additionally, alumni want to be involved when the impact is tangible. This study provides the foundation for middle school settings seeking to start or improve their alumni engagement. GJA will thrive by implementing small changes over time, which will help to boost their engagement within their alumni network.

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Appendices

Appendix A: *Alumni Recruitment Flyer & Survey*

Appendix B: *Student Recruitment Flyer & FAQ*

Appendix C: *Interview Questions*

Interview Questions for GJA Alumni
1. What does the George Jackson Academy community mean to you? How has it impacted your life?

2. Since graduating, have you stayed connected with other GJA alumni? If so, how? If not, why not?

3. What challenges or obstacles have made it difficult to maintain ties with the GJA community after graduation?

4. Are you aware of any previous attempts to organize GJA alumni? What factors may have hindered those efforts?

5. What institutional, structural or systemic issues do you think have prevented more alumni engagement at GJA?

6. In your view, what could be the value or benefits of having an engaged GJA alumni network?

7. What types of activities, programs or initiatives would you want to see from a GJA alumni association?

8. Reflecting on your experience, what additional support or resources could have better prepared you for life after GJA?

9. How could an alumni association play a role in enhancing the growth and development of current GJA students?

10. How could an alumni network help strengthen the connections and relationships among the GJA community?

Appendix D: *Alumni Survey Questions*

1. How important is it for you to stay connected to George Jackson Academy and your former classmates after graduation?

2. What benefits would you find valuable from being part of a GJA alumni network? Select **all** that apply.

   a. Meeting new people and networking

   b. Getting career advice

   c. Mentoring current GJA students

   d. Attending reunions and social events

   e. Giving back to GJA (volunteering, donations)

   f. Currently interested in mentoring GJA students

3. Are you currently still in contact with any of your GJA classmates?

   Optional: If yes, how are you staying in contact?

4. What has made it difficult to stay connected with GJA and classmates after graduating? (Select **all** that apply)

   a. No one organized keeping in touch

   b. Not having current contact information

   c. Living far away from each other

   d. Just lost touch over time

   e. We are still in touch

   f. School

5. How likely are these to prevent you from joining the GJA alumni association?

6. What additional support could GJA provide to help prepare middle school students for high school and future success? Select **all** that apply.

    a. Study skills/time management

    b. Goal setting and planning

    c. Help choosing high school

    d. Mentors from local high schools

    e. Personal finance

7. Would you be interested in being a mentor to current GJA middle school students?

8. How helpful would these be for a GJA alumni association to offer?

    a. Tutoring/academic support for students

    b. Career exploration activities

    c. Alumni social events

    d. High school preparation mentors

Optional: Any other comments about building a strong GJA alumni community?

Optional:Would you be willing to share more of your thoughts about the GJA

Alumni association via a 1:1 interview on Zoom?

Appendix E: Focus Group Protocol

 Focus Group Protocol

<u>Preparation</u>

When planning and preparing for focus groups, consider the following:

 • Secure a location that will be comfortable for the specific group you're expecting. Some

       groups may not be comfortable in a government building, for example, so be sensitive to

       those dynamics when selecting a location.

• Set up the room so that groups of seven to 10 people plus a moderator and recorder/note taker

       can interact comfortably. Round tables are good options for this. Also provide name tags

       and refreshments.

• Ensure that you have at least one recorder or note taker per group, and that these individuals

       have the equipment or supplies they need to record or take notes.

• If you think the focus groups may go longer than one hour, plan for a break after an hour.

• Review the list of "Moderator Best Practices" at the end of this protocol.

<u>Introduction</u>

The introduction sets the tone for the focus group. The moderator introduces her/himself and any

others who are playing a working role in the activities (i.e., recorders, moderators). Also cover

the following:

• Background: provide a high-level background about GJA

• Purpose of the event: explain that the purpose of the focus group is to understand your perspectives on alumni engagement , a vision for what alumni engagement could look like in the future.

• Confidentiality: explain that we have recorders/note takers because we want to make sure to capture your experiences and ideas. That said, everything that you say is confidential.

• Length of the focus group: Reiterate the agenda and time boundaries of the focus group, including any planned breaks.

Ground Rules

1. First, there are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your opinions and perspectives on the needs of your community.

2. Second, you do not have to agree with everyone else in this room if that is not how you really feel. We expect people will have different views on these questions.

3. Third, we want you to feel comfortable saying good things as well as critical things. We are not here to promote a particular way of thinking. We just want to understand your viewpoints.

 4. Fourth, we ask that you talk one at a time.

Closing

To close, thank the participants for sharing their experiences and perspectives. Thank the moderators and recorders/note takers. End with an opportunity for participants to ask questions of you, time permitting.

Student Focus Group Questions

1. Before we start, tell us your name and what it is like being a student at GJA.

2. What do you love most about GJA?

3. In hearing your responses, it seems like one common theme is that you love the feeling and camaraderie at GJA. The purpose of an alumni association would be to run programming and connect current students and alumni together. How do you see an alumni association benefitting current students and alumni?

4. What kinds of events or activities would you like to see organized by an alumni association? How do you see current students playing a role?

5. Being that you all are about to graduate soon, how would you like to stay connected with GJA?

6. How do you see current students playing a role in the alumni association?

7. How do you currently engage with alumni of GJA?

8. What kind of communication channels and/or social media platforms would you prefer for staying connected with alumni and the alumni association?

9. What questions, ideas, comments, or concerns do you have about this going forward?

Focus Group Questions for Faculty and Staff

1. Briefly tell us who you are and your role here at GJA.

2. How does GJA currently engage with alumni?

3. What challenges have you encountered with alumni engagement?

4. How might faculty and staff play an important role in the development and implementation of alumni association programming and/or initiatives?

5. Tell me about the transition of current students out of GJA. How could an alumni association better prepare and support current students as they graduate?

6. What resources or support do you think the alumni association could provide to help current faculty and staff excel in their roles?

7. If you were building an alumni association, what would be your top priority or area to focus on?

8. What questions, ideas, comments, or concerns do you have about this going forward?