



EXCEL: Expanding College for Exceptional Learners Developing a Nonprofit Organization to Support the Creation of a Postsecondary Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

By Julie Warm and Shelley Stander

INTRODUCTION

Ann W. is 23 and finished her high-school education at age 18. At that point, in the words of her mother, she “graduated to the couch.” Ann could not meet the admission requirements of the local community college, and without further training her opportunities for employment and independent living were limited.

Ben D. is 20 and is on the autism spectrum. He has taken a few classes at the local community college, but has not developed the social networks and independent living skills that he needs to be successful. He does not fit into most programs for adults with more significant disabilities, but he needs some ongoing supports to be successful in school and at work.

Ann and Ben are two of the many students with intellectual or developmental disabilities (I/DD) who leave high school each year with limited postsecondary educational and vocational options. In Kansas City, a small nonprofit called Expanding College for Exceptional Learners, or EXCEL, was formally organized in 2009 to support the creation of postsecondary education options for young people like Ann and Ben. EXCEL spearheaded and then initiated funding for the THRIVE program at the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg, MO.

Over a period of four years, the founders of EXCEL evolved from meeting informally over coffee to establishing an official nonprofit organization. EXCEL raised private money from generous families and foundations, then used partnerships with public agencies to promote sustainable inclusive programs in local colleges. This brief describes how EXCEL was formed, how its work led to the creation of THRIVE, and how others might use a similar process for similar efforts in other areas of the country.

NONPROFIT 101

Models for starting a nonprofit are numerous, but here are the major steps used by EXCEL.

Gather like-minded advocates. Many, if not most, similar postsecondary programs have come into being because of the passion and support of the families and support networks of people with disabilities. EXCEL was no exception—it was created by parents who were looking for a suitable postsecondary option for their children with I/DD.

Find your allies. Be strategic about the people and functions needed for an executive board. Assess the strengths of the founding members and consider what skills and qualities are missing. A successful executive board that is just starting out should have: a passion to go the distance (and it can be a long journey), the ability to put in many volunteer hours to accomplish the small tasks leading up to nonprofit status, and the confidence and resourcefulness to jump in and make cold calls, visits, and presentations.

When EXCEL was being formed, the founders identified the skills needed for organizational governance: legal training, financial administration, and grantsmanship. Additionally, liaisons to higher education, government, and key family advocacy groups (such as those representing Down syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorders) were also sought out. EXCEL recruited families representing Kansas and Missouri, various disabilities, and students of differing ages. This group became the EXCEL executive board, the backbone of the nonprofit and the group tasked with bearing the

organizational, financial, and legal responsibilities that allowed EXCEL to carry out its vision.

Other potential key participants were also identified during initial strategy meetings: representatives from local school districts, state legislators, and service providers. EXCEL secured pro bono design services from a family member to produce a logo and then sent written invitations to these individuals, asking them to join the EXCEL advisory board. Currently, the EXCEL executive board meets monthly to review financial and legal commitments and to plan for implementation, including fundraising. The executive board also convenes the EXCEL advisory board quarterly to report progress, brainstorm ideas, and gather feedback. The advisory board is generous with its advice and holds the executive board accountable for key milestones.

Educate yourselves. Groups should develop and use resources like the Think College online database of postsecondary programs to research, examine, and debate the characteristics of other existing programs across the county. The EXCEL executive board went as a group to tour a newly formed postsecondary program about five hours away by car. They talked to the administrator about the program's design. Local families who had sent their students to programs elsewhere were interviewed about their experiences (pre-college, during college, and post-college) and recommendations for improvement.

Develop a mission, vision, objectives, and key milestones. EXCEL determined that its basic mission was to create a vision for a postsecondary program, develop resources, and be ready to provide advice and partnership as requested by college partners. EXCEL determined that it would not develop, administer, control, or manage the postsecondary program or any of its elements. Instead, the program would be developed and owned by the college partner. The EXCEL executive board would evaluate whether program components, such as admission criteria and curriculum, reflected EXCEL's vision. The board also determined that it would provide initial funding for a program and would expect the college partner to develop a plan for sustainability at the conclusion of the grant.

EXCEL Timeline

2006		Parents from a local school district start planning a postsecondary program for students with I/DD.
2007		
May		First core group decided to bring in other parents and professionals.
August		Parent group started to solidify the executive board. Continued meetings with professionals.
September		Started conversations with local college partner.
December		Local community foundation agreed to incubate. 10% of total raised from private philanthropists.
2008		
Spring		Developed a website and stationery. Formed advisory board. Continued conversations with local college partner.
Summer		Continued conversations with local college partner.
October		Regrouped, rethought, and revised strategy. Continued writing grants. (Advisory board was critical during this time.)
December		15% of total raised from private philanthropists and supportive families.
2009		
Spring		Strategy development and (unsuccessful) grant writing. Networking for introductions to college presidents.
June		Started developing relationships with new potential partner colleges. One-on-one meetings to introduce ourselves and our vision.
September		Issued an RFP.
November		Evaluated proposals. Applied to become a nonprofit corporation.
December		25% of total raised.
2010		
January		Met with college partner to confirm details and negotiate fine points. Met the (proposed) staff.
March		Awarded grant for feasibility study.
April		Filed for 501(c)(3) status.
May		Feasibility study ended. Program was announced.
August		Program accepted the first class of participants.
October		Tax-exempt status received.
December		50% of total raised.
2011		
January		Hired professional services including attorney, accountant, bookkeeper, and banker.
May		First special-event fundraiser. Netted \$11,000.

Find an incubator. Finding an organization willing and able to be an incubator is not required, but it helps immeasurably. In EXCEL's case, a local community foundation agreed to shelter EXCEL under its nonprofit designation. This allowed EXCEL to attract charitable dollars while planning its next steps. This early partnership provided EXCEL with both a fundraising mechanism and instant credibility in the community. The community foundation representatives were generous with their financial, fundraising, and operational advice as EXCEL was getting off the ground.

In practical terms, EXCEL became a subsidiary of the community foundation. All grants were authored by EXCEL but submitted under the foundation's name. All revenue (whether grants or gifts) was received by the foundation on behalf of EXCEL, and the foundation also administered any funds awarded to EXCEL. On the other side of the ledger, all bills and financial obligations were submitted to the community foundation for payment.

Get organized. The next step in this process is to file an application with your state (usually, the Secretary of State's office) to become a corporation. By-laws and articles of incorporation are necessary and examples of these are available online. Legal guidance is quite useful here. Once the application is approved, appoint officers, establish a website, and create stationery and business cards. Finally, write a case statement. This is a core fundraising document that tells potential donors how their gift will be used and explains the benefits of contributing.

In EXCEL's case, a board member/parent coordinated the steps necessary for incorporation. She tweaked provisions of generic by-laws and articles of incorporation to reflect the board's intent regarding officers and term limits. The board found a low-cost web developer and used the local office-supply store to print stationery and business cards.

The next important step is to apply to the IRS to become a 501(c)(3) organization so that your group can accept tax-exempt contributions. This is a highly technical process. (See this IRS publication for more information: www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p4220.pdf). After this, an organization can file as a nonprofit with the state to avoid paying sales tax on goods and services.

A member of EXCEL's executive board was a lawyer and was able to manage the process of becoming a corporation. However, the 501(c)(3) application was more technical and beyond her expertise. EXCEL had difficulty locating affordable legal support to help with this application. Eventually, a law clinic at a local law school helped in completing and advising EXCEL's 501(c)(3) application process. Once the application was filed, the approval process took about four months.

Connect with potential college partners. EXCEL considered its geographic location and the characteristics of an ideal college partner. The executive board decided that about two hours by car was the outer limit of access. Within that boundary, there were about 20 colleges that met EXCEL's criteria. The executive board gave itself three months to make personal contact with as many of those institutions they could. A strong preference was to meet with the chancellor or president at each school; a second choice was the provost or academic head; and a distant third choice was a department head or faculty member.

EXCEL was able to make personal contact with 13 of the 19 potential college partners, almost all at the chancellor or president level. Each contact learned about the EXCEL grant proposal that would allow interested colleges to design a program to be funded initially by EXCEL.

EXCEL's University Partner

Institution	University of Central Missouri
Program	Transformation, Health, Responsibility, Independence, Vocation, and Education (THRIVE)
Cohort size	12 students
Cost	\$16,700 (includes housing and meals)
Grant	\$498,000 over 2½ years
Website	www.ucmo.edu/thrive/
Curriculum	After a first-semester living assessment, each student develops a person-centered plan outlining their career goals and educational objectives.
Outcome	Two-year certificate or tracked into degree program, as appropriate.

Do what you promised. A project like this has many interested participants and investors who are continually assessing your ability to carry out your plans. Develop timelines that are realistic and flexible in the event of mistakes or factors beyond your control. However, once you announce that something will happen on a certain timeline, do whatever it takes to make that milestone a reality. In the case of EXCEL, the college presidents were told that a Request for Proposals (RFP) would come out on a certain date—and it did.

Issue a Request for Proposals. This step was a huge leap of faith. Had EXCEL created the relationships needed to be successful? Would any of the colleges respond? Did they share the vision?

Hold on to your vision. EXCEL did the work, made the case, cultivated the relationships, and knew that the colleges were seriously considering the opportunity. While these steps laid the foundation for success, it was an unexpected turn that eventually landed their college partner: A faculty member at a college not targeted by EXCEL heard about the RFP through her professional network, and put together the selected proposal. EXCEL's organizational strength, sophistication, and networking had provided the flexibility for a different potential partner to respond: the University of Central Missouri (UCM), which developed the THRIVE program.

Meet with college officials and proposed staff. EXCEL met with representatives from UCM to discuss next steps and to confirm that they understood our vision. Discussions ensured that the college and EXCEL were on the same page regarding the principles that would inform and shape the program.

Commit. EXCEL created a contract based on the RFP and the UCM's proposal and provided funds in phases—feasibility study, implementation phase, and transition phase—with cost and deliverables assigned to each phase. Payment was only released to the college when each phase and its associated deliverables were completed.

Search for ways to sustain programming. EXCEL has continued to support the THRIVE program at UCM by working with state legislators and appointed officials as well as local government funding partners. Many local, regional, and state agencies are not able to support the program directly with funding but are able to realign their existing services to support students in the program.

Eventually, funders will want to know what you are doing to earn income for the program. Earned income includes anything from fundraising revenue to t-shirt sale profits to rental of unused office space. Sophisticated funders will expect that you are generating revenue from a variety of sources. Keep this in mind and make fundraising part of your overall strategy.

The stories of Ann and Ben, who introduced this brief, are not over. They still have another year to go to complete their program at UCM, but they are looking forward to a job that aligns more closely with their interests and talents and that pays them more than if they hadn't had a college experience. This goes along with their increased self-confidence, independence, and pride.

For more information about EXCEL or to contact the authors, email info@excelkc.org or call Julie Warm at 816-363-4968.

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