

# Vision for Academy of the Cross

## ***A distinctive model of high school excellence in the Lutheran tradition***

The very first glimpse of the campus displays how this environment exceeds traditional expectations for a school. The openness and focused diversity of activity on the site is immediately obvious, evidenced by the interactive learning and animated social conversations occurring in the glassed atriums, creative learning space, and courtyards of the school.

Located on a 33 acre site midway between Batavia and Dundee and five miles south of Elgin, this place is indeed an inspiration for educational possibility that is a distinctive blend of values complementing one another to shape a remarkable opportunity for growth and learning.



Property site where new program and school will be brought to life.

### ***The Schools Four Values:***

***Leadership  
God-given Significance  
Relevance of Christian Faith for Living  
Balancing Academic Rigor with Relevance***

### ***Valuing Faith-full Living***

To assist the school in effectively combining its four values, the foundation for all it does is inspiringly visible on the property's highest point. There is a large cross surrounded by a small prayer garden where individuals and groups gather to ponder, pray, and be renewed. This display of spiritual community is extended by virtual connectivity. Online prayer requests, along with devotions authored by individuals within the Academy of the Cross community, are

regularly posted on the website. Podcasts of student-led devotions suitable for younger learners are available to Christian schools, families, and others desiring unique spiritual growth opportunities. Plans are ongoing to expand these programs that so effectively serve others and solidify Academy of the Cross's own community of spiritual growth.

Additional evidence of spiritual community in this Christian school is obvious throughout the building. The artwork around the atrium entrance and murals throughout the building affirm the value of God-given significance of individuals and portray the school's faith-filled culture. On the building's second floor is the strikingly inspirational Academy of the Cross room that overlooks the prayer garden and cross. Here the school's strategic planning groups meet, as do prayer groups and some senior citizen walkers who meet for Bible study following their morning walk on the property's fitness path.

Current students have taken ownership in bringing alive the importance of faith for life. As a cooperative project of the business, visual design, and theology classes, a student team is developing plans to create a prayer maze that enlarges the prayer garden. The group researched and personally visited mazes nearby, while having virtual tours of others farther away. They are now raising money for the project, and construction is scheduled to begin within a year. While they have found the endeavor challenging, they've discovered the importance of completing a venture that will significantly impact others.

It has been exciting to watch students gain understanding of faith's relevance for living. This has resulted from the faith formation opportunities provided by a skillful theology staff that touches individuals with relevant teaching that meets their needs. While a variety of interesting classes are offered, the most popular theology class is one that examines ethical issues that challenge teens. Student interest is high because their input is sought on what is relevant to them as they seek faith's meaning for each day. Teachers who are comfortable bringing their faith and personal witness into their teaching further enhance this type of exploration. What an effective way to build God-given confidence into future leaders!

### ***Valuing God-given Significance***

The foundation of faith's relevance for daily living is strengthened by Academy of the Cross's deliberate emphasis on valuing the significance of each individual. This is effectively accomplished, in the fine distinction of Lutheran teaching, by uniquely empowering students to see how loved they are by God, how He has gifted them with talents, how they are connected to others, and how God has called them to use their talents in living their vocation to serve Him and others. What begins as a freshmen class in teamwork and calling increases in complexity as students grasp their God-given significance and realize how they can have a positive impact that truly matters. Students are taught that anything is possible, even globally, yet emphasis is placed on also meeting the needs in their immediate circle of friends, family, and community. They discover that at times the hardest things to do are found in the situations they meet each day. Increasing the challenge and significance for upper level students occurs with seniors completing a project of individual choice, presenting the results in a series of evening programs. A pilot program offering vocational internship gives students authentic experience guided by a mentor who understands calling, the importance of challenge, and the significance of service. To individualize development, a notable part of the Academy of the Cross experience is the life coach each student has working with them all four years to help better utilize each person's talents. Students thrive on the individual attention and are amazed at what they can, with coaching, stretch themselves to accomplish. The program's result is a unique preparation for the leaders of tomorrow equipping them with a strong work ethic that results in high

expectations for themselves and others. The result of all efforts to build individual significance is a bonded community of respectful and confident people, forgiven and encouraged by God's grace.

Community bonding through mutual respect creates a secure environment that meets families' high expectations for disciplined accountability and civil behavior. As the students grow to understand what provides the foundation for this security, they appreciate feeling safe both physically and emotionally. The school's valued significance helps each realize that all are important in God's eyes and in the school community. A cherished byproduct of this security is how students enjoy feeling free and confident to explore not only the academic topics they study but also to delve more deeply into understanding self, others, and the nature of relationships between people. The resulting collaboration tempers the potential destructiveness of unchecked competition and encourages the student to foster openness and security in the other relationships they have outside of the school community.

***Valuing:  
A Balance of Academic Rigor and Relevance  
Leadership Development***

Confidence that grows out of security increases the students' desire to become involved in what interests them. They discover they can become more significant as individuals by being active in school life, and the range of experiences from which they may choose in the arts, activities, and athletics encourages the thrill of participation. Both vocal and instrumental music options, along with a full array of athletic teams at both the varsity and junior varsity level, give opportunity to use and further develop skills. Major annual productions and smaller one-act plays showcase the talent of those involved in drama. As interest of students and staff focuses on certain areas, select extra-curricular programs have developed an outstanding reputation. In addition, a group of students is now working with an advisor to begin a puppet ministry. This is typical of the empowerment students appreciate to develop their talents and create clubs and organizations that meet the needs and interests of the student body, thus expanding the multiple opportunities for involvement. Beyond the formal organized activities, students especially enjoy the various places to gather and mingle for conversation. The community cafe is an extremely popular place. There students enjoy lounging in comfortable surroundings while spending time together to relax or delve more deeply into their work. They can even engage in dialog with professionals from a variety of areas who devote volunteer time to mentoring students. Friendships between students grow and deepen in this student-centered environment. All of these experiences help build within students a comfort in self-discovery and a confidence for living and using the talents they have.

Emphasis on the relevance of spiritual development and attention to the significance of each individual transforms the teaching of the general academic curriculum. Academic rigor with relevance is central to the school's philosophy and is evident in both subject content and instructional methodology that distinctively combines intentional challenge with obvious practicality. This deliberately rigorous, yet recognizably relevant, educational program has enabled excellent student success in college and equipped them with important learning and leading skills that serve them well in their professional careers, making the opportunity for studying at Academy of the Cross extremely inviting to a wide range of people. Parents are drawn to the program because of the opportunity it provides for their student to grow as a whole person and be better prepared for the future, while students are particularly attracted to the enjoyment they find spending time with their peers to achieve accomplishments of significance.

Three examples of how this type of activity comes alive in the school program follow. The talents and creativity of the staff, the interests of the students, and the partnerships able to be formed with area business, associations, and community leaders guide how these activities are developed. The school has found the possibilities seemingly endless as the programs offer unique experiences to the students and create outstanding departments of education with the school.

Rigor and practical application, for example, in health and physical education begins with a focus on healthy living and eating. Academy of the Cross offers not only team sports but also individual physical training, incorporated with Bible study thereby combining wholeness with wellness. The fitness path that winds its way around the property further evidences the application of wellness principles. Funded in part by several senior citizens groups in area churches that are regular walkers in the early morning, the path serves students, staff, and the community at large. A popular recent program addition in the wellness area is the work being done in cooperation with a local wellness facility. In collaboration with the staff of the facility, students have been challenged by the wellness professionals to develop personalized fitness and nutritional programs for the Academy of the Cross community. This growing area of the program has not only provided the background to approach healthy living in a medically educated way, but it has also offered exciting opportunities for students to be part of developing new programs for the school. The personal training program that is emerging enhances the emphasis the school places on the significance of the individual and the relevance of learning to daily living. Plans for expansion of the campus fitness facility are developing which has attracted interest from donors and future students.

Another relevant application of learning uses the wetlands preserve across from the school. Academy of the Cross works closely with the county on cooperative projects within the wetlands to provide exciting learning opportunities that allow the students to delve first hand into the impact of human intervention on the preservation of ecosystems. This results in an impressive diversification of the life science portion of the curriculum, giving students unparalleled prospects for learning. Eager to share their discoveries, the learners seize opportunities to plan and lead programs for elementary schools that come for field trips. This unique combination of learning and leading has attracted donors from environmental groups who eagerly fund such efforts to promote environmental awareness. Their funding gives the school the privilege of creatively exploring the development of new environmental education programs that will continue to challenge the students with educational rigor while maintaining relevance to what is being explored.

Further combining rigor with relevance is found in the technology curriculum. Considerable emphasis is placed on ethical use as the challenges of accessibility become more complex for students. An area of exceptional opportunity has evolved through the web design classes. As Academy of the Cross students learn website creation, a unique partnership has developed with teachers of the area's partnering Lutheran elementary schools. The high school students are using their skills to create classroom websites that serve both the elementary teachers and the families they work with. This project's added value has come from the learning and utilization of negotiation and communication skills important in working on such a project. What a practical and advanced leadership opportunity this has provided for Academy of the Cross students! What empowerment for the future this gives them!

Besides a multitude of specific project applications that are a by-product of a relevant academic curriculum, instructional methods are shaped to enhance the program's rigor and meet the needs of students for success during high school, in college, and as adults. The depth of

questioning by both students and teachers is exciting to hear, while potential answers to those probing questions are discovered together in individual subjects and across curricular areas. Answers, as they are developed, are not treated as an end for discussion but rather a springboard for future exploration.

Instructional techniques focus on depth of critical thinking, collaboration, and effective communication, as they are relevant skills that students need to be successful. Teachers supply appropriate challenge by deliberately structuring activities to provide depth of analysis. Students are stretched to think critically in order to make judgments and provide logical and passionate reasons to defend them. Such analysis leads to the creation of new ideas; this excites the students and motivates further exploration. In such an environment, by design, special emphasis is placed on the importance of working together and effectively communicating opinions and results to diverse audiences. Students realize and appreciate the coaching in strong writing and effective speaking skills, as they are inspired to push themselves towards excellence in these areas. The strong Christian ethical base from which students work provides them a solid foundation to grapple with the issues uncovered in the in-depth exploration required. Significant emphasis is also placed on the role of a skilled and caring teacher as guide and facilitator in the learning process.

In this exploratory environment, a deliberate emphasis is also placed on fostering the responsibility, accountability, and self-discipline needed by both students and teachers to function effectively, both now and in the future. A freshmen seminar program, which gradually exposes students to the learning methods they will experience, helps equip the new Academy of the Cross students with the skills they'll need to make the adjustment from the expectations experienced in their previous school preparation, thereby positioning them to be successful in Academy of the Cross's educational environment. The results are excitingly tangible as students grow to ask probing questions and challenge respectfully each other's thoughts as they intently focus on discovery and creation of new ideas.

### ***Preparation for College and Life Beyond***

As anticipated, the rigor of the offering makes Academy of the Cross a sound college preparatory program with its graduates attending a wide range of universities. Some of the most gifted students are accepted to and attend top tier universities, while others select from the array of high quality private or Christian colleges and Lutheran universities across the nation. A smaller number prefer a few years first at community colleges. Students have found that their distinctive preparation is acknowledged by higher education in the impressive acceptance rate experienced. Universities are drawn to the unique experiences Academy of the Cross graduates have had and recognize this as extremely valuable for the leaders and thinkers of tomorrow.

Regardless the college choice, of significant benefit to the graduate is what was gained at Academy of the Cross through the emphasis on rigor balanced with relevance. Equipped with a better ability to think critically, collaborate creatively, and communicate effectively, alumni benefit more fully from the offerings of college and contribute more significantly in their role as adults. The curriculum's emphasis on relevant application of teaching along with the importance of recognizing God-given significance empowers graduates to be more involved in home, community, and church as capable leaders who can better connect with people and respond to their needs. This connection, along with deliberate encouragement from faculty members, has increased the number of those desiring to enter professional church work. Whether as lay leader or professional church worker, the awareness of needs and empowerment to respond

have produced individuals whose leadership has been instrumental in creating significant programs that better utilize the power and healing of the church community. Graduates are also making a distinct mark in the corporate world. Having been educated in a values-driven institution throughout high school, those entering the work force have an increased ability to discover their own values, recognize the values of the organization for which they work, and see the dynamic significance of alignment of the two, benefiting both the individual and the employer. This success has been exciting and its impact important in increasing Academy of the Cross's donor participation because of the results realized. The churches, having experienced their own direct benefit, have become avid supporters of the school, while the work force success has increased corporate sponsorship of student scholarships and specific educational programs.

### ***Influence and Cooperation***

The influence of the school extends beyond the traditional school day making for busy after school hours. After regular class sessions the high school mentoring group works with younger students who arrive for tutoring. Student planning groups prepare for their next leadership conference sponsored jointly with Thrivent and designed to instill leadership fundamentals in middle school students. Elementary teachers arrive to work with the high school staff to more fully align their programs and better prepare their own students for the unique learning opportunity offered by the high school. Even adults arriving for continuing education classes stop by the community cafe on their way to class to engage in stimulating discussion.

### ***Space Usage Enhances School's Values***

Space allocation within the building facilitates instruction and fosters a climate of discovery, analysis, and creativity. There is no traditional library; instead, there are defined research spaces and collaborative work areas. A large gathering spot for students is provided, as are smaller areas for quiet reflection. The diversity of space usage serves as a complement to the school's unique blend of personally nurturing the individual while overtly challenging them to think critically and collaborate with others to meet challenges and solve problems. The learning complex itself has open courtyards where students can work in small groups during nice weather. Laptops and other hand held devices connect through the compatible wireless network, and demonstrating creation care are the solar panels for generating some of the power used within the building. A variety of other elements incorporated into construction earned the building LEED certification.

### ***An Educational Leader***

The importance of academic rigor with relevance has not only changed learning for each individual, but the values of the high school culture also drive the education priorities offered in the associated elementary schools. Through continued strategic planning, the associated churches and Lutheran schools benefit from the values-driven emphasis resulting in increased public demand for the elementary school programs so that students are better prepared and can more fully utilize and benefit from the unique opportunities offered at the high school. As a result, the whole system of Lutheran education in the area has improved and grown, and area Christian ministries seek connection to its success.

The pre-school through grade twelve system of education, with university connection beyond, has clearly become an educational leader. Opened in 2013 with 65 ninth and tenth grade students, the uniqueness and excellence of the program has produced steady growth towards

the 400 students it now annually serves. Being the first successful suburban Lutheran high school model in the Chicago area, Academy of the Cross is often consulted for advice and has become a guide and inspiration in Lutheran circles and for other Christian ministries. Its reputation has garnered key community, district, and regional endorsements. Its forward thinking continues to breed the success and innovation needed to grow and be attractive to the community. The connection to area universities expands the capability for research and opens additional educational opportunities for the students. Families are thrilled to be part of this laboratory environment continually challenging and developing as their students do, while still being firmly rooted and thriving on what it values.

### ***Staffing***

Staffing the school has been integral to its success. The Head Administrator is selected by the board for that person's passion about the values and vision of the school along with the individual's ability to lead this distinctive organization. With consistently strong administrative direction, the school's own position of educational leadership has steadily expanded. An ingrained mindful eye keeps watch on educational research and is open to change that will meet the future needs of students in today's society. An example of such study is the work currently being done exploring the redesign of the school program that would earmark one day per week for students and staff to work offsite or meet by virtual connectivity to study and plan.

The search for the right teachers began the year before the school opened with several meetings of the initial staff being held during the second half of the year prior to opening. This enabled the school to begin with as much of the desired culture and teaching methodology as possible. While finding properly credentialed and uniquely talented teachers able to deliver the desired results was initially challenging, now the best teachers seek employment at the school. Academy of the Cross purposefully publicizes its values to attract those individuals with the skills and attributes that will enhance the program. Once hired, teachers are involved in a training/mentoring program that mirrors methods used in teaching the students. All teachers new to the staff continue training the entire first year while they are acclimatized to the environment. Since accountability is essential in this flexible environment, it is incorporated in the first year training program. Accountability awareness equips the teachers to work with students on self-discipline and responsibility. Faculty members are also trained to vary their instructional approach by grade level so that there is deliberate growth from freshman to senior year. Teachers, thus equipped, work to advance student maturity and know what to do if it doesn't develop properly.

With the school's values driving its program, there are faculty committees who own each of the values and work to expand how they are brought alive. It is quite apparent that each group respects their value, committing themselves to developing effective ways for achieving growth in that area. It's interesting to observe how the values are staunchly protected but never stagnant...an amazing mixture of stability and innovation which maintains the school's position of leadership.

### ***Attracting Students***

Attracting students to the program offered is guided by an admissions director who was employed as an important part of the administrative team one year prior to the school's opening. This person's responsibility is to locate, attract, and enroll students who will both benefit from and enhance the program's effectiveness. Students come from a variety of economic backgrounds, reflect ethnic diversity, and possess average to above average performance

ability. Prospective families share a common desire to be founded in and stretched by the program offered. Their diversity enhances the breadth of learning possible as students bring different life experiences to the learning process. The students come not only from the solid and growingly diverse Lutheran feeder schools but also, in increasing numbers, from families having no past experience with Lutheran education. The majority of students, however, have a Christian background that both embraces and strengthens the faith-related values of the school. The available needs-based financial assistance and the academic scholarships funded by individuals, churches, and businesses arm the admissions director with the necessary tools to recruit desired students.

The admissions director utilizes a variety of techniques to create relationships with prospective students. The skillfully prepared high-quality marketing materials, centered on Academy of the Cross's values, illustrate the remarkable results realized in students as they move on to college and then assume leadership roles in the community, church, and work force. It is refreshing to see how the material reflects the school's broad-range definition of leadership and its importance to the vocations in which the graduates serve. Their testimonies have proven motivational for existing staff, future students, and donors.

### ***Organized for Success***

Established as an autonomous school able to sustain itself, Academy of the Cross's connection to the area congregations remains strong through commitment to its Lutheran heritage and cooperative endeavors with those churches. Congregations desire to be associated with a program of such respected reputation and, in turn, contribute to the school's continued success through their whole-hearted support of Academy of the Cross's development activities and by providing every encouragement for their own students to attend. Congregation members take advantage of the opportunity for involvement in the success of the program and provide volunteer time and expertise. The cooperative commitment of area churches and schools, alongside Academy of the Cross's dedication to its Lutheran heritage, allow the school to remain firmly founded in its beliefs. Its organizational independence, on the other hand, provides the benefit of a more streamlined decision-making process than is typical for many of even the most successful Lutheran high schools. This gives freedom to make decisions based on what is best for the students, fulfilling the mission of the school to reach students with an inspiring Christian education.

Also contributing to the ability to make appropriate decisions and plan wisely is the composition of the board and the methods by which it operates. Members are leaders in the church and community who are selected for their ability to contribute to the success of the organization through their diverse professional skills, their ability to think critically and strategically, their financial commitment, and their connection to the various communities the school serves. Board members, being clear about their collective role and individual goals, review and formulate long-range strategic plans, focusing on the policies that allow the administration to work effectively. Values alignment with the organization is taken seriously as is training for new board members. In addition, there is an ongoing future look that fosters an awareness of proper transitioning for the board to continue its work uninterrupted by membership changes.

The school's unique position blends very deliberate responsibility with independent creativity. It is fully accredited to allow students all the related advantages to such a process; and, to assure a safe learning environment, it complies with fire, health, and safety requirements. In addition, while the school is aware of and carefully reviews federal and state requirements, it is not bound by federally mandated academic initiatives. Being autonomous means that Academy of the

Cross operates and sustains itself, yet remains connected to others through a valuable global and community network that shares educational ideas and experiences. All of these elements combine to continually empower informed decision-making that serves long-term benefits for both the students and the institution.

### ***Funded with Sustainability in Mind***

Supplying the necessary funding to provide what is vital in supporting the vision without extravagance or waste is an ongoing priority of the organization. Academy of the Cross has the funding to do what it needs to operate efficiently and make good decisions focused on the mission of the school and in the best interest of current and future students. The primary source of operating funds comes from tuition that provides the highest percentage of school operating costs. Individual students' ability to pay the tuition is assisted by a variety of means. Congregational support to assist those church members unable to afford full tuition is vital for balancing the tuition revenue with the operating costs. There is also a specific portion of the development activities that supplies the funding necessary to provide this financial aid along with the various academic scholarships the school offers. The secondary source of operating funds emphasizes the importance of development funding to maintain the school's leadership position. This was recognized in the original incorporation plan of the school. From its inception the school established a separate foundation having its own distinct board. While there is extensive obvious coordination between the foundation and the school, this separate organizational structure has allowed the school to focus more directly on running the excellent education program it has developed while the foundation works to secure the funding for such excellence. To assist in cooperative effectiveness, the foundation's board, the school's board of directors, and the administration hold an annual strategic planning retreat that looks ahead, coordinates plans, and sets the strategic path for the next several years.

Development activities directed towards individuals, groups of people, and organizations attract donors to the values-driven culture enabling them to embrace the vision and be motivated to partner with the school through their donations of money and gifts in kind. The development work also includes fundraising activities that bring people together in community to support the school. In addition, cooperation between the foundation and the administration helps foster partnerships with special interest organizations that endorse the schools values and programs.

Beginning with its earliest plans, Academy of the Cross has always looked to the future in its educational, strategic, and business planning. From the initial gathering of funds for start-up to maintaining connections with donors for long-term commitment, the school has worked to build a donor base that covers a broad range of people and has nurtured deep relationships with those capable of significantly generous gifts. Its beginning campaign to provide the capital funding for developing the initial facility was run with the help of a capital funding consultant; however, as further facility expansion became necessary, Academy of the Cross has found that its donor connections are strong, deep, and expanding enough for capital funding to be handled through campaigns run by the organization itself. The school has exhibited its ability to continually plan and execute those plans to remain an educational leader who provides sufficient finances to support Academy of the Cross's ongoing operation and, with the blessing of God, insures enough money to be sustainable for years to come.

All of these efforts are for the clearly defined purpose of arousing high school students to extend themselves beyond educational complacency and low expectations to meet the challenge of studying, dreaming, and creating; thereby being empowered to use the talents God has given them for living intentionally meaningful lives of significant service.