



CASE STUDY

Columbia Business School and Graham Windham Developing Leaders to Help Young New Yorkers and Their Families Thrive

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Challenge

Graham Windham, a private nonprofit in New York City working with children and their families facing challenges related to systemic inequality, poverty, and racism, has sought to:

- ▶ Develop a more integrated and coordinated organization, fully aligned to meeting the needs and achieving the goals of the children and families they serve.
- ▶ Support and strengthen a development pathway for direct-practice staff to senior management so the leadership sustainably reflects the direct practice workers in diversity and experience.
- ▶ Invest in and cultivate an inclusive leadership team and associated culture that more closely represents the people Graham assists and interacts with day to day.

Solutions

- ▶ Long-term partnership with Columbia Business School Executive Education's Programs in Social Enterprise to develop and enhance best leadership practices and build a shared leadership philosophy.
- ▶ Two distinct Columbia programs designed to help develop both developing and senior nonprofit professionals for the challenges they face at their respective stages in their careers.
- ▶ Development of a Graham culture that is inclusive, vulnerable, transparent, and led by listening to youth, families, and staff, and with a focus on learning and growth. This is supported by the Columbia curriculum that trains participants in how to lead consistent with those values and practices.

Results

- ▶ Increase in the confidence of leaders—ultimately enabling better outcomes for the children, families, and communities, aided by the teams they lead.
- ▶ Development pathway originally envisioned by Graham's top leadership manifested in a strong talent pipeline and internal promotions (a.k.a. "Graham-grown" leaders) as well as a leadership team that better reflects the identities of the direct practice workforce and children and families served.
- ▶ A new sense of opportunity established in the workforce fostered by attainable and accessible internal promotion.
- ▶ Strong support for leaders as they progress in their careers—designed to counter the frustrations and sense of isolation often experienced by leaders as they ascend, leading to better management, more effective leaders, and strong leadership retention.

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Jess Dannhauser, president and CEO of Graham, sees their partnership with Columbia as pivotal to the leadership development of the organization.



DEEP DIVE

In 1806, Isabella Graham, with support from her friend Eliza Hamilton—the wife of American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton—created New York City’s first private orphanage: The Orphan Asylum Society of New York, which later became the Graham Home for Children. In 1977, the orphanage merged with Windham Child Care—a service supporting widowed mothers—and today operates as Graham, a private nonprofit providing services to over 4,000 children and families in New York City.



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This work is vital and hard. It takes a courageous person to stay in this work for a long time—and requires courageous leaders throughout the entire organization.

Graham employs over 400 permanent staff to run its programs and initiatives to help young New Yorkers and their families thrive.

For the past seven years, Graham has been inviting its team members to attend the Senior Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals and the Developing Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals at Columbia Business School Executive Education. Over 35 members of the Graham team have participated in one or both of the programs. Jess Dannhauser, president and CEO of Graham, sees their partnership with Columbia as pivotal to the leadership development of the organization. “We were aware that our leadership team did not represent the children and families we served to the extent that we as a team thought

was important. We wanted to invest in our direct practice leaders, the supervisors and directors on the frontline, so they could grow into executive-level leaders to take us into the future.”



Serving the Community in New York City

Graham serves over 4,000 children and families, operating community-based youth and family supports in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Harlem. The work that the Graham staff perform day to day is highly demanding, serving children and families whose abundant capacity is frequently held back because of systemic oppression, including inadequate access to opportunity. Grounded in these realities, evidence about what works and the wisdom of those they serve, Graham has created innovative practices that have dramatically improved outcomes and are now being scaled.

One of the services that Graham provides for its youth is an education and career program called SLAM (Support, Lead, Achieve Model)—offering a continuum of intensive, structured support that is centered around coaching children who have been in, or were at risk of entering, the foster care system. The goal of this program is to help youth

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Professor Raymond Horton in the classroom at Columbia Business School

beat the odds and enter a living wage career path by the age of 26. Supporting the children into their mid-twenties is a key part of the organization's success.

Graham's staff also supports youth and families through community center and school-based programming, facilitated peer supports, counselling services, health care coordination, advocacy, and home-based family support services to help families remain safely together.

Graham has an operating budget of \$53 million. The majority of those dollars cover the salaries and benefits for over 400 full-time staff and associated expenses and equipment needs. Resources are available but must be carefully allocated. Reflecting on the pressures facing the staff on the frontline and their team leaders, Dannhauser says, "This work is vital and hard. It takes a courageous person to stay in this work for a long time—and requires courageous leaders throughout the entire organization."

Dannhauser and his senior leadership team were aware that the makeup of the frontline supervisors and leaders, both in terms of diversity and educational background, was not reflected in their senior leadership team. They were determined to build a development pipeline to address

that—enhancing and supporting skill development to allow people to rise through the organization and take on more senior organizational roles.

Partnering with Columbia Business School Executive Education

In 2014, Graham created an internal supervisory academy to begin building a development pipeline. At the same time, they engaged with Columbia Business School Executive Education's well-established Programs in Social Enterprise, led by Raymond Horton, the Frank R. Lautenberg Professor of Ethics and Corporate Governance.

Professor Horton created the first programs for public and nonprofit managers at Columbia in the 1980s and was director of the Social Enterprise program until 2008, when he developed two flagship leadership programs



for the nonprofit sector. The Senior Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals takes place in four weeklong modules over four months that averages 50 participants, and the intensive one-week Developing Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals attracts 100 participants per session.

Horton is passionate about the performance of nonprofit organizations and understands that how they are managed is pivotal to the impact they can have. “You can’t successfully lead an organization unless you know something about management, and you can’t be an effective manager unless you know something about leadership,” he submits. Therefore, creating a great leadership program was vital to enabling nonprofit organizations to flourish.

Leveraging his position within the University, Horton admits he “cherry-picked the best and brightest Columbia faculty and put them to work in the Programs in Social Enterprise.” He does not see nonprofit leadership as very different from the leadership of commercial organizations. Organizational size may differ, but managers are still leading people, creating effective strategies, and having to negotiate. “In general, I think we overestimate the differences between nonprofit and private organizations,” Horton says. And

while some leadership issues may be more complex in the nonprofit sector, as motivation is more intrinsic than extrinsic, he believes the strength of these programs is the knowledge the faculty bring from their research and scholarship.

Today, the Programs in Social Enterprise at Columbia Business School Executive Education are run by Matt Harty, a teacher, non profit educator, curriculum designer, and adult learning specialist. Harty explains that the Senior Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals is for “people with responsibility for thinking through the strategy—the mission of the organization—and likely less focused on the day-to-day, functional aspects of the organization.” While the Developing Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals is for people in mid-management roles on the path to senior leadership. “They’re not currently responsible for the strategy and mission of their organization, but they’re likely going to be in a few years, and this is their first real exposure to leadership and management training.”

A Steadfast Commitment

Graham’s commitment to both programs is rare, says Harty, but extremely effective. “Graham has been consistently sending staff annually, often multiple staffers, to both



SLP was a powerful leadership course for me. I emerged as a confident and decisive leader. It helped me connect why I do this work to my values and how I lead. It helped me to understand my relationship and commitment to the Board and to the CEO. Prior to SLP, I used to say, 'I don't know what an executive decision is, but I'll make a decision.' After SLP, I understood that an executive decision impacts everyone – parents, children, staff, and Graham overall.

**LAVERN HARRY, VP FOR FOSTER
CARE, ADOPTION, AND PREVENTION**





Graham's support for their staff...for their training and development...is impressive and admirable.

programs, which is a bit unusual. They have deep and consistent and persistent support for their staff across all levels, for their training and development. It's impressive and admirable." He sees it as a hallmark of that consistency of support that Graham has made the conscious decision to promote internally. Given the size of their operations and the number of staff, there is ample capacity to do that, and with the support of these programs, they have established the pipeline of leadership talent they had set out to develop.

It is rare for an organization to invest in two programs so consistently over an extended period of time. And that investment is clearly delivering results. Graham has eschewed the familiar excuses on staff development which Harty reminds us of. "I can't have two people out of the office at once, or—we can only afford to send one person at a time, or—we have a staff bandwidth issue, and so on. Jess [Dannhauser] has really supported his staff's involvement, sending multiple people to Columbia to attend the programs, from the high performers to the high potentials, to the current leadership team."

The four-week Senior Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals is ideal for the organization's top leadership team's needs, but as Harty points out, the one-week Developing Leaders Program provides ample time for rising leaders to gain a solid understanding of the new tools, new approaches, and mindsets required for them to flourish at the next level. "After a three-hour negotiation class, you are going to walk out and approach that type of task differently, with specific recommendations, tools, and best practices as a result of the training," says Harty. Increasing self-awareness is another core goal of both programs, including leadership assessments, 360 survey work, and peer coaching.

A Vital Role of Peer Coaching

The four-week Senior Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals requires a significant time commitment from participants. "It is far more intensive, and it has a heavier emphasis on peer learning. It takes a deep dive into who you are as a leader. It encourages you to ask tough questions such as, 'What is your vision for your organization?' 'What are the challenges in executing that vision? Or

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implementing change initiatives at your organization?’ Ultimately, it’s defining who they are as a leader. What defines their leadership practice? How do they want to inspire and motivate others? How can they deliver on their mission or increase their impact—maybe in new ways they hadn’t yet imagined?” says Horton.

The program is designed in a modular format, spanning a four-month period. One significant element of the program is the work participants engage in between modules. While the assignments correlate to each individual’s current work roles, the participants regroup during the module weeks to discuss their projects and support each other in their

progress. “This is one of the major benefits of the modular structure. It allows for a peer coaching element with real-time testing, experimentation, feedback loop, and accountability. It is one of the things we are most proud of here—

that we’ve built the architecture and the infrastructure to facilitate that exchange so effectively,” reflects Harty.

The results of this peer coaching are constantly evaluated and consistently return highly positive results. It is a core part of the program and one of the benefits of the “open-enrollment” structure, where participants of the program come from various organizations, not just Graham. This enables a cross-fertilization of ideas to take place, as experiences are shared, and a strong network is built among participants from nonprofit organizations across the greater New York City area.

Kimberly Hardy Watson is chief operating officer at Graham and has seen many of her colleagues attend the Columbia programs. “I’ve managed many employees who have gone through the programs, and the changes I’ve seen in how they perform as leaders once they emerge from a program is profound. There’s a marked difference in how they approach leadership, how they approach their management, and their style of leadership. You can clearly see it—the impact is observable.”





The Leadership Credo exercise was incredibly powerful, much more than I ever anticipated. It brought up so much emotion for me and an insight that I had not tapped into before. I really had to allow for the introspection, to ask myself who I was as a leader and how I got to be where I am, which was a very moving task. I still think about it today and recall the speeches that were shared during the program

**BEATA VILAR DE QUEIROS,
ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT
FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
SERVICES AT GRAHAM**



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Watson also notes that many of the Graham employees come from a background as social workers or therapists. “They have a great deal of experience in social work, mental health, or human services, but less so in management. What they gain in these programs is a greater perspective of leadership and the management function. The programs brighten their understanding—by making connections with individuals who are in similar work but approach it from a different place. This wider perspective enhances the quality of their leadership and gives them a greater understanding of how it all works together.”

For Watson, the programs create greater resilience in their participants, observing that those who have completed the programs tend to stay with the organization longer. “Quite literally—these people stay longer. This is very difficult, very challenging work. When people go through these programs, they learn to manage the frustrations that come with the lack of support and sense of isolation they encounter as leaders as they ascend in the organization. They learn how to

‘collaborate out’—to link up with others doing similar work and get support, ideas, and different perspectives. They learn to recognize that some of the challenges they have are very germane and connected to the work that they’re doing—and so not to ‘personalize’ those challenges too much. They realize the issues they’re struggling with are not about them personally, but that they are issues all leaders struggle with.”

The programs have become a badge of honor within Graham, and as Watson explains, they are central to the concept of “Graham-grown talent.” “Graham-grown is about making sure that wherever we have an opportunity to elevate and promote from within, that we take advantage of that. It’s especially important when we have individuals who reflect the direct practice staff and the people and communities we serve, because they then become role models. A large component of the work that we do is with adolescents and teens, so it’s important for them to see that it’s possible to grow and to elevate in the work that we do. It makes a significant impression on them.”

Bonnie Kornberg is the chief performance officer at Graham and attended the Senior Leaders Program for Nonprofit Professionals in 2016, a decade after she started working with Graham. She recalls it being a truly transformational experience. In particular, she notes that the program's core Leadership Credo helps to set the tone. "The Leadership Credo requires you to really dig into your own history, to understand what is driving you personally," she explains. "Columbia does a fabulous job at modeling what it is to be an exceptional leadership team. They set up experiences in situations where they encourage people to be open and to develop safe spaces. What people shared as part of the Leadership Credo—from their personal history—was unbelievable. It's your story that shaped you into who you are today."

Kornberg recognizes the enormous strength and insight she gained around her own leadership practice from this exercise, and the vulnerability it required her to share was powerful in building her resilience for the future.

Graham has implemented a similar process whereby their leaders can share and discuss the challenges they are facing. This has made for a much more cohesive and open atmosphere in the organization and strengthened the connections among co-workers. For Kornberg, this culture says, "We are in this together. We realize that this job is

stressful, and if we can have a way to support each other through that, we'll all be better for it. That's very similar to the Columbia frame."

The partnership with Columbia Business School has also been reflected in the progress that Graham has made in aligning the senior leadership diversity to better reflect that of the frontline staff. Kornberg observes that "since 2015 [shortly after the partnership with Columbia began], the proportion of senior leaders of color at Graham has gone from 67 percent to 80 percent, while our entire staff population, as well as the people we serve, has stayed at roughly 90 percent people of color, so our leadership team better reflects our staff and population."

CEO Dannhauser plans to continue the collaboration with Columbia Business School Executive Education into the foreseeable future. "The programs bring new ideas back to our organization. They give people the experience to know what it's like to receive feedback from colleagues and it has made our teams more open and collaborative."

This partnership, between two respected New York institutions, is set to continue well into the future, benefiting not only the current and future leaders of Graham, but the children, families, and communities those leaders make an impact on every day.



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