

Case Study

Transferring skills and supporting the launch of the Cape York Girl Academy



Background

In January 2016 Cape York Partnership (CYP) launched the Cape York Girl Academy, an independent boarding school for Indigenous mothers aged 13–17. The first of its kind in Australia, the Girl Academy provides education, accommodation and opportunity for young Indigenous women disengaged from education, training and employment, and it accommodates their babies too.

For years, communities in Cape York had expressed concern about teenage pregnancies ending girls' education and limiting their life choices. CYP compiled evidence that Indigenous teenage girls in Cape York are five times more likely to get pregnant than their non-Indigenous counterparts. It showed numerous negative consequences of this, including reduced chances of gaining an education (with up to 75% of teenage Indigenous females not finishing year 10), negative effects on their mental wellbeing, and lowered chances of living a productive, healthy life (with 82% of remote teenage Indigenous females disengaged from employment and education).

The Girl Academy believes every girl has the right to a good education, and that education is the key to their life choices. It supports them to achieve their educational goals, and also to:

- Care for themselves and their children
- Build skills required for employment
- Learn social norms around effective and healthy relationships
- Improve health and wellbeing
- Build confidence and become happier, healthier mothers and members of community.

For the girls' babies and children under five, a health and wellbeing program and Early Childhood Centre provides a nurturing and safe environment for growth, learning and development.

As this ambitious initiative prepared to open its doors, CYP Chief Executive Officer Duncan Murray looked for support to ensure a successful launch. In December 2015, Dean Pagonis from Boston Consulting Group (BCG) was deployed for a secondment, continuing a long history of Jawun secondees transferring skills and building organisational capacity in Cape York. Duncan prepared a brief focused on project management, fundraising, and skills transfer to the new Girl Academy team.

Approach

Applying his extensive consulting experience, Dean worked with Duncan, Principal Jessa Rogers and the new staff team to ensure a successful launch of the Girl Academy. This was no easy task, as Dean remembers: *'The secondment tested and improved my flexibility and adaptability, exposing me to a frenetic start-up environment with ever-changing priorities and constraints'*. Among other things, Dean drafted key policies and procedures, developed an organisational chart and staffing model, conducted formal staff and student inductions, facilitated management and board meetings, and oversaw a range of critical accommodation, schooling and facility issues.

To secure the Girl Academy's financial foundation, Dean worked closely with CYP's Chief Financial Officer Matthew Turner to identify ways of increasing the school's working capital, and established a range of management accounting disciplines including a rolling cash flow forecast model. With his financial analysis establishing that short and long term fundraising was a priority, he identified new ways of raising funds with Julie White, Head of Fundraising. One idea was a short-term crowdfunding initiative to raise \$12,500 for a single term of education and child care. Dean set this up with the help of Eliza Spring, an editing colleague at BCG who worked on a pitch using the inputs of Duncan and Julie. He also developed a marketing strategy for the launch with Head of Marketing and Communications Jimi Bostock, which included book signing and 'meet-and-greets' with Noel Pearson.

From the outset, Dean prioritised staff capacity building as per his brief. The skills transfer varied according to those he worked with: with Principal Jessa, it included time and task prioritisation, project management and financial management; with Business Manager Adam Peut, it included relationship management and communication skills in meetings; and with CFO Matthew, it included managing 'upwards' (to CEO) and 'downwards' (to his team), running effective meetings, and managing a daily schedule to meet priorities. The team spoke highly of what they learnt from Dean, both through his active coaching and his professional role modelling. Matthew remembered: *'Dean was always incredibly organized. He spent the last part of the day planning what he needed to do/address/complete the next day. I am now trying to do likewise'*. And on his project management expertise, Matthew recalled: *'Dean had an ability to think laterally....It has alerted me to thinking more creatively rather than using the usual narrow-minded, finance-related view. People come to me with problems and expect me to provide the solution, and I think I am better equipped to do that now'*.

Overall, skills transfer was an important legacy of Dean's time at the Girl Academy, and one valued by CYP. Duncan reflected on how this had worked out: *'Aside from doing an outstanding job, it was inevitable that Dean's work rate and enthusiasm would rub off on the young Girl Academy team.'*

Dean himself thrived on the pace and responsibility of a challenging start-up environment: *'By the end of my secondment, I became comfortable in this high-paced environment - learning to balance speed to output on the most urgent priorities, whilst balancing the longer-term priorities for the school.'*

Outcomes

The crowdfunding campaign exceeded its target, with \$16,255 pledged within the first five days. It was the most successful first week in 2 years for a startsomegood.com campaign! In the same week, Dean secured a digital marketing partnership with IndigenousX, online platform for news and opinion with over 45,000 followers on Twitter and 2,000 on Facebook. With this momentum, the six-week crowdfunding campaign eventually raised \$38,735, enough to fund three terms at the Girl Academy.

The Girl Academy was successfully launched in Term 1 of 2016, with 15 students (and their seven babies) boarding at the Wangetti campus, each with an individual education and wellbeing plan. Most of these girls would probably otherwise have left formal education forever. Instead they became the first generation of girls to join a school whose vision is to ensure their education and expand their life choices.

Returning to BCG New York, Dean continued to follow Indigenous education and the Girl Academy in particular. He set up monthly conversations with CFO Matthew and Business Manager Adam, providing professional support and following the progress of the school he proudly helped launch.

Next Steps

The Girl Academy received another BCG secondee in May 2016, one who will further establish successful systems at the school. The secondment of Dean Pagonis paved the way for future secondees to project manage start-ups for CYP, and conversations about more defined skills transfer briefs have started with other Cape York organisations. Additionally, the success of the crowdfunding campaign provided CYP with another avenue for short term fundraising.