



# Final Thoughts

For the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

**Ben Peterson**

October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009

**jhr | Journalists for Human Rights**

web. [www.jhr.ca](http://www.jhr.ca) • tel. 416 413 0240 • fax. 416 413 1832

147 Spadina Avenue, Suite 206 • Toronto, Ontario • M5V 2L7

jhr (Journalists for Human Rights) is enormously grateful to the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation for the support you've provided to jhr over the last three years. With your assistance jhr was able to grow and build its School Chapter Program into a leading youth engagement program.

This final report consists of nothing other than a series of lessons learned and reflections on managing a successful school chapter program. It was written by Ben Peterson, jhr's Co-Founder and Executive Director, who has had the privilege of being involved with jhr's Chapter Program every step of the way.

- 1) Thanks: I hope everyone at the McConnell Foundation understands how amazing you are. Our School Chapter program probably wouldn't be around without your support. So, first of all, thank you from the bottom of my (and our) heart(s)!
- 2) Community: More than ever before, success in youth engagement is about building communities of support; communities that can rally around an idea, can support each other, can learn from each other, where membership becomes part of people's identity and self-worth. Too many youth engagement efforts offer only a fleeting moment of involvement, or a series of theoretically connected opportunities but that don't require continued intellectual or emotional involvement throughout. With so many causes out there, so many ways for youth to get engaged now, successful organizations must build community first. At jhr we are just learning how to do it properly. It's more than just showing up at meetings. It's about wearing it on your sleeve.
- 3) Community 2: In an increasingly 'verticalized' world, communities tend to form around very specific interests, like journalism, engineering or sport. Being the first entrant into a new vertical gives any organization a real competitive advantage, because it soaks up all of the demand (active and latent) for an engagement outlet. Much of jhr's early success was because of just that—we were the first (and remain the only) one into the journalism field. If I were investing in youth engagement organizations, I start by funding those that create the strongest communities in the narrowest, and least explored, verticals. They're the ones that really shape people's lives, where there is most demand and where most good can be done.
- 4) Community 3: Community isn't just about engaging students in their school. It's about giving them real opportunities to influence and shape *the entire* School Chapter program, to become a

part of the *overall* community. Organizations can't be afraid of giving up control. Student-led programs should be 'student-led' all the way through.

- 5) Community 4: Ok, enough about community. One more quick word: understand that not all 'verticals' are the same. Students self-select different fields based on different interests and personality traits. For example, engaging journalists (tend to be introverted and critical) is very different than engineers (extroverted and accepting) or musicians (highly creative). Thus one-fits-them-all approaches to youth engagement efforts are dicey at best.
- 6) Saturation: I often wonder if there are too many youth engagement organizations. So much of it is supply rather than demand driven. At jhr we really try to be demand driven, but it's sometimes hard to resist trying to add that 30<sup>th</sup> Chapter or whatnot. We believe in our Chapters so much that we have sometimes pushed them on schools of individuals before they were ready for them. Upon reflection, each student engagement system needs to understand its natural growth limitations, and be fine with it. This is especially true in orgs that fill a particular vertical, like jhr. The trick then becomes about building a sense of true community within existing Chapters. It's not about how wide you spread, but how deep you get.
- 7) Success. What is success? How do you measure the depth of involvement, as opposed to the breadth? It's not just the number of people that are in a Chapter or the number of stories that they write on human rights. It's about the number of people whose lives have, in some way, significantly benefited from their involvement. Another university club to join doesn't matter that much—a way to give someone an opportunity they'd never have otherwise, like a trip to Ghana or a chance to hone their skills editing a nationally published magazine (Speak Magazine), does.
- 8) Telling Your Story. Most youth engagement organizations, including jhr, do a terrible job at showcasing their deeper successes. Pictures of smiling kids at conferences don't really cut it—they are boring and you've seen it a million times. We're trying to revamp our entire communications department right now to help bring out the real stories of the real individuals whose lives have really been affected for the positive by jhr.
- 9) Succession Planning: Yes, I know this is the biggest difficulty all student engagement organizations have. This is why building true communities at the campus level is so important, and why focusing on leadership is an essential part of any community. Well functioning communities aren't homogenous, they are made up of people of different ages, backgrounds,

etc., all brought together because of a common passion. The stronger and more diverse a community is, the more it can handle diversity, including graduating leaders.

- 10) Partnership: Many of our individual Chapters partnered with other student groups to deliver programming. However, not enough partnerships come out of a head office level. One of the most productive things the McConnell Foundation could do is to hold a national conference for student engagement coordinators, to develop practical toolkits for common topics like community building, leadership, succession and fundraising, and to spur real partnership opportunities.
- 11) Fundraising: When jhr initially submitted its proposal to the McConnell Foundation, we hoped to raise more money each year from our Chapters, and, as our Chapter Program grew, eventually raise enough to offset the costs of administering the program. In 2009 Chapters have raised just over 23,000 for jhr's operations, versus overall costs of just over \$60,000. Clearly, we have not met our target. We over-estimated Chapters' willingness to raise money to support the program. It's very difficult to sell students (or anyone) to raise money for administrative costs. Quite frankly, I'm not sure how jhr's Chapters can structure themselves to raise enough money to adequately cover all of their costs. We are trying, and luckily we have enough money from other grants and unrestricted funds that we have some flexibility even after the McConnell grant is over. Any advice or guidance here would be most appreciated.
- 12) Flexibility vs. Guidelines: When jhr started its Chapters we gave them all a very wide birth—providing only the loosest of guidelines and programming ideas and then let them run. The Chapters with the strongest and most creative leadership flourished, but many blew around in the wind, spending all their time talking about what to do and not actually delivering on much. So, as time went on, we pulled our Chapters in, narrowing our programming and providing more and more advice. We have now arrived at a happy medium. We provide the broad categories of programming and resources for Chapters to conduct each. But we give them flexibility to pick and choose which broad programming categories they'd like to specialize in, and get creative within. This provides enough structure, but also enough set programming, to satisfy both innovative and non-innovative Chapters.
- 13) Head Office Management of Chapters: One of our biggest problems has been a yearly change of leadership at the Head Office Level. In three years jhr has hired three different Chapter program directors. The problem is simple: it's hard to keep youth engagement people when they

don't think of themselves as youth anymore. This is good and bad—it has meant difficulty keeping organizational memory and continuity, but it has also allowed us to bring in a constant stream of new ideas and a truly youth-driven perspective. I think the ideal contract length for a person managing a youth program is about two years. Enough time to really make the position 'theirs' but too short for them to lose touch with what university students are really thinking. But plan, from the outset, to minimize organizational memory loss.

- 14) High Schools: Last year jhr tested a pilot project to expand our Chapters to the high school level. By the end of the year we had Chapters at about a dozen high schools. This year we are hoping to expand it significantly. Our high school Chapters are structured much differently than our university ones: head office is very hands off; teachers play a large role in leading the Chapters; they are focused only on two programs: media creation and events (fundraising). The biggest obstacle we've faced is school bureaucracy: with sooooo many youth engagement organizations out there, schools are very protective of which ones they let in and which ones they don't. There seems to be far more competition between engagement organizations at the high school level than the university level; each school can only support a handful of engagement organizations because of their structure and size, whereas universities can comfortably support dozens.
- 15) Moving Forward: jhr is in the process of reviewing the structure, programming and cash flow situation of our Chapter programs, for the goal of improving its impact and making it financial sustainable. Any assistance, ideas, connections or otherwise the McConnell foundation could provide would be extremely helpful. I'm proud of the success of our Chapter program to date and I'm doubly excited about its future.